

Pearls
from
Marcel Proust
Remembrance of Things Past



Collected, translated and commented

by

Fred-Olav Sørensen

Foreword

For many years, I have been fascinated by Marcel Proust's monumental work "Remembrance of Things Past". Having grown up bilingually with French as my mother tongue, it was natural for me, when I started to read Proust, to choose the French version. Proust's formidable capacity to hold on to a thought and explore it until all the associations he derived from that thought had been brought forward to his consciousness, was for me a revelation. Never before had I seen anyone manage to penetrate the facets of what we consider as daily life and bring out the magic of these facets to this extent. His sharp observations of social life in the higher circles of society at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century are delightful and full of wisdom, highly relevant for us today.

I wish to share with you my joy of reading Proust by showing you some pearls I have picked up when reading his work. For each quote, I start by giving you the original version in French, thereby giving you the opportunity to see the original text. Next, I translate it to English, and finally I give a short commentary. The intention of this commentary is to give you the background from which the quote is taken, in order to facilitate the interpretation of the quote and Proust's meaning. With each quote, I refer to the part of the work from which the quote is taken.

I hope this electronic book, which you may read free of charge, but not copy without my permission, will give you a flavor of Proust's great work.

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Fred-Olav Sørensen



«--- apprenant à chercher notre plaisir ailleurs que dans les satisfactions du bien-être et de la vanité.”

«--- learning to find our pleasure elsewhere than in the satisfactions of well-being and vanity.”

(Du côté de chez Swann, I)

The search for pleasure is a search for sensual stimulation that never reaches its saturation. When one type of sensual stimulation has been attempted a certain number of times, its effects are weakened and the senses require stronger doses of the same stimuli to obtain the same effects as before. When this type of stimulation has lost its attractiveness, the search for other stimuli starts – and the same pattern is repeated.

Vanity is derived from the desire to be liked and, preferably, admired by others. By allowing vanity to play itself out freely, we remove ourselves progressively from our deeper personality and allow ourselves to be governed by what we think others will like and by what trendsetters think we ought to do or look like. Socrates and Plato thought that true pleasure was to be found by seeking knowledge, do what is good and live in ethical harmony with yourself. “Know yourself!”



«Je m’imaginai, comme tout le monde, que le cerveau des autres était un réceptacle inerte et docile, sans pouvoir de réaction spécifique sur ce qu’on y introduisait, ---“

“I imagined, like everybody else, that other people’s brains were passive and docile recipients, devoid of powers of reaction to what they were subjected to,---“

(Du côté de chez Swann, I)

Communicating your own thoughts to other people, without regard to how your listeners perceive and react to what you say, will be a source of great surprises and perhaps also disappointments! Knowing the situation and background of the person you are speaking with is useful if you wish to understand how your words are interpreted. The words you use will have a different interpretation and content for persons with different backgrounds than yours. What is a normal way of life and way of thinking for a wealthy person, may be repulsive to talk about for a person living on a low income. Empathy is important, but it is also a challenge to find the right balance between understanding and consideration. It may not be a good idea to identify oneself so deeply with the other person’s situation and feelings as to lose one’s own identity and sense of direction. It is easily done to be brought out of balance by other people’s feelings, or for that matter, be engulfed by the other’s feelings. Trying to please a psychopath will lead to the elimination of one’s own feelings and will.



“- mon repos qui....supportait, pareil au repos d’une main immobile au milieu d’une eau courante, le choc et l’animation d’un torrent d’activité.”

“- my rest which was.....enduring, like a resting hand in the middle of a stream of water, the shock and animation of a torrent of activity.”

(Du côté de chez Swann, I)

Proust describes the atmosphere he experiences on a summer’s day in his room, where the sharp light of the sun outdoors interplays with the shadows indoors and where he is laying quietly, reading and meditating while noisy activities are ongoing in the street outside. The extreme sensitivity of Proust, and his capacity to register different moods in a situation, are well illustrated in this quote. Things that for people with normal antennae would appear unnoticeable or insignificant, could for him be the source of great inner trembling and reflection. It must for him have been very demanding to face all these sufferings these extreme antennae led him into. At the same time, it gave him experiences which, when we read about them, open our eyes to a world that is there all the time, but that we don’t see because we are so busy moving to and fro, up and down, out or in.



«...car ces après-midis-là étaient plus remplis d'événements dramatiques que ne l'est souvent toute une vie. C'était les événements qui survenaient dans le livre que je lisais; il est vrai que les personnages qu'ils affectaient n'étaient pas "réels", comme disait Françoise. Mais tous les sentiments que nous font éprouver la joie ou l'infortune d'un personnage réel ne se produisent en nous que par l'intermédiaire d'une image de cette joie ou de cette infortune; l'ingéniosité du premier romancier consista à comprendre que dans l'appareil de nos émotions, l'image étant le seul élément essentiel, la simplification qui consisterait à supprimer purement et simplement les personnages réels serait un perfectionnement décisif.»

"...because these afternoons were more filled of dramatic events than a whole life often is. They were the events that came up in the book I was reading; it is true that the persons subjected to them were not "real", as Françoise said. However, all the feelings that we experience through the joy or the misfortune of a real person come to us only through our imagination of this joy or misfortune; the ingenuity of the first novelist consisted in understanding that in producing our emotions, the image being the only essential element, the simplification which would consist in purely and simply eliminating the real persons would be a decisive perfection."

(Du côté de chez Swann, I)

What is real? Is there a reality outside of that produced by our own senses? And what would that reality be? These are eternal questions that philosophers have dealt with for thousands of years. If we think

our lives are lived through what our senses tell us, then it is the type and magnitude of our sensual experiences that make up the quality of our lives. Does it make any difference whether these sensual experiences come through a novel or through other impulses to our senses? In continuing his line of thought brought out in the quote above, Proust says that you through the short time it takes to read the novel, will become much better acquainted with the persons in the novel than you would be with a “real” person through an entire life. You may acquire much richer ideas of other people’s lives and your own life than those you would obtain if you defined the persons in the novel as “unreal” and only stuck to people you have met yourself in the “real” life.

(Move on to next page! Each quote starts on a new page.)



«On cherche à retrouver dans les choses, devenues par la précieuses, le reflet que notre âme a projeté sur elles...»

“We try to rediscover in the things, become precious by them, the reflections that our soul has projected into them...”

(Du côté de chez Swann, I)

Among our possessions, there are some that we keep, because they mean something to us. They are not mere objects of consumption. We keep them because we have them from our ancestors or because we have acquired them for a special reason, as memories of travels, as markers of important events, for special aesthetic reasons, or for some other reason not linked to pure utility. These things are bearers of something within ourselves, traces of situations in our lives that are kept precious in our memories. We are unable to rid ourselves of them, because this would be like tearing away part of our feeling of identity, our soul. When we look at these things, we feel the sensations we had when we got them, the reason why they were then important to us, and what this memory does to us today.



“Mais Bloch avait déplu à mes parents....”

“But Bloch had displeased my parents....”

(Du côté de chez Swann, I)

The reasons why Bloch had not succeeded in pleasing Proust’s parents are to be found in a personality that was intensely preoccupied with appearing as a pure intellectual who was not attached to bourgeois politeness or material things. When Bloch came for lunch he was drenched by rain, and Proust’s father expressed his astonishment at his appearance. Bloch answered that he was not affected at all by external physical conditions, and that his senses did not register that kind of things. When Proust’s grandmother after lunch had said that she did not feel quite well at the time, Bloch had quenched a sob and wiped a tear. It had not made things better that he had arrived one and a half hour late for lunch. Without excusing himself he had said that he never let himself be distracted by atmospheric disruptions or by conventional measures of time. He said that he was inclined to rehabilitate the use of the opium pipe, but that he completely disregarded bourgeois equipment like the clock or the umbrella.



«Ce respect pour ceux qui se trouvaient au-dessus de lui et qu’il voyait d’en bas (eussent-ils été fort au-dessous de lui jusque-là), cette tendance à remonter jusqu’à eux, qui est une résultante presque mécanique de toutes les déchéances.»

“This respect for those who were above him and who he saw from below (even if they had been far below him up to then), this tendency to climb up to them, which is an almost mechanic resultant of all degradation.”

(Du côté de chez Swann, I)

Proust talks about a pianist and composer (M. Vinteuil) who reflects on his and his daughter’s social rank. He placed himself low down on the bottom of the ladder. As a consequence of these reflections, Vinteuil’s habits and behavior had after a while acquired a humble manner which reflected his degraded image of himself. When he walked in the streets, he went out of his way to avoid meeting people whom he considered to be much better than himself.

Proust himself had great respect for Vinteuil’s work, and considered with sadness and amazement the way Vinteuil looked upon himself. To compare oneself with others is a source of frustrations. You will always find someone you consider to be better than yourself in one or other respect. Social ranking is meaningless and creates falsehood as well as neuroses for those people who care about this.



«...je fus frappé pour la première fois de ce désaccord entre nos impressions et leur expression habituelle....Mais en même temps je sentis que mon devoir eût été de ne pas m'en tenir à ces mots opaques et de tacher de voir plus clair dans mon ravissement.»

“...I was for the first time struck by this disharmony between our impressions and their usual expressions....At the same time I felt that it would be my duty not to stick with these unclear words and try to see more clearly into the nature of my enthusiasm.”

(Du côté de chez Swann, I)

Proust tells us about his youth and about places where he walked and received impressions from nature and from buildings. The mismatch between the strength of the impressions he had received during these walks and the words people normally used to describe the things he had seen, at that time struck him for the first time. These unclear words that were normally used to convey impressions from this nature and these buildings, were completely insufficient to express the feelings he had got. He then felt it to be his duty not to accept the use of these unclear words, but rather to try to find words that would enable him to get to the bottom of his enthusiasm. This realization and the ensuing aim that Proust here describes, is in my view the core of what makes Proust's work so unique. His will and capacity to get to the very bottom of his own thoughts and feelings is unmatched.



«...et mon imagination reprenant des forces au contact de ma sensualité, ma sensualité se répandant dans tous les domaines de mon imagination, mon désir n'avait plus de limites.»

“...and my imagination being strengthened by the contact with my sensuality, my sensuality spreading itself to all parts of my imagination, my desire no longer had any limits.”

(Du côté de chez Swann, I)

From time to time, when he walked by himself and sensed atmospheres, his enthusiasm was lifted to romantic levels, producing a wish to see a country girl in front of him on the road, who allowed herself to be embraced by him. How this wish appeared, in the middle of other thoughts, he did not know. It immediately strengthened his feelings for all those things that had pleased him on his way. It was as if the presence of that woman in his imagination added value to these other things. A reciprocal strengthening of the charms of nature and of the woman was produced. The beauty of the trees shined on her and her beauty reflected back on the trees.



«...je cessais de croire partagés par d'autres êtres, de croire vrais en dehors de moi, les désirs que je formais pendant ces promenades et qui ne se réalisaient pas.»

“...I stopped to believe that these desires were shared by others, that their truth existed outside of myself, these desires that I shaped during my walks and that were not becoming reality.”

(Du côté de chez Swann, I)

These were dreams that Proust developed when he as a young man went for walks in the village where he was on vacation with his parents. These dreams circled, when he walked alone, around the thought that a young woman would show up on the road in front of him and let herself be embraced by him. He looked intensely at buildings she would show up from and at trees she would appear behind. These women actually appeared on the road only when he was walking with his parents, but never when he walked alone. But what if she would one day turn up? Would he then dare to address her? He was enraged by these thoughts and hit the trees behind which no women appeared more alive than those you would find painted on the canvas of a landscape painting.



«Il n'était pas comme tant de gens qui, par paresse ou sentiment résigné de l'obligation que crée la grandeur sociale de rester attaché a un certain rivage, s'abstiennent des plaisirs que la réalité leur présente en dehors de la position mondaine où ils vivent cantonnés jusqu'à leur mort, se contentant de finir par appeler plaisirs, faute de mieux, une fois qu'ils sont parvenus à s'y habituer, les divertissements médiocres ou les supportables ennuis qu'elle renferme.»

“He was not like so many people who, because of laziness or resigned feelings of obligation created by high social standing stayed attached to a given shore, abstained from the pleasures that reality presented to them outside the social limits where they lived imprisoned until their deaths, resigning themselves to call pleasures, for want of better, when they have become used to them, the mediocre diversions or endurable bores that they were confined to.”

(Du côté de chez Swann, I)

The social rules of behaviour that are in force within the different social groups in society are often difficult to grasp for outsiders, but nevertheless quite clear for those who live within a given social group. These rules are, even if they are invisible, severely enforced by the group and work in the long run as an iron cast that it takes courage and determination to break out of. If you try to break out, you will soon be met by sanctions. These sanctions take the form of social exclusion from the outer and inner circles. For those who build their entire existence around the goal of being accepted socially in certain groups, such more or less visible exclusions may have dramatic consequences for their mental health. Some persons are so strong and charismatic that they can make their own rules, without regard for the consequences they may have for their social position – and still be accepted by all. For most people it is more complicated. They must look for a balance between respecting their social group's rules of behavior and upholding their personal integrity and freedom.



«Leur amabilité, séparée de tout snobisme et de la peur de paraître trop aimable, devenue indépendante, a cette aisance, cette grâce de mouvements de ceux dont les membres assouplis exécutent exactement ce qu'ils veulent, sans participation indiscrete et maladroitte du reste du corps.»

“Their friendliness, void of all snobbishness and fear of being too friendly, having become independent, has this ease, this grace of movement seen in those whose limbs execute exactly what they wish them to do, without indiscrete or clumsy participation by the rest of the body.”

(Du côté de chez Swann, I)

Being free from snobbishness, from social ambitions, from the wish be liked or accepted by others, gives a mental feeling of freedom that leads to inner calm. This inner calm leads to the relaxation of the body. It is not preoccupied with proving anything. The relaxed body creates natural, graceful movements, where the limbs do what the brain asks them to do without unnecessary use of energy. Psychologists will usually with great ease be able to read our body language, because our neuroses make our body do numerous movements and twists with our arms, legs, eyelids, shoulders and other parts of our body, beyond those movements that the given situation would naturally invite them to do. In Latin countries the body language is to a much higher degree a natural extension of the oral language than in northern countries, and neurotically conditioned movements may take on a different character there – but that is an issue for specialists.



«...ce qui parlait à son imagination, ce n'était pas la pratique de désintéressement, c'en était le vocabulaire.»

“...what spoke to his imagination was not the practice of unselfishness, but the vocabulary of it.”

(Du côté de chez Swann, II)

Using the right words to create a public image of yourself that is in harmony with how you like to be perceived, is more important than to act in accordance with this image. To use words that are in harmony with what you actually are doing, is seldom of interest. That could soon be a bit discomforting. In a culture that is centered on media, the image that is created will always have priority over the realities behind the image. You are supposed to promote yourself, and consequently it is difficult to tell the truth. The participants on the media scene take consciously or unconsciously part in this game. Those who are considered as heroes are presented in grossly glorifying ways, while those who have in some way become scapegoats are presented in the most vilified ways. This polarization of the images that are invented of people, create a distance between the images produced in the media and the reality that people perceive in their daily lives. Some people then react by thinking that there is something very wrong with their own lives, and then try to imitate the images they see in the media. That leads them into a mental state that makes them sick.



«...comme on voit les gens incertains si le spectacle de la mer et le bruit de ses vagues sont délicieux, s'en convaincre ainsi que de la rare qualité de leur goûts désintéressés, en louant cent francs par jour la chambre d'hôtels qui leur permet de les goûter.»

“...observing how people are uncertain about whether the sight of the sea and the sound of the waves are delightful, convincing themselves of this and of the rare quality of their disinterested tastes, by renting an expensive hotel room that permits them to enjoy it.”

(Du côté de chez Swann, II)

We surround ourselves with symbols in our everyday lives. Psychoanalysts, anthropologists, art critics, advertising people and ideological propagandists work all the time with analysis of how symbols govern our daily actions. Symbols exist pervasively in our unconscious. The free, rational thinking that got its breakthrough in the Enlightenment period of the 18th century – after having been slumbering for two thousand years after the Greek golden age in antiquity – should make us believe that the power of symbols over our consciousness would have weakened gradually over the last two – three hundred years. It does not seem like it. The power of symbols is in constant flux. When the influence of some symbol weakens, others are gaining. Some symbols live deep down in our unconscious, like those we observe in mythology. Carl G. Jung spent much of his life analyzing these. Other symbols are more visible on the surface, like those we find in logos for organizations and enterprises that aim at sending us a message. The example given by Proust illustrates how we attach value to things, not necessarily because we feel strongly for them, but merely because the price they cost to acquire them or the cultural content it indicates sends a message about our status if we acquire it. We are still trapped in our efforts to “keep up with the Jones”, whether we operate on a scene where cultural symbols dominate or a scene where material symbols dominate.



«...leur traits – au lieu d’être pour lui des signes pratiquement utilisables à l’identification de telle personne qui lui avait représenté jusque-là un faisceau de plaisirs à poursuivre, d’ennuis à éviter, ou de politesses à rendre...»

“...their traits – instead of being for him signs of practical use for identification of a given person who up to now had represented only an array of pleasures to be sought, bores to be avoided or courtesies to be rendered...”

(Du côté de chez Swann, II)

Proust refers to Swann’s social circle, and says that Swann over time had associated each individual’s traits with his relations to this individual. He is nevertheless on his way to a different mode of looking at them, as a consequence of his contemplation of the tapestries with the beautiful mythological figures and then of the servants moving about in a room where he finds himself, resulting in his looking at his acquaintances with aesthetically critical eyes. Swann’s associations when he sees a person among his acquaintances moves here from utilitarian association of usefulness, to an aesthetically critical and finally to a more abstract consideration of the lines in their faces.



«le monocle du général, resté entre ses paupières comme un éclat d’obus dans sa figure vulgaire, balafrée et triomphale, au milieu du front qu’il éborgnait comme l’oeil unique du cyclope, apparut à Swann comme une blessure monstrueuse qu’il pouvait être glorieux d’avoir recue, mais qu’il était indécent d’exhiber.»

“the general’s monocle, sitting between his eyelids like a grenade explosion in his vulgar, scarred and triumphant face, centered on his forehead like the unique eye of the Cyclops, appeared to Swann like a monstrous wound that he might have been proud to receive, but that it would be indecent to expose.”

(Du côté de chez Swann, II)

Proust could be pitiless in his characteristics of people he met in society, like this example shows. He was completely forthright and his descriptions were very imaginative, as the following example also shows – where a guest in a party watches a pianist play a piece by Liszt:

“...Madame de Franquetot anxieusement, les yeux éperdus comme si les touches sur lesquelles il courait avec agilité avaient été une suite de trapèzes d’où il pouvait tomber d’une hauteur de quatre-vingts mètres...”

“...Mrs de Franquetot anxiously, with her eyes lost as if the tangents on which his hands flew with agility had been a series of trapezes from which he could fall from a height of eighty metres...”



«Ce n'est pas pour rien, se disait-il maintenant, que depuis que les gens jugent leur prochain, c'est sur ses actes. Il n'y a que cela qui signifie quelque chose, et nullement ce que nous disons, ce que nous pensons.»

“It is not for nothing, he now said to himself, that when people judge others, it is on their acts. It is only that which means anything, and not what we say or what we think.”

(Du côté de chez Swann, II)

In this passage, Proust reflects Swann's thoughts. This also a thought that is fundamental for the existentialists – with Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus leading the way. The author André Malraux was also preoccupied with defining people's character in accordance with their acts. A person's thoughts and intentions could be the very best, the most worthy, but they meant nothing if they were not followed by acts in accordance with these. Should you wish to consider yourself as a human being, you would have to go through the choices you had made in life, and the actions you had performed. The existentialists were emphasizing the importance of making choices. Life is made up of situations where you have to make a choice. You cannot avoid making a choice. Staying passive or silent in a given situation is also a choice you make, and that choice has consequences like all other choices. You have to live with the consequences of the choices you make, without complaining, they are results of your own choices.



«Il se rendait compte que toute la période de la vie d’Odette écoulée avant qu’elle ne le rencontrât, période qu’il n’avait jamais cherché à se représenter, n’était pas l’étendue abstraite qu’il voyait vaguement, mais avait été faite d’années particulières, remplis d’incidents concrets. Mais en les apprenant, il craignait que ce passé incolore, fluide et supportable, ne prît un corps tangible et immonde, un visage individuel et diabolique. Et il continuait à ne pas chercher à concevoir, non plus par paresse de penser, mais par peur de souffrir.»

“He realized that the whole extent of Odette’s life past before she met him, a life he never had attempted to look into, was not an abstract extent he saw vaguely, but had been made up of particular years, filled with specific events. However, by learning to know them, he feared that this colorless past, fluid and bearable, would take on a tangible and repulsive body, an individual and devilish face. And he continued to avoid looking into this, not because of laziness of thought, but from fear of suffering.”

(Du côté de chez Swann, II)

The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard says that only the present, the moment we find ourselves in, is real. The past is made up of ghosts and the future consists of illusions. The ghosts of the past and the illusions about the future take up, for many people, the attention in the present. To live in the present is demanding. The choices we have made and the events we have dealt with in the past, have conditioned our present in a way that is impossible to escape from. In addition to this reality we are

faced with, our memory reshapes the past in the most surprising ways. For some people, the past is a positive helper that carries them forward. For others, the ghosts of the past are like millstones drawing them ever deeper down in an abyss they are incapable of climbing up from. Everybody carries their past with them. Swann pushes the past of his mistress (and later, wife) away from his attention. He fears it and prefers to keep it at distance, where it can keep the veil he wishes to cover it with.



«...; en effet l'écart que le vice mettait entre la vie réelle d'Odette et la vie relativement innocente que Swann avait cru, et bien souvent croyait encore, que menait sa maîtresse, cet écart, Odette en ignorait l'étendue....»

“...; in effect the distance in vice between the life Odette actually was living and the life Swann had believed, and often still believed that his mistress lived, this distance Odette ignored the magnitude of...”

(Du côté de chez Swann, II)

Swann had been attracted to, and gradually fallen in love with, Odette without asking himself about her past. In the upper part of the bourgeois society where Swann (and Proust) found themselves, a liberated sexual life was very ill considered – especially for women. In Swann's imagination, Odette was a very different woman from the one she was in reality, and also a different woman from the one her social circle considered her to be. These were three different pictures of Odette's private life. Swann did not wish – in spite of his vague feelings – to enter into Odette's most private life, and least of all did he wish to know about her past. There were two reasons for that. One was that he was less concerned by social conventions than most people in his circle. The other, and most important, was that he – consciously or unconsciously – was afraid to destroy the idealized picture he had of her and thereby destroy their love by his own jealousy and hurt pride.



«Et ces aveux, il ne pouvait plus les oublier. Son âme les charriait, les rejetait, les berçait, comme des cadavres. Et elle en était empoisonnée.»

“And these confessions, he could not forget them. His soul was teasing them, rejecting them, brooding over them, like corpses. And it was poisoned by them.”

(Du côté de chez Swann, II)

Odette did not know how much (or how little) Swann knew about her private life. She imagined for herself what he knew and what he did not know. From her ideas about what he knew, she sometimes made confessions, thinking that this would show him that she had nothing to hide and thereby calm his troubled and suspicious soul. Instead of calming Swann’s soul, these confessions gave new impulses to his jealousy, because these confessions always contained small details that he had not imagined and that put his uneasy imagination in motion.



«...il s'était lancé dans la littérature.....son oeuvre sur le fusil à répétition bulgare.....»

“...he had embarked on literature....his work on the Bulgarian automatic rifle....”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, I)

Proust's father had talked with his acquaintance, ambassador Norpois, about Proust's wish to become an author. Norpois looked at Proust with an air that indicated that this was an illness that was not deadly, and told about a younger colleague in the Foreign Service who was attacked by this illness and who actually left the service, where a good career awaited him, in order to throw himself into this calling. In Norpois' opinion, he had succeeded quite well, first with a work about the feeling of infinity on the western banks of the Victoria-Nyanza-lake and thereafter with a work, written with great penetration and alert pen, about the Bulgarian automatic rifle. Norpois recommended that Proust take contact with this colleague to seek advice and inspiration, something that gave Proust the same anguish as if he had been enrolled as ship-boy on a sailship.



«...Comme dit un beau proverbe arabe: «Les chiens aboient, la caravane passe.» Après avoir jetté cette situation, M de Norpois s’arrêta pour nous regarder et juger de l’effet qu’elle avait produit sur nous. Il fut grand, le proverbe nous était connu. Il avait remplacé cette année-là chez les hommes de valeur cet autre: “Qui sème le vent, récolte la tempête”, lequel avait besoin de repos, n’étant pas infatigable et vivace comme “Travailler pour le roi de Prusse”.

“...As it is said in an arab proverb: “the dogs bark, the caravan is passing”. Having presented this quote, Mr. de Norpois stopped to look at us in order to judge the effect it had had on us. It was substantial, the proverb was known to us. It had this year replaced for men of value this other: “Who sows wind, reaps storm”, which needed rest, not being tireless and lively like “Working for the King of Prussia”.

(À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, I)

Ambassador Norpois’ empty and pompous conversation gives a vivid impression of salon conversations at their worst, when their main purpose is to boost the image of the speaker rather than to exchange views or make intellectual progress.



«Cette réputation de grand lettré, jointe à un véritable génie d'intrigue caché sous le masque de l'indifférence, avait fait entrer M de Norpois à l'Académie des Sciences morales.»

“This reputation of a great literate, combined with a real genius for intrigue hidden behind a mask of indifference, had given Norpois access to membership in the Academy of Moral Sciences.”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, I)

Proust considers ambassador Norpois to be an affected person who takes on postures, where intrigues are an integral part of his behavior. To play a part in order to build a reputation has, with the advent of modern media's focus on celebrities, become an even stronger tendency among people seeking public attention in our times. Every politician knows that the impressions people are left with, are more important than the actual truth behind the impressions that have been created. Media, on their side, are playing a game which consists in magnifying disagreements and conflicts in order to create a sense of crisis or sensation among the public, in order to sell their “news”. The games played by the media reinforce politician's needs to play their own game of posturing, to influence the impressions people are left with. This game, played by politicians and media, has created a large market for experts who know how this game is best played, the “spin doctors”. The search for the actual truth behind events is much too time consuming and costly for media, and is therefore not given priority. Besides, that is not what media are looking for. The truth does not always sell well, compared with a well-fabricated story.



«Votre rêve le plus ardent est d’humilier l’homme qui vous à offensé. Mais si vous n’entendez plus parler de lui, ayant changé de pays, votre ennemi finira par ne plus avoir pour vous aucune importance. Si on a perdu de vue pendant vingt ans toutes les personnes à cause desquelles on aurait aimé entrer au Jockey ou à l’Institut, la perspective d’être membre de l’un ou de l’autre de ces groupements ne tentera nullement.»

“Your most ardent dream is to humiliate the man who has offended you. However, if you don’t hear about him any longer, having come to another country, your enemy will in the end have no importance for you. If you have lost sight for twenty years of all these persons for whom you would have wished to enter the Jockey Club or the Institute, the perspective of becoming member of one or the other of these communities will no longer be attractive.”

(À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, I)

How much of our life is a result of what other people think about us or do to us? To what extent do we allow others to determine what we choose to do? How much are we governed by what other people think we should do or not do? Are we capable of using our given freedom to make our own choices? Proust’s words describe the suffocating tyranny that was found in the higher social circles, where being a member of the “right” clubs and networks determined what kind of person you were considered to be. As long as other people’s opinions about you are important to you, you will be a victim of this tyranny. This tyranny is especially strong in those circles where social rules and social rankings govern people’s consciousness. Our thoughts and our actions will then be concentrated on everything that can contribute to the elevation of our rank on the social ladder.



«...dans la confusion de l'existence, il est rare qu'un bonheur vienne juste se poser sur le désir qui l'avait réclamé.»

“...in the confusion of existence, it is rare that happiness comes to place itself right on the desire that had seeked it.”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, I)

Happiness is not something you find when you are looking for it. You meet it only when you are looking for something else. If you seek it, it will be like moving around in the desert and discover a mirage or hallucinate about water fountains and airy castles. You will not be able to seize it; it will be gone when you approach it. Happiness may come to you when you have fought for something that is important for you, or discovered something specific that you have been searching for. When this you have found or obtained no longer is important for you, happiness will disappear correspondingly.



«...il me sembla que je méritais vraiment le dédain de M. de Norpois; que j'avais préféré jusqu'ici à tous les écrivains celui qu'il appelait un simple "joueur de flute" et une véritable exaltation m'avait été communiqué, non par quelque idée importante, mais par une odeur de moisi.»

"...it seemed to me that I really deserved the disdain of Mr. de Norpois; having preferred up to now among all authors he who by him was called a simple "flute player" and having been excited, not by some important idea, but by a mouldy odour."

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, I)

The pompous ambassador Norpois considers himself to be a man of «elevated» tastes. He is concerned with the great epic works and famous names of the "official" history of literature. Authors who deal with "small" matters of everyday life are not for him. In Proust's text, Bergotte is the preferred author, disdainingly called "the flute player" by Norpois. Bergotte is a pseudonym for Anatole France, a favorite with the younger people at Proust's time. Proust's exaltation with the smell of mould illustrates his extreme sensitivity and capacity to concentrate his attention and feelings on things that very few would notice, but make up the particularity of Proust.



«Combien y en a-t-il de ces «amis des princes» qui ne seraient pas recus dans un salon un peu fermé? Les princes se savent princes, ne sont pas snobs et se croient d'ailleurs tellement au-dessus de ce qui n'est pas leur sang que grands seigneurs et bourgeois leur apparaissent, au-dessous d'eux, presque au meme niveau.»

“How many are there of those “friends of princes” who would not be invited to select receptions? The princes know they are princes, they are not snobbish, they consider themselves so much above those that are not of their rank, that great nobles and high bourgeois society alike seem to them, below them, almost at the same level.”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, I)

Social rankings are to be found everywhere, but no place to such a high degree than in countries where nobility is alive and kicking. Titles of nobility give an open, easily accessible ranking that is readable for all those who are interested in social rankings. Within nobility there are also social rules prescribing how you are to behave when meeting people with higher or lower social ranking than yourself. In a country like Japan, the social rules of conduct are so advanced that the way you address people varies in a detailed way according to where these people are placed on the social ranking. Among nobles, it is also important to know for how long a family has held their titles. The longer this period, the higher is the prestige attached to any given title. Money is also important. Nobility without money have lower prestige than nobility

with money, within a given level of nobility. Nobles protect their prestige and they protect each other. Families with money, but without titles, have no prestige within nobility. However, a rich family may build itself up socially by marrying into a noble family on the verge of bankruptcy (which is the only way they will get access). This happens all the time, and this is why it is so important in socially ambitious circles to keep track of how long a family has kept its titles without this kind of blood dilution. Proust's description of the social image princes have of themselves gives a vivid idea of how titles of nobility create social distance between people. Within nobility, the Gotha (a publication which keeps track of family lineages within nobility) is an important register, permitting people to know their own place (and, of course, that of others) in high society.



«...comme les nouveaux décorés qui, dès qu'ils le sont, voudraient voir se fermer aussitôt le robinet des croix, Madame Bontemps eût souhaité qu'après elle personne de son monde à elle ne fût présenté à la princesse.»

“...like the recently decorated who, from the very moment they are decorated, would want the access to that order be closed, Mrs. Bontemps would have wished that nobody in her own circles should be introduced to the princess after her.”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, I)

Our need to be exclusive can easily lead us to protect our privileges. If we have a possession that few or nobody else have, it gives us a joy linked to the feeling of being privileged. If other people get access to the same type of privilege, it will give us an insidious feeling of discontent – even if our possession is unaltered in magnitude or material nature. Our privilege is diluted, our feeling of exclusivity is reduced. This feeling of exclusivity is linked to our need to be visible as an individual, and this visibility is reduced when other people acquire the same possessions. We wish to be recognized, and we don't think we can be that if we become invisible. Recognition coming from exclusivity is in opposition to recognition coming from the contributions we make within a team or a community, where team work is at the center of attention. Your capacity to contribute to the team's achievements is at the core of the scale of recognition, whereas an urge to achieve exclusivity is harmful in this context.



«Mais on ne trouve jamais aussi hauts qu'on les avait espérés, une cathédrale, une vague dans la tempête, le bond d'un danseur....”

“However, we never experience them being as high as we had hoped, a cathedral, a wave in the storm, a dancer's jump...”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, I)

Our expectations govern most of our joys and disappointments. When we look forward to something, our imagination gets to work. The longer our imagination is allowed to work on a future event, the greater will be the distance between our expectations and what we actually experience when we are faced with the event in question. If our expectations are linked to something positive, we become disappointed. If they are linked to something negative, we become pleasantly surprised that it wasn't worse. A Norwegian mountain climber, Arne Næss, had climbed to the top of Mount Everest and he afterwards said that the best part of the expedition had been the time when he did the preparations at home. At that time, the dreams and the expectations had been given free reign, and these had given him far more pleasure than the actual implementation of the expedition. Taking the initiative for pleasing projects may give a double amount of joy. The first joy, which may be the greatest and last for the longest time, is at the time when we prepare the project and look forward to it. The second is when we implement the project, and most of the time the joy will be good if we have prepared the project well, but less so than the joy we had when we prepared it.



«...les propos que nous avons entendus, sont là qui obstruent l'entrée de notre conscience, et commandent beaucoup plus les issues de notre mémoire que celles de notre imagination, ils rétroagissent d'avantage sur notre passé que nous ne sommes plus maîtres de voir sans tenir compte d'eux, que sur la forme, restée libre, de notre avenir.»

“...the words we have heard are there to obstruct the entrance into our consciousness, and control much more the roads of our memory than those of our imagination, they act more on our past that we no longer can see without taking them into account, than on the shape of our future, which is still free.”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, I)

New experiences and new input that we receive, redefine our perception of our situation and place our memories in a new light. A wish we have had has been filled with images and associations made by our imagination, and if the wish has come through the new situation will block access to the thoughts and feelings we had before the wish had come through. The present, the wish come through, takes over in our perception of the situation, and the magic of the dream about the wish before its realization is gone. If, in addition, we receive comments about this event from other people, these comments will alter even more the way our memory perceives the event.



«J'avais pu croire pendant des années qu'aller chez Madame Swann était une vague chimère que je n'atteindrais jamais; après avoir passé un quart d'heure chez elle, c'est le temps où je ne la connaissais pas qui était devenu chimérique et vague comme un possible que la réalisation d'un autre possible a anéanti....il se composait de deux états que je ne pouvait, sans qu'ils cessassent d'être distinct l'un de l'autre, réussir à penser à la fois.»

“I might have thought for years that to visit Mrs. Swann was a vague chimera that I would never reach; having spent a quarter of an hour in her home, it was the time when I did not know her that had become a vague chimera removed by a new reality....it was made up of two states of mind that I could not think of at the same time, without one of them being removed by the other.”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, I)

It is hard to go back to the feelings and dreams we had before we achieved what we dreamed about. Having achieved what we dreamed about, we experience that the reality we then face is not in harmony with the dreams we had. At the same time, we are unable to reproduce the dream in our mind, because the dream as it appeared then is being clouded by the new reality we now face. It is hard enough to make our dreams come through. This requires endurance and fights against our own weaknesses, as well as against external circumstances. In those cases where we actually make it, it turns out that the dream – when it has become reality – has got a different content than it had before it became reality.



«...on entendait alterner avec les propos du vrai Bergotte ceux du Bergotte egoïste, ambitieux et qui ne pensait qu'à parler de tels gens puissants, nobles ou riches, pour se faire valoir, lui qui dans ses livres, quand il était vraiment lui-même, avait si bien montré, pur comme celui d'une source, le charme des pauvres.»

“...you could hear, alternating with the words of the real Bergotte, those of the selfish and ambitious Bergotte who thought only of talking about powerful, aristocratic or rich people, to make himself interesting, he who in his books, when he was really himself, had shown so well, pure like from a source, the charm of the poor.”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, I)

The renowned French author, Anatole France, is believed to be the main inspiration for Proust's Bergotte. Proust had observed Bergotte in social settings and seen that he was socially ambitious in his private life, attaching importance to power, aristocracy and money. This stood in contrast to his literary work, where people living in poor conditions had a form of dignity that was more beautiful and more attractive than what you would find among those in the upper social echelons. Who was the real Bergotte? Did his work as an author reflect a desire to play in an “intellectually correct” way with social myths, or did he have a split personality?



«Les arguments de M. de Norpois (en matière d'art) étaient sans réplique, parce qu'ils étaient sans réalité.»

“Mr. Norpois’ arguments (in matters of art) could not be opposed, because they were without real content.”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, I)

Proust is here attacking the emptiness in Mr. Norpois’ views on art. An opinion with a substantial content gives opportunity for counterarguments and real discussion, with the possibility of arriving at views that may contain elements from all participants in the discussion. Mr. Norpois’ thoughts and arguments about art were without content, empty conversation made up to pose as a connoisseur, and impossible to discuss. He was more concerned with making a brilliant show than with expressing opinions.



«Ce fût vers cette époque que Bloch bouleversa ma conception du monde, ouvrit pour moi des possibilités nouvelles de Bonheur (qui devraient du reste se changer plus tard en possibilités de souffrances)...»

“It was at this time that Bloch shook my view on the world, opening up for me new possibilities for Happiness (which would, by the way, later transform themselves into possibilities for suffering)...”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, I)

Bloch had assured Proust that women were more than happy to have sexual intercourse. In addition to make him this favor, Proust says, Bloch also made him another favor, namely the one of bringing him along to a brothel. There he could see that Bloch was speaking the truth. Before that time, Proust had only had vague ideas of the faces of the women he could have, but the brothels gave him specific faces attached to this kind of situation. However, the hostess of the brothel knew none of the women he wanted, and the women she offered were not among those he wanted.



«Je cessai du reste d’aller dans cette maison parce que, désireux de témoigner mes bons sentiments à la femme qui la tenait et avait besoin de meubles, je lui en donnait quelques-uns – notamment un grand canapé – que j’avais hérités de ma tante Léonie....Mais dès que je les retrouvai dans la maison où ces femmes se servaient d’eux, toutes les vertus qu’on respirait dans la chambre de ma tante à Combray, m’apparurent suppliciées par le contact cruel auquel je les avait livrées sans défense! J’aurais fait violer une morte que je n’aurais pas souffert d’avantage.»

“I nevertheless stopped going to this house because, out of a desire to please the woman who kept it and had a need for furniture, I gave her some – among other things a large sofa – that I had inherited from my aunt Léonie....But at the same moment I saw them again where these women made use of them, it occurred to me that all the good qualities that were to be found in my aunt Léonie’s room in Combray, were being mistreated through the cruel contact to which I had exposed them in a defenseless way. Had I caused the rape of deceased, I would not have suffered more.”

(À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, I)

The feelings we have for our possessions are strongly linked to the connection in which we have been used to seeing them and make use of them. They contain memories, and these memories leave imprints of deep feelings in our subconscious. We don’t reflect on these feelings in our daily lives, because we take these things for granted – just like we don’t reflect on how important of the people we see on a daily basis are for us, because we also take them for granted. What these people and these things mean to us in a deeper sense, we don’t discover before we do something which has created a distance between them and us – either by letting them down or by separating ourselves from them. This change is felt particularly strongly if we subsequently see them with other people.



«Toute une partie de mes meubles, et surtout une magnifique argenterie ancienne de ma tante Léonie, je les vendis, malgré l’avis contraire de mes parents, pour pouvoir disposer de plus d’argent et envoyer plus de fleurs à Madame Swann qui me disait en recevant d’immenses corbeilles d’orchidées: «Si j’étais Monsieur votre père, je vous ferais donner un conseil judiciaire.» Comment pouvais-je supposer qu’un jour je pourrais regretter tout particulièrement cette argenterie et placer certains plaisirs plus haut que celui, qui deviendrait peut-être absolument nul, de faire des politesses aux parents de Gilberte.»

“I sold a great part of my furniture, and particularly a magnificent ancient silverware cupboard from my aunt Léonie, against the advice of my parents, in order to have more money and send more flowers to Mrs. Swann who said to me as she received huge basket of orchids: “If I were Mister your father, I would give you a judicial advice.” How could I suppose that one day I would regret in particular this cupboard and place certain pleasures higher than the one, which would maybe become insignificant, of making polite gestures to Gilberte’s parents.”

(À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, I)

Apart from Mrs. Swann’s misuse of the word “judicial” in place of the word “judicious”, which Proust introduced to mark Mrs. Swann’s lack of education, this passage shows how our perspective of what is important evolves all the time. What is important for us as teenagers, becomes meaningless when we are young adults, and what we give priority when we are young adults becomes incomprehensible when we get older. To reflect on how the pattern of our priorities changes over time, can lead to many surprises. And then we may wonder why small children and old people understand each other so well.



«Mes parents cependant auraient souhaité que l'intelligence que Bergotte m'avait reconnue se manifestât par quelque travail remarquable.»

“My parents had nevertheless wished that the intelligence that Bergotte ascribed to me would have manifested itself in some remarkable work.”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, I)

Proust was well known by his contemporaries for his literary insights and vast knowledge. He was also considered as a very sharp observer, with capacity for perceptive detail and advanced reasoning. He participated in the social life of the higher circles in Paris, but was much hampered by allergies and often had to stay in bed. His parents felt that he spent a lot of money unwisely, and wasted his time on reflections and writing that were leading nowhere. The ambitions of his parents for him were not met in their lifetime; his fame came mostly after their death.



«...ce genre de plaisir tout passif que trouve à rester tranquille quelqu'un qui est alourdi par une mauvaise digestion.»

“...the kind of pleasure, totally passive, that someone finds by staying immobile when he is burdened by a bad digestion.”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, I)

Proust describes how he, having come home from a visit at Swann's, builds up an imaginary conversation with the persons who were there. This imaginary conversation essentially consists of exchanges of views that play up to Proust in such a way that he gets the opportunity to shine with his intelligent thoughts. These imaginary conversations were thoughts that just flowed through Proust's consciousness while he lay and slumbered after a great meal. Having decided to start working tomorrow, there was obviously no point in starting now - today!



«...ce qu'on a obtenu n'est jamais qu'un nouveau point de départ pour
desirer s'avantage.»

“...what you have obtained is nothing else than a starting point for
generating new desires.”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, I)

We don't live now. We are either in the company of the ghosts of the past or the illusions of the future. This implies that every time we obtain something or experience a wish coming through, we don't pause and enjoy it. We hasten on to the next wish or the next aim. Enjoyment and satisfaction is always ahead of us. We never seem to reach it.



«En réalité, dans l'amour il y a une souffrance permanente, que la joie neutralise, rend virtuelle, ajourne, mais qui peut à tout moment devenir ce qu'elle serait depuis longtemps si l'on avait pas obtenu ce qu'on souhaitait, atroce.»

“In reality there is in love a permanent suffering that joy neutralizes, renders virtual, postpones, but may at any moment become - what it would have been for a long time if you had not obtained what you wished for - atrocious.”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, I)

An intense love is a condition filled with vulnerability linked to the smallest events and signals that you feel may threaten the perfection of this emotion. You are constantly asking yourself if the love you feel is reciprocated and you are in a state of alert towards your love's facial expressions, choice of words, priorities, and actions. You survey the signals and make alarmist interpretations, being afraid that the magic may vanish. If others take an interest in the loved one, regardless of why they do it, you become suspicious, and jealousy may be hard to contain.

All these elements are there permanently, and they are only kept in check at those moments when you feel that everything is right and where nothing comes between you and the loved one. These are the moments that make it possible to endure the permanent suffering that is there, ready to appear at any moment.



«C'est alors à la dernière seconde que la possession du bonheur nous est enlevé, ou plutôt c'est cette possession même que par une ruse diabolique la nature charge de détruire le bonheur. Ayant échoué dans tout ce qui était du domaine des faits et de la vie, c'est une impossibilité dernière, l'impossibilité psychologique du bonheur que la nature crée.»

“It is then at the last second that the possession of happiness is taken away from us, or rather, it is this possession itself which, by a devilish twist, nature uses to destroy happiness. Having failed in everything dealing with facts and life, there is this last impossibility, the psychological impossibility of happiness that nature produces.”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, II)

At the very moment we get what we desire, our attention is moving to something else that we have not got or that is better than what we got. We wonder whether what we got was really worth it, or if we should not have wished for something else. Or, to quote Groucho Marx: “I would not want to be a member of a club that would have me as its member.” Proust is seeing this as a psychological reflex: at the very moment you get what you desire, an inner voice directs its attention at what is wrong with the situation or what could be better.



«Chaque jour depuis des années je calquais tant bien que mal mon état d'âme sur celui de la veille.»

“Every day, since many years, I transposed my state of mind to the one of yesterday.”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs,II)

Where do our states of mind come from? Why are they different from day to day? Do specific events govern the movements in our states of mind? Are there streams of consciousness concerning things we have done that show up in our memories? Fear of what may happen in the future? Atmospheric changes? When we are in high spirits one day and down low or melancholy the next, without anything specific having occasioned the change, what may then be the cause of the change in mood? Proust had an extraordinary capacity to stay concentrated on a thought and go deeper and deeper into its ramifications, such as in this case, where he fixes his attention on what his mood is today, and asks himself how that corresponds to his mood of yesterday. How often do we do anything like that?



«A un moment où je dénombrerais les pensées qui avaient rempli mon esprit pendant les minutes précédents.....”

“At a moment when I was running through the thoughts that had filled my mind in the preceding minutes.....”

(À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs,II)

«Stream of consciousness» is a form of literature that has been popular, but that is something else than what Proust’s work is about. While “stream of consciousness” is about writing down your thoughts as they run through your mind without applying any kind of censorship on what is happening, Proust’s great strength is about holding on to a thought and running through all the associations that thought may contain for him. He has done this in a way nobody else has even been close to. In this quote he is recapitulating his “stream of consciousness” in order to find out whether he had fallen asleep or not in the last minutes.



«Mais par ce matin de voyage l'interruption de la routine de mon existence, le changement de lieu et d'heure avaient rendu leur présence indispensable (note: la présence de ses facultés). Mon habitude qui était sédentaire et n'était pas matinale faisait défaut, et toutes mes facultés étaient accourues pour la remplacer, rivalisant entre elles de zèle – s'élevant toutes, comme des vagues, à un même niveau inaccoutumé – de la plus basse à la plus noble, de la respiration, de l'appétit, et de la circulation sanguine à la sensibilité et à l'imagination.»

“However, on this morning of travel the interruption of the routines of my existence, the change of place and time, had made their presence indispensable (note: the presence of his faculties). My habits, which were sedentary and not early risers, were not available, and all my faculties had come running to replace them, competing between them in eagerness – rising all, like waves, to a similar unusual level – from the lowest to the most noble, the breathing, the appetite, the blood circulation to sensibility and imagination.”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, II)

When we are brought out of our usual, daily context, our senses and capacities will not go on “autopilot” – like they normally do. They are being sharpened by the unusual and the unexpected. We open up for impressions in a more alert way and thereby feel that we live more intensely. Moving out of our daily routines and away from our daily places and motions, all our senses are mobilized to meet the unexpected. It need not be far away. It is sufficient that we are dealing with something we do not normally do, or being in a place where we not normally are.



«...je cherchais à imaginer le directeur de l'hôtel de Balbec pour qui j'étais, en ce moment inexistant, et j'aurais voulu me présenter à lui dans une compagnie plus prestigieuse que celle de ma grand'mère qui allait certainement lui demander des rabais. Il m'apparaissait comme empreint d'une morgue certaine, mais très vague de contours.»

“...I tried to imagine the director of the Balbec hotel for whom I was at this moment inexistent, and I would have wanted to present myself to him in a more prestigious company than that of my grandmother, who would certainly ask for a discount. He appeared to me as being ceremonious, but aside from that I had a very vague image of him.”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, II)

Proust is sitting as a young boy in a train on his way to summer vacation with his grandmother at the Balbec hotel. He is very fond of his grandmother, but at the same time very conscious about how he appears to other people. His grandmother is down to earth and unceremonious, with a good self-confidence – without being arrogant. Proust is imagining himself taking part in fashionable society, where mundane people and their appearance play an important role. He most certainly does not want to appear as someone who has a limited budget. His need to be seen and valued is natural, as it is for all, but maybe even more at that age than later in life.



«...les boutons extirpés dans la figure du directeur cosmopolite (en réalité naturalisé Monégasque, bien qu'il fût – comme il disait parce qu'il employait toujours des expressions qu'il croyait distinguées, sans s'apercevoir qu'elles étaient vicieuses – «d'originalité roumaine»).

“...the extirpated pimples in the face of the cosmopolitan director (in fact a naturalized native of Monaco, although he was – as he said, because he always used expressions that he thought dignified, without realizing that they were viciously twisted – “of Rumanian originality”).”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, II)

Trying to appear as someone you are not, is with Proust a theme we often meet when he talks about people he meets in social life. The hotel director has social ambitions for himself and his hotel, and he aims for hotel guests in a social stratum that lies above the one he belongs to himself. He does not possess the language codes of the classes he aspires to and often uses expressions he does not entirely understand the content of, or words of which he does not properly measure the value.



«Je n'étais pas encore assez âgé et j'étais resté trop sensible pour avoir renoncé au désir de plaire aux êtres et de les posséder.»

“I was not old enough and I had remained too sensitive to have renounced the desire to please people and possess them.”

A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, II)

Proust is sitting in the dining room of the fashionable summer hotel with his grandmother. His grandmother is completely unmoved by social conventions and the relative importance of the respective social classes, something Proust at his young age has not yet become. He wishes that he could be unmoved in the way an aristocrat would be. He also wishes that he could be with the other young people moving about on the promenade along the seashore, but he is scared stiff that his grandmother will ask them on his behalf – something he would find utterly humiliating. He is sitting there in the dining room, completely entangled in – and stifled by – his worries about social rules of conduct.



«...ma grand'mère qui, ne pouvant supporter l'idée que je perdisse le bénéfice d'une heure d'air, ouvrit subrepticement un carreau et fit envoler de même coup avec les menus, les journaux, voiles et casquettes de toutes les personnes qui étaient en train de déjeuner; elle-même, soutenue par le souffle céleste, restait calme comme une sainte Blandine, au milieu des invectives qui, augmentant mon impression d'isolement et de tristesse, réunissait contre nous les touristes méprisants, dépeignés et furieux.»

“...my grandmother who, being unable to stand the idea that I would lose one minute of fresh air, discretely opened a window and at the same time made the menus, newspapers, veils and headpieces of the other lunch guests fly about; herself, carried by the breath of heaven, staying calm like a saint, in the middle of the invectives that, increasing my feeling of isolation and sadness, were directed at us by the disdainful, ruffled, and furious tourists.”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, II)

Proust's extreme sensibility and focus on social acceptance in the mundane circles when he was young often came under pressure when his beloved and uncomplicated grandmother moved about without concern for what other people might think of her. He admired and loved her, but was at the same time worried about what she might do to destroy the elegant and distinguished façade Proust wished to show at that time.



«...et c'est la suppression de tout désir, de la curiosité pour les formes de la vie qu'on ne connaît pas, de l'espoir de plaire à de nouveaux êtres, remplacés chez les femmes par un dédain simulé, par une allégresse factice, qui avait l'inconvénient de leur faire mettre du déplaisir sous l'étiquette de contentement et se mentir perpétuellement à elle-mêmes, deux conditions pour qu'elles fussent malheureuses.»

“...and it is the suppression of all desire, of the curiosity about the forms of life that one does not know, of the hope to please new beings, replaced in those women by a simulated disdain, a false cheerfulness, which had the inconvenience of placing displeasure under the appearance of satisfaction and making them lie perpetually to themselves, two preconditions for making them unhappy.”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, II)

Those people who participate in social competition with the motive of climbing up the social ladder, will quite fast get entangled in a role they try to play. This role is made in such a way that when they meet people they feel are below themselves on the social ladder – or for that matter people who are on a lower social ranking than the level they wish to reach – they will assume a disdainful attitude which is characterized by a pretention of having seen and heard all before, and not being excited by anything these other people might be saying. On the other hand, when they meet people of the social classes they aspire to, they appear enthusiastic and studiously interested in what these people have to say. This play of appearances is very exhausting, and in addition it leads – for those who play this type of game - to a loss of contact with their real personality and the real joys they might otherwise have experienced.



«...la garden-party hebdomadaire que sa femme et lui donnaient, dépeuplait l'hôtel d'une grande partie de ses habitants parce qu'un ou deux d'entre eux étaient invités à ces fêtes, et parce que les autres, pour ne pas avoir l'air de ne pas l'être, choisissaient ce jour-là pour faire une excursion éloignée.»

"...the weekly garden party that his wife and himself were giving, emptied the hotel with a large part of its guests, because one or two of them were invited to these parties, and the others, not wanting to show that they were not invited, chose that day to make a prolonged excursion."

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, II)

When we have social ambitions and participate in social competitions, we develop social strategies. The main motive behind all the strategies is to create certain impressions in given situations, regardless of what the realities might be. This makes us into actors who stage our own lives as if they were reality shows. The social ambitions cloud other ambitions that might be closer to what our deeper identity might imply. We become slaves of false images of success, and we remove ourselves from the person we might be if we allowed us to be ourselves. This distance will in the longer run create serious stress, because we live in a chronic state of hypocrisy.



«Comment aurais-je pu croire à une communauté d'origine entre deux noms qui étaient entrés en moi l'un par la porte basse et honteuse de l'expérience, l'autre par la porte d'or de l'imagination?»

“How could I have thought of a common origin between two names, one of which had entered my consciousness through the low and shameful gate of experience, and the other through the golden gate of imagination?”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, II)

In his younger days, as told in his work, Proust was full of admiration for the duke of Guermantes and his wife, while he only had scorn for Mrs. de Villeparisis, an older whimsical noblewoman. While Proust in his imagination had built up glorious images of the Guermantes family (which he had not yet met), he had little respect for Mrs. de Villeparisis – whom he had met and had the opportunity to judge by experience. When Proust's grandmother tells him that she thinks Villeparisis and Guermantes are of the same family, the young man is indignant and thinks what is quoted above. Experience and imagination are two different things, and reflect a major distinction in philosophy: the distinction between the empiricists (of which David Hume is the principal exponent) and the rationalists (René Descartes).



«...je vis de loin venir dans notre direction la princesse de Luxembourg, à demi appuyée sur une ombrelle de façon à imprimer à son grand et merveilleux corps cette légère inclinaison, à lui faire dessiner cette arabesque si chère aux femmes qui avaient été belles sous l'Empire et qui savaient, les épaules tombantes, le dos remonté, la hanche creuse, la jambe tendue, faire flotter mollement leur corps comme un foulard, autour de l'armature d'une invisible tige inflexible et oblique, qui l'aurait traversé.»

"...I saw from far the princess of Luxemburg coming in our direction, leaning halfway on an umbrella in a way that gave her tall and marvelous body a slight inclination, forming this arabesque so dear to the women who had been beautiful during the Empire and who knew – with their falling shoulders, their heightened back, sunken hip, stretched leg – how to make their body float like a shawl around an inflexible and arched axis that appeared to run through it."

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, II)

In the «elevated» circles there were, in Proust's time, like today, a number of complicated codes one had to know about if one had the ambition to do the right things and blend naturally into the conventions of these circles. The princess of Luxemburg's way of walking was among the more advanced examples, and even the anorectic models on today's catwalks would have trouble matching this.



«Cependant la princesse de Luxembourg nous avait tendu la main et, de temps en temps, tout en causant avec la marquise, elle se détournait pour poser de doux regards sur ma grand'mère et moi, avec cet embryon de baiser qu'on ajoute au sourire quand celui-ci s'adresse à un bébé avec sa nounou. Même dans son désir de ne pas avoir l'air de siéger dans une sphère supérieure à la nôtre, elle avait sans doute mal calculé la distance, car, par une erreur de réglage, ses regards s'imprégnèrent d'une telle bonté que je vis approcher le moment où elle nous flatterait de la main comme deux bêtes sympathiques qui eussent passé la tête vers elle, à travers un grillage au Jardin d'Acclimatation.»

Meanwhile the princess of Luxemburg had stretched her hand out to us and, now and then, while talking to the marquess, she turned her head to place soft glances on my grandmother and me, with this embryo of a kiss that you would add to the smile if you looked at a baby and his nanny. Even in her desire of not appearing to be in a sphere that was superior to ours, she had probably miscalculated the distance, because, through an error of calculation, her glances were impregnated with such goodness that I saw the moment approaching when she would pat her hand like on the heads two nice animals stretching out to her through the fences of the zoo." (Note: Jardin d'Acclimatation is a garden in Paris which also contains a zoo.)

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, II)

Our social life never becomes more ridiculous and problematic than when we imagine that we rank higher on the social ladder than those we speak with, while at the same time try to "pretend" that we are at the same level as them. The point of departure, placing ourselves on a social ladder, is already quite hopeless. When we in addition put up an act to pretend that we don't do it, it becomes plainly ridiculous.



«Je reconnaissais ce genre de plaisir qui requiert, il est vrai, un certain travail de la pensée sur elle-même, mais à côté duquel les agréments de la nonchalance qui vous fait renoncer à lui, semblent bien médiocres.»

“I recognized this type of pleasure which requires, it is true, a certain mental effort, next to which the pleasures given by nonchalance would seem very mediocre.”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, II)

The famous author D.H. Lawrence has said: «An effort of pure attention, if you are capable of it, brings its own reward.”. The effort that lies in concentrated thinking gives a reward in the form of insights, new ideas, and maybe also answers to difficult questions you ask yourself. It is nevertheless very demanding to hold on to a thought and concentrate your undivided attention on it until it is brought to its conclusion. We are far too easily distracted by impulses, interruptions, sounds, multiple channels of media that are switched on, or other distractions. It is generally much more pleasant to let yourself be interrupted. It requires less effort to let external impulses govern our attention; our will power is not tested, we can move along with the flow of impressions and impulses. Our search for entertainment illustrates this. However, as Proust says in the quote above, if you have made the necessary effort it gives you a much greater pleasure than the one you would get by lazily allowing the flow of impressions govern your thoughts.



«...plaisir d'avoir extrait de soi-même et amené à la lumière quelque chose qui y était caché dans la pénombre.»

“...pleasure of having extracted from yourself and brought to light something that was hidden there in the shadow.”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, II)

Proust is here talking about the joy of reflection in silence, where he gets in contact with his own thoughts and ideas. He says that when he meets another person, he gets completely concentrated on entering into the other person's thoughts and existence. His own universe of thoughts gets erased and disappears from his consciousness. This illustrates one of many ways of communicating with other people. Some people never manage to stretch their attention over to the other person; they stay in their own world during the whole conversation. Most people may find themselves somewhere between those extremes. Proust's quote also shows the importance of finding silence and going properly into one's own thoughts from time to time, in order to avoid living constantly on other people's terms.



«...ce désir de montrer qu'on est «autant que les autres», cette peur de paraître trop empressé qui lui était en effet vraiment inconnue et qui enlaidit de tant de laideur et de gaucherie la plus sincère amabilité plébéienne.»

“...this desire to show that you are “just as good as the others”, this fear of appearing too eager, which for him were unknown and which creates such ugliness and clumsiness in the most sincere plebeian amiability.”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, II)

Proust talks about a friend who has been brought up in a good family with much social self-confidence, and he contrasts this friend's uncomplicated social behavior with the one he finds among people with social inferiority complexes who are very concerned with showing that they are just as good as others (which is self-evident for his friend and does not need any form of demonstration) and who at the same time spend much energy in not appearing to eager in their social efforts.



«Alors il voulut s’excuser mais selon le mode qui est justement celui de l’homme mal élevé, lequel est trop heureux en revenant sur ses paroles de trouver une occasion de les aggraver.»

“At that point he wanted to make excuses, but in line with the behavior of a badly raised man, who is all too happy to go back on his words and find an occasion to make things worse.”

(À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, II)

To repair a mistake is always a hard act. Making excuses will rarely make things worse, but the problems appear when you want to explain why you said what you said. Either you engage in lies or half-truths if you try to make it look like you did not really say what you said, or you dig yourself deeper into your mistake if you wish to explain what you said. The best solution is generally to apologize without explanations and take the consequences of the mistake, whatever they may be.



«Je m’efforce de tout comprendre et je me garde de rien condamner.»

“I try to understand everything, and I refrain from judging anything.”

(À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, II)

Are we capable of sticking to this?



«...dans l'état d'esprit où l'on observe, on est très au-dessous du niveau où l'on se trouve quand on crée.»

“...when you are in the state of mind of the observer, you are much below the level on which you are when you create.”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, III)

Observation and contemplation mobilize a much lower level of consciousness than the one you are in when you are in the act of creating something. The concentration and the senses are mobilized automatically and you can more easily reach what we associate with inspiration. Observation is passive and creation is active.



«Il vivait dans le monde des à peu près, où l'on se salue dans le vide, où l'on juge dans le faux. L'inexactitude, l'incompétence, n'y diminue pas l'assurance, au contraire.»

«He lived in the world of superficiality, where you salute into the air, and make erroneous judgments. Inexactitude or incompetence do not diminish self-assurance, on the contrary.

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, III)

Proust is here talking about the father of his friend Bloch. The father has an indirect relation with literature, through hearsay – not through his own reading. He judges things at distance, without direct knowledge about them. He compensates for his inexactitude and ignorance by self-assurance. He gives himself social prestige by pretending not to wish to meet people he in reality would have liked to be in contact with, but does not have the possibility to meet.



«Même dans les cas où la multiplication des faibles avantages personnels par l’amour propre ne suffirait pas à assurer à chacun la dose de bonheur, supérieure à celle accordé aux autres, qui lui est nécessaire, l’envie est là pour combler la différence. Il est vrai que si l’envie s’exprime en phrases dédaigneuses, il faut traduire: «Je ne veux pas le connaitre» par «je ne peut pas le connaitre».»

“Even in the cases where the multiplication of the feeble personal advantages through self-esteem would not suffice to procure for everyone the dose of happiness, superior to that given to others, which is necessary to him, envy is there to fill in the difference. It is true that if envy expresses itself in disdainful phrases, you have to translate: “I do not want to know him” with “it is not possible for me to know him”.”

(À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, III)

It is always possible to hide behind a shield of self-satisfaction, but this in turn creates a need for compensatory actions. You have to build up stories in your imagination to justify the self-satisfaction. You also need to build up a façade you present to your surroundings, a façade that corresponds to the image you wish to project. And then you need to strike a balance between the image projected by the self-satisfaction and the reality that hides behind the façade, which occasionally will pop up in moments of inattention.



«En passant devant le bureau j’adressai un sourire au directeur, et sans l’ombre de dégoût, en receillis un dans sa figure que, depuis que j’étais à Balbec, mon attention comprehensive injectait et transformait peu à peu comme une preparation d’histoire naturelle.»

“When passing the office I smiled to the director, and without a shadow of disgust, I received one in his face which, since I had been in Balbec, my sympathetic attention took up and transformed little by little into a natural history preparation.”

(À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, III)

As Proust gradually had come to know the hotel director at Balbec, his impressions had moved from the mystery of the unknown and peculiar, to the banality and predictability of the known. Proust had learned to read the acting in the face of the hotel director, and the different smiles of the director were among the things he observed with scientific distance and analytical interest. The director had, for Proust, become a superficial person whose expressions did not represent something that went on in the depths of his person, but were rather parts of a superficial game aimed at influencing the guests’ impressions of him.



«...il appartenait à ce prolétariat moderne qui désire effacer dans le langage la trace du régime de la domesticité.»

“...he was part of this modern proletariat that wished to erase in the language the traces of a background of subservience.”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, III)

Language is an integral part of our identity and it shows our cultural attachments. For those who at Proust's time had a strong focus on their desired cultural attachments, it was, like today, important to use language as a mark of distinction. At that time only a minority had the necessary strength to admit openly their attachments to the lower social classes. Wishes of social mobility manifested themselves in efforts by many to hide their backgrounds through “refinements” of their language. As shown by this quote from Proust, such efforts were rarely successful.

Those who were relaxed about what their language told about their background, without any attempt to cover anything up, were generally met with more respect than those who tried to act up. This is, of course, different from the natural evolution that takes place in a person's language as a result of prolonged blending in a new social environment, different from the one he originally came from. Only those who from a point of view of principle hold on to their original language and cultural attachments will succeed in resisting such an evolution.



«L'effort qu'Elstir faisait pour se dépouiller en présence de la réalité de toutes les notions de son intelligence était d'autant plus admirable que cet homme qui, avant de peindre, se faisait ignorant, oubliait tout par probité, car ce qu'on sait n'est pas à soi, avait justement une intelligence exceptionnellement cultivée.»

“The effort Elstir made to strip his mind in the presence of reality of all the notions contained in his intelligence was all the more admirable since this man who, before painting, made himself ignorant, forgot everything on purpose, because what you know is not yours, had an exceptionally cultivated intelligence.”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, III)

The painter Elstir in Proust's work is a pseudonym for a famous painter. Many critics consider that Proust had Claude Monet in mind when he wrote about Elstir, while others contain that he thought about James Abbott McNeill Whistler (Elstir is partly an anagram for Whistler). The interesting thing about the quote is that the artist, who from an intellectual point of view is very knowledgeable and an advanced thinker, must try to “rid himself of “ his intellectual baggage before he starts to paint. Only then will he be able to reach in to his feelings and senses, which constitute the form of consciousness he needs to take in the impressions that light and nature give him.



«Si un peu de rêve est dangereux, ce qui en guérit, ce n'est pas moins de rêve, mais plus de rêve, mais tout le rêve. Il importe qu'on connaisse entièrement ses rêves pour n'en plus souffrir; ...»

“If a little dreaming is dangerous, what cures it is not less dreaming, but more dreaming, the dream in its entirety. It is important to know your dreams completely in order not to suffer from them;”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, III)

Suppressed wishes and thoughts have a tendency to grow big and dominating in our subconscious. If we don't confront them with our consciousness they may take forms and ways that we don't master, and subsequently lead to inner conflicts and depressions. Daily life will appear sad and empty, compared to the insufficiently digested imagery of the subconscious. It is necessary to take your dreams out from your subconscious and into your scrutinizing consciousness, and make them sufficiently specific to enable you to make decisions about whether or not you will do anything about them. If you decide not to do anything about them, but let them stay on as distant dreams, they will give you peace. If you decide to do something about them, it implies that your life will change, and that you will have to live with all the consequences that such a decision entails. A wish to make the dreams come through, without accepting to take on all the consequences this leads to, ends in failure and still deeper depressions.



«Au fur et à mesure qu'on descend dans l'échelle sociale, le snobisme s'accroche à des riens qui ne sont peut-être pas plus nuls que les distinctions de l'aristocratie, mais qui plus obscurs, plus particuliers à chacun, surprennent d'avantage.»

“As you move down on the social ladder, snobbery attaches itself to insignificant things that may not be more ridiculous than the distinctions of the aristocracy, but being more obscure, more particular for each person, surprise more.”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, III)

Proust's quote is linked to the person of Albertine Simonet and Proust says that if he did not know better, he would have spelled her surname with a double n. However, as he got to know her better, it turned out that her family was very preoccupied with the idea that this name should be spelled with one n. This was a wealthy bourgeois family who was of the opinion that those Simonets who spelled their surname with one n, were much more exclusive than those who spelt it with a double n.



«Mon intelligence jugeait ce plaisir fort peu précieux, depuis qu'il était assuré. Mais en moi la volonté ne partagea pas un instant cette illusion, la volonté qui est le serviteur, persévérant et immuable, de nos personnalités successives, cachée dans l'ombre, dédaignée, inlassablement fidèle, travaillant sans cesse, et sans se soucier de variations de notre moi, à ce qu'il ne manqué jamais du nécessaire. Pendant qu'au moment où va se réaliser un voyage désiré, l'intelligence et la sensibilité commencent à se demander s'il vaut vraiment la peine d'être entrepris, la volonté qui sait que ces maîtres oisifs recommenceraient immédiatement à trouver merveilleux ce voyage, ci celui ci ne pouvait avoir lieu, la volonté les laisse dissenter devant la gare, multiplier les hésitations; mais elle s'occupe de prendre les billets et de nous mettre en wagon pour l'heure du départ. Elle est aussi invariable que l'intelligence et la sensibilité sont changeantes...”

“My intelligence was of the opinion that this pleasure was very limited, as it was obtained. However, my will did not for one moment share this illusion, the will being the servant, persevering and immovable, of our changing successive personalities, hidden in the shadow, despised, unceasingly faithful, working all the time to make sure, without considerations for the variations in my self, that my self lacks in nothing. While at the moment a desired travel will take place, the intelligence and the sensibility start to ask themselves whether it really matters to embark on it, the will knows that these volatile masters immediately would think that the travel would be marvelous if it were called off, the will lets them discuss the matter, multiply the hesitations; nevertheless it goes on to purchase the tickets and to place us in the wagon at the time of departure. It is as immovable as the intelligence and the sensibility are changing...”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, III)

No comment.



«...il ne pouvait jamais «rester sans rien faire» quoiqu'il ne fît d'ailleurs jamais rien.»

“...he never managed “to do nothing”, in spite of the fact that he never did anything.”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, III)

To be active and energetic is of course not the same as achieving something, obtaining results.



«...nous ne sommes pas comme des bâtiments à qui on peut ajouter des pierres du dehors, mais comme des arbres qui tirent de leur propre sève le noeud suivant de leur tige, l'étage supérieur de leur frondaison.»

“...we are not like buildings to which you can add stones from outside, but like trees that draw on their own sap the successive branches, the next level of growth.”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, III)

Proust's words are here produced from reflections on the importance of loneliness to grow, to make progress in thinking. Conversations with friends do not give the same possibility to go deeply into your thoughts and yourself, he says. At the same time he is deeply moved by the kind words to him from a good friend, and recognizes the importance these words also have for him. But this importance is of a different character and belongs to another sphere than his search for loneliness to make progress in his own thinking. Impulses from the outside have to be internalized through reflection before they can produce effects in himself.



«Le visage humain est vraiment comme celui du Dieu d'une théologie orientale, toute une grappe de visages juxtaposés dans des plans différents et qu'on ne voit pas à la fois.»

“The human face is really like that of a God in oriental theology, a multitude of faces superposed in different levels that you don't see at the same time.”

(À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, III)

As a young man, Proust had met a group of young girls on the beach walk in the seaside town of Balbec. He later followed up the contact and in the quote above he reflects his impression of how these young girls could change personalities and appearances in different situations. Their radiation was different every time he met them, depending on who was there and on how the relations with Proust were going. These differences were so significant that they could appear as entirely different persons each time.



«Francoise mettait si habilement à profit les quelques instants qu’il passait dans la cuisine, en attendant la réponse de maman, qu’il était bien rare qu’il repâtit sans avoir indestructiblement gravée en lui la certitude que «si nous n’en avons pas c’est que nous n’en voulions pas».»

“Francoise made such good use of the short moments he stayed in the kitchen, waiting for my mother’s answer, that he very seldom left without having in an indestructible way engraved in his consciousness the certainty that “if we do not have it, it is because we do not want it”.”

(Le côté de Guermantes, I)

Francoise is the invaluable housemaid in the Proust family’s household. She was intent on creating the impression that the family was well off, and if a person came to deliver or pick up something and observed that something was missing in the house, she made sure this impression was maintained – as shown by the quote. Francoise identified herself entirely with the family and supported it with all her heart, including when it came to building up an image she wished to create. This naturally also had the effect of building up her own image, but that was probably not her main purpose.



«...ce n'est pas que la richesse sans plus, la richesse sans la vertu, fût aux yeux de Françoise le bien suprême, mais la vertu sans la richesse n'était pas non plus son idéal. La richesse était pour elle comme une condition nécessaire de la vertu, à défaut de laquelle la vertu serait sans mérite et sans charme.»

“...it was not that wealth only, wealth without virtue, was the supreme good in the eyes of Françoise, but virtue without wealth was not her ideal either. For her, wealth was like a necessary condition for virtue, without which virtue would be without merit and without charm.”

(Le côté de Guermantes, I)

It does of course make a much greater impression when a rich person has a restrained level of consumption, than when a person without means keeps the same level of consumption. It is of course hard to say whether the latter's restrained level of consumption follows as a consequence of virtue or of necessity, whereas the former's shines in its visible virtue. People with “old money”, among whom moderation gave social status, would normally go elsewhere to spend their money – where it was less visible. There they could live a luxurious life without fear of moralizing gazes, because nobody would know who they were and nobody would be interested in knowing anything about them.



«Les poètes prétendent que nous retrouvons un moment ce que nous avons jadis été en rentrant dans telle maison, dans tel jardin où nous avons vécu jeunes. Ce sont là pèlerinages fort hasardeux et à la suite desquels on compte autant de déceptions que de succès. Les lieux fixes, contemporains d'années différentes, c'est en nous même qu'il vaut mieux les trouver.»

“Poets pretend that we find again for a moment what we were by entering this house, that garden where we have lived when we were young. These are very hazardous pilgrimages, from which we draw as many deceptions as successes. Particular places, seen at different times, are found in a better way within ourselves.”

(Le côté de Guermantes, I)

«You can never set your foot twice in the same river.” This saying by Heraclitus from Ephesus tells us that the circumstances around a happening always are unique, and that a repetition of this happening in such a way that everything turns out the same, is impossible. Our mental state is changing all the time and our attention is always drawn in different directions. The physical setting in which we find ourselves changes its content continually; a cloud may come in front of the sun, a sound may appear in the air, an insect comes in front of our gaze. These changes, that in the course of seconds may seem small, are momentous in our mental experience when a long time passes between the times we do “identical” things.



«J’y trouvait quelques-uns de ses amis qui dînaient toujours avec lui, nobles, sauf un ou deux roturiers, mais en qui les nobles avaient dès le collège flairé des amis et avec qui ils s’étaient liés volontiers, prouvant ainsi qu’ils n’étaient pas, en principe, hostiles aux bourgeois, fussent-ils républicains, pourvu qu’ils eussent les mains propres et allassent à la messe.»

“I found there some of his friends that always dined with him, noblemen, except for one or two commoners, in whom the noblemen had already in high school smelled friendship and with whom they had readily associated, proving that they were not, in principle, hostile to commoners, even republicans, as long as they had clean hands and went to church.”

(Le côté de Guermantes, I)

The social distance between aristocracy and bourgeoisie – we are not even mentioning lower social classes – is enormous, both in France and in the United Kingdom. Having grown up in the aristocracy entails having been made conscious of your own family’s history and its role in the larger historical context. It implies the view that there is a group of people who throughout time has been bearer of superior values, attitudes and characteristics, and that belonging to this group carries with it a special genetic, social, and cultural heritage. You cannot be integrated in this group in any other way than to be born into it. People from other social classes may be intelligent, rich, talented, and in this way “deserve” to mingle with friends in the nobility. They will, however, never be given reason to think that they are becoming “one of them”. If not for any other reason, they will give themselves away because of their lack of mastery of the cultural codes that nobility have in common. In addition, there are a number of people in the aristocracy who see it as their task to keep check on who are “insiders” and who are “outsiders”, through the Gotha – the nobility’s Who’s who.



«Et comme une idée, continuai-je, est quelque chose qui ne peut participer aux intérêts humains et ne pourrait jouir de leurs avantages, les hommes d'une idée ne sont pas influencés par l'intérêt.»

“And as an idea, I continued, is something that cannot take part in the interests of humans and could not profit from its advantages, men driven by an idea are not influenced by personal interest.”

(Le côté de Guermantes, I)

It is very clarifying to be conscious of the kinds of interest that are governing your actions. The answers such thinking will give, may surprise you. You may think you are free and that your actions are governed by yourself. If you analyze the motives behind your actions, you may find that there are other people who govern your choices or that you make your choices based on certain types of information you receive – without thinking about why that particular information forms the basis for your actions. Should you seek other sources of information? Would other sources or other people lead you to other choices and other actions? If that is so, would it be interesting to seek these other sources?



«....tandis que s'avance le sommelier, aussi poussiéreux que ses bouteilles, bancroche et ébloui comme si, venant de la cave, il s'était tordu le pied avant de remonter au jour.»

“...as the wine waiter advances, as dusty as his bottles, bent and dazzled, as if, coming from the cellar, he had twisted his ankle when coming up in the light.”

(Le côté de Guermantes, I)

Atmosphere from a restaurant!



«C'est que, ce que nous éprouvons, comme nous sommes décidés à toujours le cacher, nous n'avons jamais pensé à la façon dont nous l'exprimerons.»

«As it is, what we feel, since we are determined to always hide it, we have never thought about how we would express it.»

(Le côté de Guermantes, I)

Our feelings will normally pass through a filter in our consciousness before they find their way out of our mouth in the form of words and phrases. The expression of our feelings will then be shaped by our vocabulary, the extent to which we are ready to admit our feelings openly, and our state of mind at the moment we express ourselves. If we, as Proust's quote tells us, happen to express our feelings in a situation where we did not plan to say anything at all, that filter is out of function and the words and our state of mind will produce declarations that may be both confusing and revealing. The situation Proust relates to, is a situation where he in a reception wishes to express his modesty by saying that he feels well in the company of the person he addresses. He formulates this in such a way that this person thinks Proust is looking down on him, and then hell breaks loose.



«...de cette même désapprobation que le respect de Mme de Guermantes pour sa tante l'eût empêché d'exprimer, mais enfin qu'elle eût éprouvée si elle eût constaté sur les fauteuils au lieu de notre présence celle d'une tache de graisse ou d'une couche de poussière.»

"...with the same disapprovement that Mrs. de Guermantes' respect for her aunt prevented her from expressing, but that she nevertheless would have felt if she had detected on her chairs, instead of our presence, stains of grease or a layer of dust."

(Le côté de Guermantes, I)

Mrs. de Guermantes is a duchess and Proust shows through this quote the magnitude of the social distance in her eyes, between her and «ordinary» people. Mrs. de Guermantes manages through her facial expressions to make Proust understand that she considers him and the other person he is sitting together with as somebody insignificant and a bit bothersome to meet in a social context, like dust or grease on the furniture. Proust observes with a sharp eye, but is not impressed and does not let this affect him. When Proust later published his reflections, many people in the "finer" circles felt insulted by his observations which x-rayed the often ridiculous behaviour of parisian nobility.



«Puis le genre d'esprit Mérimée et Meilhac et Halévy, qui était le sien, la portait, par contraste avec le sentimentalisme verbal d'une époque antérieure, à un genre de conversation qui rejette tout ce qui est grandes phrases et expression de sentiments élevés, et faisait qu'elle mettait une sorte d'élégance quand elle était avec un poète ou un musicien à ne parler que des plats qu'on mangeait ou de la partie de cartes qu'on allait faire. Cette abstention avait, pour un tiers peu au courant, quelque chose de troublant qui allait jusqu'au mystère.»

“And this type of Merimée and Meilhac and Halévy-spirituality that she had, drove her, in contrast to the verbal sentimentalism from an earlier time, in the direction of a type of conversation that rejects all manners of high-flying words or feelings, and implied that she put a certain elegance in, when she was with a poet or a musician, to talk only about the food they were eating or the game of cards they were going to play afterwards. This manner of restraint had, for a third party who knew nothing of this, something confusing that was bordering on the mysterious.”

(Le côté de Guermantes, II)

Mrs. de Guermantes was a consummate social player who was very concerned with appearing advanced and unconventional. She wished to develop her own codes of behavior in social settings, where the key was to keep good contact with artists in order to ensure good input of original ways of thinking, while at the same time not challenging the basic rules of behavior of nobility to such an extent that she would risk to be marginalized. She navigated safely within the framework of nobility when showing her discrete contempt for the non-noble, and had solid knowledge of what you do and don't do within the social codes of her lot. She was very preoccupied with appearing a bit unpredictable and audacious intellectually, so that her friends within nobility always wondered what she might do next. That created a curiosity and a hidden delight among her friends that she consciously nurtured.



«..., et les repas du milieu Guermantes faisaient alors penser à ces heures que des amoureux timides passent souvent ensemble à parler de banalités jusqu’au moment de se quitter, et sans que, soit timidité, pudeur, ou maladresse, le grand secret qu’ils seraient plus heureux d’avouer ait pu jamais passer de leur coeur à leur lèvres.»

“..., and the dinners in the Guermantes environment made you think of these hours that timid lovers often spend together talking about banalities until the moment to leave each other comes, and, either because of timidity, modesty, or awkwardness, the great secret that they would have been happy to confess would never have moved from their heart to their lips.”

(Le côté de Guermantes, II)

When invited to the duchess and the duke of Guermantes, as with several others of the finer nobles, it was customary not to enter into serious conversations. In this quote, Proust refers to a dinner where a friend of the Guermantes’ had been invited for the purpose of meeting a well known poet. The friend looked forward to listening to the conversations between the duchess and the poet. Mrs de Guermantes talked only about the weather and the food, and none of the guests were even close to talking about poetry with the poet. Proust’s friend was frustrated and confused. Why had he been invited, when there was no talk of poetry? This was among the social codes you needed to know about when you were invited to the Guermantes’.



«...., j’avais peine à retrouver dans le beau visage, trop humain de Mme de Guermites, l’inconnu de son nom, je pensai du moins que, quand elle parlerait, sa causerie, profonde, mystérieuse, aurait une étrangeté de tapisserie médiéval, de vitrail gothique.»

“...., I was at pains to find, in the beautiful, too human face of Mrs. de Guermites, the unknown of her name, I thought that at least when she spoke, her words, mysterious, would have the strangeness of a medieval tapestry, a gothic church window.”

(Le côté de Guermites, II)

For Proust, the name of Guermites, long before he met the duchess and the duke, had an aura of mystery and beautiful old landscape linked to the great and prestigious properties they had close by the village where Proust and his parents often passed their vacations (Combray). He had in his lively imagination built an image of elevation and mystery in which he covered Mrs. de Guermites. When he later met her in social settings, he experienced the contrast between the elevated, mysterious image his imagination had constructed and the normal human appearance that Mrs. de Guermites – in spite of her discrete and refined efforts to rise above that – could not escape.



«C'est la seule personne que j'aie envie de connaître, ajouta la duchesse en qui on pouvait toujours, comme au moment d'une marée spirituelle, voir le flux d'une curiosité à l'égard des intellectuels célèbres croiser en route le flux du snobisme aristocratique. Cela me ferait un plaisir!»

“It is the only person I wish to get acquainted with, added Mrs. de Guermantes, in whom one could always, as in a moment of spiritual flood, see the flow of curiosity towards famous intellectuals meet the flow of aristocratic snobbery. It would be such a pleasure!”

(Le côté de Guermantes, II)

The duchess of Guermantes is always very preoccupied with the idea of appearing as an advanced intellectual, something that gives her a particular aura in her own aristocratic circles. She always navigates in a social setting where the rules of behavior of the nobility are followed with great precision, while at the same time trying to give the impression that she is not concerned by these rules, but feels at her best in the world of unconventional spirituality. Proust, on his side, is at this time very concerned by the idea of getting to be socially accepted by the duchess, and he is irritated on himself for having not saluted the person alluded to in the quote (the author Mr. Bergotte) in the lobby of the theatre the other night. Then the duchess would have seen that he was an acquaintance of this author, and this might have prompted an invitation for him to join the duchess in her box at the theatre after the break!



«Me le présenter! Mais il faut que vous ayez bien peu le sentiment des valeurs! On ne me connaît pas si facilement que ça. Dans le cas actuel l'inconvenance serait double à cause de la juvénilité du présentateur et de l'indignité du présenté.»

“To present him to me! You must, indeed, have very little sense of values! One does not get to know me that easily. In the present case the inappropriateness would be double because of the youth of the presenter and the lack of dignity of the presented.”

(Le côté de Guermantes, II)

The social rules of behavior of the aristocracy are invisible, but cast in iron. The nobility protects its privileges, of which social exclusivity is one of the most important. This social exclusivity functions as an impenetrable fence where those who are inside watch closely that nobody is allowed in, except those who have an image that may contribute to the strengthening of the splendor and mystique surrounding nobility. People who are publicly known for so called prestigious activities will be allowed inside on a temporary basis, as long as they have something valuable to add to those who are inside. The day they no longer represent added value to the insiders, they will in an imperceptible way be pushed out again. Only those with blue blood, or money enough to support an impoverished person with blue blood, will have permanent residence within the fence.



«"Probablement les temps de vent réussissent à vous faire dormir là où échoueraient les plus puissants hypnotiques – Au contraire, Monsieur, le vent m'empêche absolument de dormir". Mais les médecins sont susceptibles. "Ach!" murmura du Boulbon en fronçant les sourcils, comme si on lui avait marché sur le pied et si les insomnies de ma grand'mère par les nuits de tempête étaient pour lui une injure personnelle. Il n'avait pas tout de même trop d'amour propre, et comme en tant qu'"esprit supérieur" il croyait de son devoir de ne pas ajouter foi à la médecine, il reprit vite sa sérénité philosophique."

""The windy days probably succeed in making you sleep at times when the most powerful medications would fail – On the contrary, Sir, the wind impedes my sleep completely". But doctors are sensitive. "Ach!" murmured du Boulbon and knitting his brows, as if being stepped on his foot and my grandmother's insomnia by nights of storm were a personal insult to him. His personal pride was nevertheless not too excessive, and as a "superior spirit" he felt it his duty not to attach too much importance to the science of medicine, and he therefore recovered his philosophical serenity."

(Le côté de Guermantes, II)

Doctor du Boulbon is of course not the first scientist to feel insulted when factual observations don't conform to his theoretical understanding. There are unfortunately many examples of scientists who falsify data with the purpose of making "reality" conform to what they wish to prove. The same goes of course for many journalists, and all others who are strongly preoccupied with proving a point. Wishes of people to prove a point are often stronger than the wish to seek truth.



«Ma grand'mère refusait net de se laisser examiner. Et nous, gênés pour le praticien qui s'était dérangé inutilement, nous déférâmes au désir qu'il exprima de visiter nos nez respectifs, lesquels n'avaient rien. Il prétendait que si, et que migraine ou colique, maladie de coeur ou diabète, c'est une maladie de nez mal comprise.»

“My grandmother refused completely to allow herself to be examined. And we, confused by having called the doctor for nothing, allowed ourselves to yield to his desire to examine our respective noses, even though there was nothing wrong with them. He pretended that yes, headaches, stomach-aches, heart conditions or diabetes were all nose illnesses that were not properly understood.”

(Le côté de Guermantes, II)

Our fear of being disagreeable to people make us do the most curious things. And professional people, having the need to make everything fit into their mental universe, create visions of reality that are very limited in scope. Both things have to do with personal courage: in one case the courage of your opinions, even if it causes discomfort in personal confrontations, in the other case the courage to admit that there are many things you don't know.



«Mais il avait encore dans les jambes tout le reste des saluts et révérences à reculons qu'on l'avait empêché de mener à leur fin et se rendait d'ailleurs si peu compte de ce que c'était le chagrin de maman, qu'il demanda, la veille de l'enterrement, si je n'essayait pas de la distraire.»

“However, in his legs he still had all the rest of the backwards moving salutations and reverences that he had been prevented to complete and was so unaware of the extent of mother's sorrow that he asked, the day before the funeral, if I wasn't making efforts to distract her.”

(Le côté de Guermantes, II)

The duke of Guermantes is very preoccupied with formalities. If you have started a pirouette, it has to be completed properly. Not to complete it properly would be a serious breach of etiquette, and might in turn lead to loss of prestige in the relevant circles. The social codes of nobility are like an iron corset that you cannot break if you wish to stay “inside”. This entails, among other things, that if these social codes are at odds with normal empathy and human compassion, it is the empathy and the human compassion that has to give.



«De toute évidence, quand j’avais connu Albertine, le mot de «mousmé” lui était inconnu. Il est vraisemblable que, si les choses eussent suivi leur cours normal, elle ne l’eût jamais appris, et je n’y aurais vu pour ma part aucun inconvenient car nul n’est plus horripilant. A l’entendre on se sent le meme mal de dents que si on a mis un gros morceau de glace dans la bouche.”

“Quite evidently, when I met Albertine, the word “mousmé” was unknown to her. It is probable that, if things had run their normal course, she would never have known it, and I would have seen no inconvenience in that because nothing is more exasperating. To hear it you feel the same toothache as if you had put a large ice cube in your mouth.”

(Le côté de Guermantes, II)

Albertine is using a word she does not have a normal relationship with.

She is attracted to it because she likes the sound of it, because it is special, and because it gives her an aura of exclusivity to use it. Proust dislikes intensely her use of it, because it does not blend naturally into her personality or her normal vocabulary.



«Il faisait partie d'un groupe aristocratique pour qui l'exercice de l'impertinence, même à l'égard de la noblesse quand elle n'était pas de tout premier rang, semblait être la seule occupation....La jeunesse une fois passée, il est rare qu'on reste confiné dans l'insolence. On avait cru qu'elle seule existait, on découvre tout d'un coup, si prince qu'on soit, qu'il y a aussi la musique, la littérature, voire la députation. L'ordre des valeurs humaines s'en trouvera modifié, et on entre en conversation avec les gens qu'on foudroyait du regard autrefois. Bonne chance à ceux de ces gens-là qui ont eu la patience d'attendre et de qui le caractère est assez bien fait – si l'on doit ainsi dire – pour qu'ils éprouvent du plaisir à recevoir vers la quarantaine la bonne grâce et l'accueil qu'on leur avait sèchement refusés à vingt ans.»

“He was part of a group of aristocrats for whom the practice of impertinence, even towards nobility when it was not of the highest rank, seemed to be the only occupation....Once youth is passed, one seldom stays confined in insolence. One had thought that only that existed, one suddenly discovers, regardless how much of a prince one is, that there is also music, literature, and parliament. The order of human values gets modified, and one enters into conversation with people one formerly would strike down with a flashing gaze. Good luck to those people who had the patience to wait and whose character is good enough – if one can say that – to feel pleasure in receiving at forty the good graces and welcome that they were being refused at twenty.”

(Le côté de Guermantes, III)

The attitudes of young people are magnified reflections of their parents' attitudes. While the elders in the aristocracy use subtle ways to express their feelings of superiority and their methods of excluding behavior are hard to detect explicitly, the younger lack subtleness and express their natural contempt directly in pointed ways. This goes on until the young gradually acquire their independence of spirit and consciousness of their own identity, something that takes a long time for some and shorter time for others. When they mature, they often regret the idiotic and mindless things they could do to others, often with great damage to their victims. Some of the victims are ready to forgive or swallow their pride, while others never forget and never forgive.



«...., situé à l'entrée obscure de la région où les Guermantes jugeaient, ce génie vigilant empêchait les Guermantes de trouver l'homme intelligent ou de trouver la femme charmante s'ils n'avaient pas de valeur mondaine, actuelle ou future.»

“...., situated at the entrance of the obscure region where the Guermantes were judging, this vigilant spirit prevented the Guermantes to find the man intelligent or to find the woman charming if they did not have mundane value, actual or future.”

(Le côté de Guermantes, III)

The Duke and the Duchess had active social radars that immediately classified people according to whether they fitted into their noble circles or not. It was not enough in itself to be socially attractive through brilliant intelligence, beauty, or charm. You also needed – in one way or another – to have the potential to enhance the value of their receptions if you were to be invited to them. Your mundane value was measured either through your degree of nobility or through how your intelligence or beauty could contribute to the enhancement of the reception's worthiness or its level of entertainment. The “vigilant spirit” of the Guermantes worked ceaselessly to make sure that no “unworthy” people gained access to their social circles.

It is interesting to see that Proust in this quote associates the attractiveness of men with intelligence and the attractiveness of women with beauty. In this respect he reflects the common ideas of his time. Proust, however, was homosexual and his way of presenting this may also have been made to conceal what he really was attracted by – even if he undoubtedly also admired female beauty, probably in the same way fashion designers do.



«Celles-ci cependant faisaient devant l'Altesse debout une révérence qui allait jusqu'à la gémuflexion, de manière à mettre leurs lèvres à la hauteur de la belle main qui pendait très bas et à la baiser. Mais à ce moment la princesse, de même que si elle eût chaque fois été surprise par un protocole qu'elle connaissait pourtant très bien, relevait l'agenouillée comme de vive force avec une grâce et une douceur sans égales, et l'embrassait sur les joues. Grâce et douceur qui avaient pour condition, dira-t-on, l'humilité avec laquelle l'arrivante pliait le genou.»

“These were meanwhile in front of the standing Highness doing a reverence that went as far as a gémuflexion, so as to place their lips at the same height as the beautiful hand that was hanging low and to kiss it. At this very moment, however, the princess, as if she each time had been surprised by a protocol that she nevertheless knew very well, lifted the woman who was on her knees with great vividity and with an unmatched grace and sweetness, and kissed her on her cheeks. A grace and sweetness that was, as it were, conditioned by the humility with which the arriving person had bended her knee.”

(Le côté de Guermantes, III)

If you are acquainted with the social rules of the game and with the etiquette, and know where you are in the social hierarchy as well as your place in different social settings, so that you can show the proper respect to people above your standing when you meet them, yes, then you can hope to be met with amiability. The amiability will be more condescending the lower down in the hierarchy you are. If you look for an intimacy or assume an equality that is not in conformity with your social rank, you will quickly and neatly be corrected.



«Ce qui justifiait du reste pleinement la curiosité ravie que la princesse de Parme apportait chez la duchesse, c'était cet élément comique, dangereux, excitant, où la princesse se plongeait avec une sorte de crainte, de saisissement et de délices (comme au bord de la mer dans un de ces «bains de vagues» dont les guides baigneurs signalent le péril, tout simplement parce qu'aucun d'eux ne sait nager), d'où elle sortait tonifiée, heureuse, rajeunie, et qu'on appelait l'esprit des Guermentes.»

“What fully justified the delighted curiosity that the princess of Parma brought to the duchess, was this element of comic, danger, excitement in which the princess plunged herself with a sort of worry, thrill and delight (like at the seaside in one of these “wavebaths” that the life-guards warn against the danger of, simply because none of them know how to swim), from which she emerged invigorated, happy, younger, and which was called the Guermentes spirit.”

(Le côté de Guermentes, III)

The princess of Parma was not particularly bright, and she always felt a bit uncertain with the duchess of Guermentes, because the duchess in her home always cultivated an advanced and unconventional intellectuality (measured by the muted scale of the nobility). The princess did not always understand what was said, but she thought it was very exciting, because the things she understood were often slightly at the limit of acceptable thoughts and ideas. She had the feeling of taking part in something slightly daring, something special, but yet within the limits of what her code of conduct could accept.



«...dans les corps fortement constitués, où d'ailleurs la rigueur des préjugés n'est que la rançon de la plus belle intégrité, des idées morales les plus élevées, qui fléchissent dans des milieux plus tolérants, plus libres et bien vite dissolus, un professeur, dans sa robe rouge en satin écarlate doublé d'hermine comme celle d'un Doge (c'est à dire un duc) de Venise enfermé dans le palais ducal, était aussi vertueux, aussi attaché à de nobles principes, mais aussi impitoyable pour tout élément étranger, que cet autre duc, excellent mais terrible qu'était M. de Saint-Simon.»

"...in strongly built organisations, where the rigor of the prejudices is the price of the most splendid integrity, the highest moral ideas, which soften in environments that are more tolerant, freer and quite quickly dissolved, a professor, in his robe of red purple satin doubled with ermine like that of a Doge (a duke that is) of Venice enclosed in his ducal palace, was as virtuous, as attached to noble principles, but also as pitiless towards all strange elements, as this other duke, excellent but terrible, that M. de Saint-Simon was."

(Le côté de Guermantes, III)

Closed circles with long traditions tend to develop a number of "established truths" that are not open to discussion. In conjunction with these established truths, these circles develop a pride of their own, a feeling of integrity and high morals that create a self-assurance which stands there as a bulwark against attacks from new ideas. They stand in contrast to more open, tolerant environments that are created and dissolved rapidly, where people are more ready to question their own thoughts and prejudices.



«Mme de Guermantes était elle-même beaucoup moins avancée qu'elle ne le croyait. Mais il suffisait qu'elle le fût plus que Mme de Parme pour stupéfier celle-ci, et comme chaque generation de critiques se borne à prendre le contrepied des vérités admises par leurs prédécesseurs, elle n'avait qu'à dire que Flaubert, cet ennemi des bourgeois, était avant tout un bourgeois, ou qu'il y avait beaucoup de musique italienne dans Wagner, pour procurer a la princesse, au prix d'un surménage toujours nouveau, comme quelqu'un qui nage dans la tempête, des horizons qui lui paraissaient inouïs et lui restaient confus.»

Mrs. de Guermantes was herself much less advanced than she thought. It was, however, sufficient for her to be more so than Mrs. de Parma to stupefy her, and like each generation of critics limit themselves to take the stand which is opposite to that of their predecessors, she only needed to say that Flaubert, this enemy of the bourgeois, was above all a bourgeois, or that there was much Italian music in Wagner, to produce in the princess, at the price of an ever renewed strain, like someone who swims in the storm, horizons that seemed amazing to her and remained confused to her.”

(Le côté de Guermantes, III)

The duchess of Guermantes loved to confuse the princess of Parma with paradoxes and other attempts at original angles to known phenomena. The princess of Parma was not bright, and at the same time gullible and full of admiration for the vivid intellect of the duchess. Through her admiration she was among those who was spreading the word on the unconventionality and freshness of the duchess' ideas, something that the duchess was very happy about.



«.....l'impuissance où on est de trouver du plaisir quand on se contente de le chercher.»

“.....our impossibility of finding pleasure when we limit ourselves to be looking for it.”

(Le côté de Guermantes, III)

It is a paradox that so many people are searching for happiness or joy. Happiness is not something that exists in itself, which you can find by looking for it. Happiness is something you may find as a result of looking for something else. It is a side-effect of other activities. If you collect rare coins and suddenly stumble upon such a coin in a market place, you may experience happiness. If you take part in social life somewhere, and meet a person you fall in love with, you become happy. It is very rare that you find love by looking for it about town.



«C'est démodé? dit la princesse de Parme avec le léger saisissement que lui causait cette vague nouvelle à laquelle elle ne s'attendait pas, bien qu'elle sût que la conversation de la duchesse de Guermantes lui réservât toujours des chocs successifs et délicieux, cet essoufflant effroi, cette sainte fatigue après lesquels elle pensait instinctivement à la nécessité de prendre un bain de pieds dans une cabine et de marcher vite pour «faire la réaction».»

“Has it gone out of fashion? Said the princess of Parma with the light shivering that this new wave that she did not expect caused her, even though she knew that the conversation of the duchess of Guermantes always had successive shocks and delights in store for her, this exhausting fright, this holy fatigue after which she instinctively thought of the necessity of taking a foot bath in a cabin and walk fast to “create the reaction”.”

(Le côté de Guermantes, III)

The princess of Parma, who did not manage to follow the intellectual moves of the duchess more than a short while at a time, but who loved the mental “shocks” and challenges for her imagination that the conversation caused, needed to get time for herself to react afterwards in order to recover her full senses. She was the perfect public for the duchess, who lived and breathed for her status as an advanced intellectual. This status was not too hard to attain in the circles of nobility, where the mode of thinking was very conventional and rigid, and where it was not well seen to move past the limits of correct behavior and thinking. The duchess mastered this game to perfection, because she knew very well where the outer limits of accepted behavior were, while at the same time creating the impression that she challenged these limits. It was from these challenges that the princess of Parma got her delighted shivers and shocks.



«Elle n'est pas très forte, me dit le duc, et puis il ne lui faut pas trop de libations, je la crois légèrement sous l'influence de Bacchus. En réalité Mme de Varambon n'avait bu que de l'eau, mais le duc aimait placer ses locutions favorites.»

“She is not very strong, the duke told me, and she cannot take too much drink, I think she is under the influence of Bacchus. In reality Mrs. Varambon had only been drinking water, but the duke liked to place his favorite expressions.”

(Le côté de Guermantes, III)

The duke of Guermantes was, like his wife, very self-conscious and snobbish. In addition he wanted, also like his wife, to appear as an intellectual and a gifted one at that. This was more than he was in reality, and it therefore led to strained efforts on his side when he took part in social gatherings. These efforts appeared, to a sharp observer like Proust, very amateurish.



«Agréablement bousculée jusqu'ici, au cours du bain d'esprit, un bain agité pour elle, qu'elle prenait ce soir, et qu'elle jugeait devoir lui être particulièrement salubre, se laissant porter par les paradoxes qui déferlaient l'un après l'autre, devant celui-ci plus énorme que les autres, la princesse de Parme sauta par peur d'être renversée.»

“Pleasantly shaken up to now, during the spiritual bath, an agitated bath for her, that she was taking tonight, and that she judged to be particularly salutary for her, allowing herself to be transported by one paradox after the other, in front of this one more enormous than the others, the princess of Parma jumped out of fear of being pushed over.”

(Le côté de Guermantes, III)

The simple soul of the princess of Parma made her into a welcome guest to the parties of the duchess of Guermantes. She was an important public for the duchess, because she regularly allowed herself to be shaken of all the high flying and unconventional thoughts the duchess believed that she had. The princess gave confirmation, in her behavior, to the duchess that she was original and fascinating, something she would not have experienced if Proust had been her only public. For those who were in doubt about the originality and intelligence of the duchess, the princess unknowingly acted as a catalyst for the other guests' admiration of the duchess.



«...à l'accent, au choix des mots on sentait que le fond de conversation de la duchesse venait directement de Guermantes. Par là, la duchesse différait profondément de son neveu Saint-Loup, envahi par tant d'idées et d'expressions nouvelles; il est difficile, quand on est troublé par les idées de Kant et la nostalgie de Baudelaire, d'écrire le français exquis d'Henri IV, de sorte que la pureté même du langage de la duchesse était un signe de limitation, et qu'en elle, et l'intelligence et la sensibilité étaient restés fermés à toutes les nouveautés.»

"...through the accent, the choice of words, one felt that the foundation of the duchess' conversation came directly from Guermantes. By that, the duchess was thoroughly different from her nephew Saint-Loup, who was invaded by so many new ideas and expressions; it is hard, when you are troubled by the ideas of Kant and the nostalgia of Baudelaire, to write French in the exquisite style of Henry IV, so the purity of the duchess' language was a sign of limitation, and in this, that her intelligence and sensibility had stayed closed to all new tendencies."

(Le côté de Guermantes, III)

The duchess of Guermantes was a good example of how the nobility's fixation on formalities could influence the intellectual development. To talk in the "right" way, use the "correct" words, was an overriding concern, an absolute requirement in these circles if you wanted to be respected. This point of departure created an iron corset for the body of language which made it difficult to open up the mind for new ideas and thoughts, if the acquisition of these thoughts required other types of language, other words, and other forms of "correctness". In the world of nobility there were many things "one did not talk about"; and if one talked about them, one could only do so in certain ways.



«Là encore l'esprit de Mme de Guermantes me plaisait justement par ce qu'il excluait (et qui composait précisément la matière de ma propre pensée) et tout ce qu'à cause de cela même il avait pu conserver, cette séduisante vigueur des corps souples qu'aucune épuisante réflexion, nul souci moral ou trouble nerveux n'ont altérée.»

“There again the spirit of Mrs. de Guerantes pleased me precisely by what it left out (and which consisted of exactly the matter of my own thoughts) and everything that it because of that had been capable of preserving, this seductive vigor of flexible bodies that no tiring reflexion, no moral concerns or nervous troubles had altered.”

(Le côté de Guermantes, III)

This absence of worries that characterized the duchess of Guermantes and which you may find with persons who don't question their own situation, who have no financial worries, and who consider people's place in society as something static and God-given, had brought forward a type of personality that carried with it all traditions as the most natural thing in the world and that saw no reason to change these. In this respect she was a living sociological museum, in spite of her view of herself as an intellectually advanced person. Proust finds himself in a world where all subjects, large or small, are observed with his analytical and critical mind. He is a direct opposite to her, and it fascinates him to observe her.



«Chacun des convives du dîner, affublant le nom mystérieux sous lequel je l'avais seulement connu et rêvé à distance, d'un corps et d'une intelligence pareils ou inférieurs à ceux de toutes les personnes que je connaissais, m'avait donné l'impression de plate vulgarité que peut donner l'entrée dans le port danois d'Elseneur à tout lecteur enfiévré d'Hamlet.»

“Each of the dinner guests, carrying a mysterious name by which I had known and dreamt about him or her at a distance, displaying a body and an intelligence equal or inferior to those of all the persons I knew, gave me the impression of flat vulgarity that an entry into the danish port of Elsinor may give to any feverish reader of Hamlet.”

(Le côté de Guermantes, III)

Proust had for many years been fascinated by the duke and the duchess of Guermantes. They lived in the same building as Proust and his parents, but in a particularly fashionable part of that building. Their social standing was mythical, being as they were part of the absolute upper echelons of French nobility, and the duchess was beautiful and attractive. For Proust, from his early youth, this couple had been covered by a veil of mystery and magic. Gradually, through his intellectual development, Proust became an interesting person for those people in the higher circles who held literary salons. He was seen as a promising young writer, and little by little integrated into these circles. In the quote above, Proust refers to the first time he was invited to dinner by the duke and the duchess of Guermantes. He discovers, to his amazement and disappointment, that this assembly of high nobility consists of quite ordinary people with average or lower intelligence, seen in comparison with his own acquaintances.



«Les fêtes de ce genre sont en général anticipées. Elle n'ont guère de réalité que le lendemain, où elles occupent l'attention des personnes qui n'ont pas été invitées.»

“Parties of this kind are generally anticipated. They hardly have any real content until the next day, when they attract the attention of the persons that were not invited.”

(Sodome et Gomorrhe, I)

Great parties were in Proust's time social events that were extensively covered by the media the day after, when the social columns went through the names of those who had invited and those who had been invited to the parties. For the curious who were not invited, and that was indeed the majority, it was very exciting to see who were part of the elevated social circles and – not least – at what level on the social ladder they were placed. Maybe they would find someone they knew about in these higher circles? What actually happened in these circles, they could only dream about, and these dreams were probably much more exciting than the reality – which is indeed what Proust is telling us.



«Et sa voix était aussi caillouteuse que si, pour exprimer son ardeur pour Chopin, elle eût, imitant Démosthène, rempli sa bouche avec tous les galets de la plage.»

“And her voice was as stony as if, to express her ardour for Chopin, she had, in imitation of Demosthenes, filled her mouth with all the pebbles of the beach.”

(Sodome et Gomorrhe, I)

Mrs. de Cambremer was a very rich lady of the society who was very preoccupied by being in the front line of the cultural world. Claude Debussy had recently produced a new version of Chopin’s “Nocturnes” and it had not yet reached the attention of Mrs. de Cambremer, because it was only known among the “younger” in the world of music and had not yet reached the newspaper critics. Mrs. de Cambremer was informed about the cultural life only through the newspapers, and her notions, vocabulary and impressions came only from them. Proust told her about Debussy’s new work and then she was all excited.



«Depuis qu'il existe des chemins de fer, la nécessité de ne pas manquer le train nous a appris à tenir compte des minutes, alors que chez les anciens Romains, don't l'astronomie n'était pas seulement plus sommaire mais aussi la vie moins pressée, la notion non pas de minutes, mais même d'heures fixes, existait à peine.»

“Ever since railroads were created, the necessity to not miss the train has taught us to keep track of the minutes, although among the ancient Romans, where astronomy was not only more imprecise but life also less stressful, the notion of not minutes, but even precise hours, hardly existed.”

(Sodome et Gomorrhe, I)

Proust is reflecting on this as he stands in the elevator of the hotel with Albertine. Albertine is keeping quiet and Proust is observing the elevator man. The elevator man must, like all the other staff of the hotel, use his talent for observation and his capacity to draw conclusions from these observations about the guests of the hotel, since they never speak to the staff and the staff never to them. They only get to know something when the guests talk among themselves. This situation is sharpening the senses of the staff. The senses are sharpened or weakened as a consequence of the need to use them.



«Elle avait pris depuis de longues années, par peur de rebuffades, l'habitude de se tenir à sa place, de rester dans son coin, dans la vie comme dans le train, et d'attendre pour donner la main qu'on lui eût dit bonjour.»

«She had over time grown accustomed to, from fear of being rebuffed, staying in her place, staying in her corner, in life as in the train, and to wait to give her hand until you greeted her.”

(Sodome et Gomorrhe, II)

Mrs. Verdurin had a literary salon, and in that salon the princess Sherbatoff, on account of her great lineage, was a treasured member. Her presence enhanced the social prestige of the salon. The princess was a timid and oppressed person, as this quote indicates. The quote tells us about the dramatic destiny of a person who has grown up under tyrannical parents who think that children should be seen, but not heard. Every initiative is rebuffed, and you are only allowed to do what you are asked to do. The same happens at work places with tyrannical bosses. Those who have the talent for taking initiative will move away as quickly as they can, while the passive and fearful stay on – until this workplace disappears as a consequence of lack of ideas and initiative – as evolution makes the workplace redundant.



«Les plaisirs qu'on a dans le sommeil, on ne les fait pas figurer dans le compte des plaisirs éprouvés au cours de l'existence.»

“Those pleasures we have in our sleep, we do not count them among the pleasures experienced during our lifetime.”

(Sodome et Gomorrhe, II)

We spend a third of our life in sleep. That's about as long as our working life, and as long as the rest of our time awake. And yet, we don't count it among our experiences in life or among those things that have otherwise been important to us. Sigmund Freud was very concerned with what went on in our sleep. He thought that our activity in sleep, the dreams, could tell us about the state of our mind, as far as the unconscious was concerned. The symbols that appear in our dreams represent different aspects of our unconscious, and this unconscious has great influence on how we behave when awake. Carl G. Jung went one step further and linked the symbols from our unconscious to so-called archetypes, symbols Jung associated with common features of humans in general, and which he linked to our pre-historic past. This exciting universe is, then, not part of what we consider important in our lives?



«J'étais effrayé pourtant de penser que ce rêve avait eu la netteté de la connaissance. La connaissance aurait-elle, réciproquement, l'irréalité du rêve?»

“I was nevertheless frightened to think that this dream had had the clarity of consciousness. Would consciousness, by reciprocity, contain the irreality of the dream?”

(Sodome et Gomorrhe, II)

This goes straight into a theme that has occupied philosophers since antiquity. What is real? What exists outside our consciousness? Is everything that happens around us a product of our own imagination, or is there something tangible that exists – a truth that is the same for all? René Descartes' famous saying “I think, therefore I am”, represents the result of his search for a fixed point in his existence. If everything we observe is the result of the workings of our own consciousness, without any tangible relation to the world outside of ourselves, then our dreams are as real as what we experience when awake.



«....un peu vieilli par les excès de champagne et voyant venir l'heure
nécessaire de l'eau de Contrexéville.»

«...grown a bit old by excesses of champagne and seeing the necessity of
the hour of the Contrexéville water approach.”

(Sodome et Gomorrhe, II)

This quote appears in a short description of a maître d' who had come to the point in his life when his body no longer was able to take champagne very well. He had to admit that time had come to switch to mineral water if he wanted to go on living. Contrexéville is a brand of mineral water. If you by chance find yourself in a posh restaurant in France, you will normally have the opportunity to observe older guests, who after a long life of excellent wining and dining, are confined to water and easily digestible food – served on silver platters and with prices to go with it.



«...la force insensible et puissante qu'ont ces courants de la passion et par lesquels l'amoureux, comme un nageur entraîné sans s'en apercevoir, bien vite perd vue de la terre. Sans doute l'amour d'un homme normal peut aussi, quand l'amoureux, par l'intervention successive de ses désirs, de ses regrets, de ses déceptions, de ses projets, construit tout un roman sur une femme qu'il ne connaît pas, permettre de mesurer un assez notable écartement de deux branches de compas.»

“...the unnoticeable and strong force contained in these currents of passion, and through which the lover, like a swimmer carried away without noticing, soon loses sight of land. Undoubtedly the love of a normal man may also, when the lover, through the successive intervention of his desires, his regrets, his disappointments, his projects, builds a novel around a woman he does not know, make it possible to measure a quite notable distance between two branches of the compass.”

(Sodome et Gomorrhe, II)

When a person's strong wishes move together with imagination, images of reality which carry very far are created. If these images are developed in loneliness, they will not meet corrective impressions from other people's reactions or experiences. This person's images, created by intense love, may become very beautiful and attractive, but they may bring hard disappointments if the person after a long period of fantasizing gets confronted physically with the object of his love.



«...ils me rappelaient que mon sort était de ne poursuivre que des fantômes, des êtres dont la réalité, pour une bonne part, était dans mon imagination; il y a des êtres en effet – et c’avait été, dès la jeunesse, mon cas - pour qui tout ce qui a une valeur fixe, constatable par d’autres, la fortune, le succès, les hautes situations, ne comptent pas; ce qu’il leur faut, ce sont des fantômes.”

“...they reminded me that my fate was to follow only spirits, beings whose reality, for a large part, were in my imagination; there are effectively beings – and that had been, from youth, my case – for whom everything that has a fixed value, ascertainable by others, fortune, success, high functions, do not count; what they need are spirits.”

(Sodome et Gomorrhe, II)

Proust’s formidable capacity to hold on to a thought and reflect on all aspects of it, challenged his own capacity to give his thoughts life. This capacity to give his thoughts life opened up for his imagination. Proust was throughout his life handicapped by strong allergies, and had to stay for long periods in bed. His imagination was given free reign, and his reality was his world of reflections. Because his reflections went so deeply and intensely into the subjects he concentrated on, his world of imagination became more real than what people normally call reality.



«...au moment même où il aurait eu besoin de toute sa gentillesse, de toute sa douceur, de toute sa gaieté, pour désarmer le baron, il devenait sombre, hargneux, cherchait à entamer des discussions où il savait qu'on n'était pas d'accord avec lui, soutenait son point de vue hostile avec une faiblesse de raisons et une violence tranchante qui augmentait cette faiblesse même. Car, bien vite à court d'arguments, il en inventait quand même, dans lesquels se déployait toute l'étendue de son ignorance et de sa bêtise. Elles perçaient à peine quand il était aimable et ne cherchait qu'à plaire. Au contraire, on ne voyait plus qu'elles dans ses accès d'humeur sombre, où d'inoffensives elles devenaient haïssables.»

“...at the very moment when he would have needed all his kindness, all his docility, all his joyfulness, to disarm the baron, he became gloomy, ill-tempered, looking for discussions where he knew one would not agree with him, held his hostile point of view with a weakness of reasons and a cutting violence that increased this very weakness. Because, very soon short of points, he nevertheless invented some, in which he played out the whole extent of his ignorance and stupidity. They hardly appeared when he was amiable and only wanted to please. On the contrary, you saw only them when he was in a somber mood, where harmless they became detestable.”

(Sodome et Gomorrhe, II)

Proust talks about the pianist Morel and his relationship with baron de Charlus, where Morel appears as a person who lays down flat when confronted with toughness and was arrogant when he was met with mildness. In addition, he had a neurotic behavior in combination with bad manners, which came to life in situations where he felt embarrassed.



«Il y a une chose plus difficile encore que de s’astreindre à un régime,
c’est de ne pas l’imposer aux autres.»

“There is one thing which is harder than to stick to a diet, and that is to
abstain from imposing it on others.”

(Sodome et Gomorrhe, II)

We have an embedded urge to impose our norms on others. Our bad habits are not bad habits, our actions are right, and others should do as we do. If they don’t do as we do, it must be because they don’t know better, and then they must be brought over to our views – in order to ensure that they do as we do.



«J'avais promis à Albertine que, si je ne sortait pas avec elle, je me mettrais au travail: mais le lendemain, comme si, profitant de nos sommeils, la maison avait miraculeusement voyagé, je m'éveillait par un temps différent, sous un autre climat. On ne travaille pas au moment où on débarque dans un pays nouveau, aux conditions duquel il faut s'adapter. Or, chaque jour était pour moi un pays différent. Ma paresse elle-même, sous les formes nouvelles qu'elle revêtait, comment l'eussé-je reconnue?»

"I had promised Albertine that, if I did not go out with her, I would go to work: but the next day, as if, taking advantage of our sleep, the house had miraculously travelled, I woke up in a different weather, in a different climate. You don't work at the moment you arrive in a new country, having to adapt to its conditions. And, every day was for me a different country. My laziness itself, in the new forms it took, how would I have recognized it?"

(La prisonnière, I)

Laziness travels under false flag. It presents itself as something else than it is. It is a need we do not wish to identify with, and it therefore will always appear with different reasons for its existence.



«La vie a pris en effet soudain, à ses yeux, une valeur plus grande, parce qu'il met dans la vie tout ce qu'il semble qu'elle peut donner, et non pas le peu qu'il lui fait donner habituellement. Il la voit selon son désir, non telle que son expérience lui a appris qu'il savait la rendre, c'est à dire si médiocre!»

“Life has effectively, suddenly, in his eyes, taken on a greater value, because he puts into life all that he thinks it can give, and not the little he usually puts into it. He sees it according to his desire, not like his experience has taught him that he could make it, that is to say so mediocre!”

(La prisonnière, I)

The background is a person who is to show up for a duel and through that thinks that life may be over for him very shortly. When we take life as given, the days go by without our will or our enthusiasm being mobilized to be present in our own lives and to seize the opportunities that are effectively there. Daily life is about facing challenges and difficulties that come along on the road we find ourselves on. This road may have been chosen by others, or we may have entered it without reflecting on how or when it happened. When, suddenly, life is threatened, we see all the opportunities life may contain, opportunities we never have seized until then, and may never seize even if our life is continued.



«Et ce serait si facile si on savait ne jamais haïr, aimer toujours. Car, alors, on serait si heureux de ne dire que les choses qui peuvent rendre heureux les autres, les attendrir, vous en faire aimer!»

“And it would be so easy if we could never hate, always love. Because then, we would be so happy to say only those things that could make other people happy, soften them, make them love you!”

(La prisonnière, I)

This attitude to life, which may be in line with Christ’s attitude to life, is too demanding for us. We are unable to cope with it. Even more superficial variants of this, of the type “smile to the world, and the world will smile to you”, may be hard to carry through when life is loaded with anguish, conflicts, and other demanding difficulties. And yet, the way we choose to meet other people determines how they treat us. Even if we have great problems to deal with, we can influence how they see us and how they treat us, and by looking for the opportunities this gives us, we can improve our lives.



«On se rappelle la vérité parce qu'elle a un nom, des racines anciennes;
mais un mensonge improvisé s'oublie vite.»

«We remember the truth because it has a name, old roots; but an
improvised lie is quickly forgotten.»

(La prisonnière, I)

Or, to say it with Mark Twain: "He who lies must have a good memory".



«La vie pouvait-elle me consoler de l'art? Y avait-il dans l'art une réalité plus profonde où notre personnalité véritable trouve une expression que ne lui donnent pas les actions de la vie? Chaque grand artiste semble, en effet, si différent des autres, et nous donne tant cette sensation de l'individualité que nous cherchons en vain dans l'existence quotidienne.»

“Could life give me solace from art? Was there in art a deeper reality where our true personality finds an expression that the actions in life do not provide? Each artist seems, in effect, so different from the others, and gives us so much this feeling of individuality which we in vain look for in daily existence.”

(La prisonnière, I)

Does daily life impose so great restrictions on our own opportunities for freedom, creativity and expressions of energy that our real personality gets buried in daily obligations? Do the great artists have the capacity and the will to give their own personal particularities free reign through the artistic expressions they manage to create? Do they through their artistic activities prevent the obligations of daily life to choke their deeper personality?



«...j'étais troublé par cette habileté vulcanienne. Serait-ce elle qui donnerait chez les grands artistes l'illusion d'une originalité foncière, irréductible en apparence, reflet d'une réalité plus qu'humaine, en fait produit d'un labeur industriel? Si l'art n'est que cela, il n'est pas plus réel que la vie, et je n'avais pas tant de regrets à avoir.»

“...I was troubled by this Vulcanian competence. Would it be this that gave the great artists the illusion of fundamental originality, apparently unalterable, reflection of a superhuman reality, in fact a product of industrious work? If art is only this, it is not more real than life, and I did not need to have that many regrets.”

(La prisonnière, I)

Proust's existential doubts about his choices in life, where art stands out as a unique path for unique personalities, and which gives the deeper sides of our personality free reign, get solace from the realization that hard work more than anything else is what gives art its strength and particularity. In which case art does not distinguish itself from other types of existence in the way strong results are achieved.



«.....je me promis de serrer un jour d'un peu plus près la nature de cette force invisible mais aussi puissante que les croyances...., qui portait si haut les cités, les femmes, tant que je ne les connaissais pas, et qui se dérobaient sous elles dès que je les avais approchées, les faisait tomber aussitôt à plat sur la terre à terre de la plus triviale réalité.”

“.....I promised myself to grasp in a closer way the nature of this force, invisible but also as strong as faiths...., that elevated to such heights the cities, the women, as long as I did not know them, and which disappeared beneath them at the moment I had got closer to them, made them fall to the ground in the most trivial reality.”

(La prisonnière, I)

The force of imagination and illusions, as strong as faith, rules the ground alone as long as we do not have factual knowledge about what we are thinking of. Under the influence of this force, anything is possible in our imagination. If we start our process of thinking with positive ideas about our object of attention, this object may become fantastic and beautiful. If we start with negative ideas, the object may become repulsive in our imagination. When factual knowledge enters into our train of thoughts, the more commonplace realities transform the fantastic or the repulsive into something ordinary. As they say in the tabloid media: “do not destroy a good story by seeking facts.”



«Certes, pour posséder il faut avoir désiré. Nous ne possédons une ligne, une surface, un volume que si notre amour l'occupe.»

“Certainly, in order to possess you have to have desired. We possess a line, a surface, a volume only if our love is preoccupied with it.”

(La prisonnière, I)

Proust says this in connection with a reflection on his relationship with Albertine. He has for a long time wished to be united with her, to possess her. When he actually sits together with her in a carriage and knows that they are going home to him to live together, this strong feeling of owning her develops in full force. In the same situation, with a woman he does not love nor desire, the feeling of ownership will not appear – simply because it is not there as a desire.



«Albertine avait beau commencer à avoir du gout, elle avait encore un certain respect pour le bronze, et ce respect rejaillissait sur moi en une considération qui, venant d'Albertine, m'importait infiniment plus que de garder un bronze un peu déshonorant, puisque j'aimais Albertine.»

“In spite of Albertine’s beginning acquisition of good taste, she still had a certain respect for bronze, and this respect rubbed off on me in the form of a consideration that, coming from Albertine, was far more important than the keeping of a slightly dishonorable bronze, since I loved Albertine.”

(La prisonnière, I)

Proust’s acquaintance, Bloch, had only contempt for a bronze that Proust was having in his home. Nevertheless, Proust had not rid himself of that bronze, firstly because he was not preoccupied by decorating his apartment in a conscious way, being too lazy for that. Not being concerned with this, he felt that he had the right to leave his interior as it was, without putting any efforts into producing refined nuances.

Secondly, this bronze had the advantage of opening up for communication with people who did not understand him, but who were in tune with this bronze. He obtained consideration from people who liked this bronze.



«Avec cette merveilleuse docilité contrastaient certains mouvements, vite réprimés, d’impatience, qui me firent me demander si Albertine n’aurait pas formé le projet de secouer la chaîne.»

“This marvelous docility was contrasted by certain movements, quickly repressed, of impatience, that made me ask myself whether Albertine was not preparing the project of shaking the chains.”

(La prisonnière, I)

Proust preferred, due to his poor health, to stay at home. He spent most of his time at home, much of it in bed, where he made his reflections and wrote down his thoughts. He wanted to hold a grip on Albertine and did not like that she went out without him. Proust was aware that this situation could be considered by Albertine to be a form of prison, and he was very sensitive to situations where she directly or indirectly gave vent to this feeling. His jealousy prevented him from “loosening” the mental chain he had attached her in.



«...le mensonge est si peu exigeant, a besoin de si peu de chose pour se manifester!»

«...the lie is so undemanding, needs so little to reveal itself!”

(La prisonnière, I)

Proust met a friend of Albertine’s in the street and told her happily that he was seeing a lot of her these days. This friend wished to speak with Albertine and Proust’s jealousy and suspicion made him ask why she wanted to meet her. Maybe he could give her the information she needed? She circumvented his question and did not wish to expand on why she wished to meet Albertine, which sparked Proust’s reaction as described in the quote above.



«Mme Verdurin, quand elle se sentait devoir à quelqu'un une reconnaissance qui allait lui peser, et ne pouvait le tuer pour la peine, lui découvrait un défaut grave qui dispensait honnêtement de la lui témoigner.»

“Mrs Verdurin, when she felt that she had an obligation of some consequence to somebody, and yet could not kill that person to rid herself of it, would find with that person a major failing which would give her an honest reason to disregard her obligation.”

(La prisonnière, I)

We may think that rendering people great services will give us their friendship, but the friendship should rather be there before we render the services. Maybe we think that we are acquiring influence with people when we render them services, but this relation of relative power and influence should rather be there before the services are rendered. To place people in a debt of obligations is a risky business. It is particularly dangerous if these obligations become so vast that the person in debt will not be capable of reciprocating. The danger is then that instead of acquiring a friend, you are getting an enemy. Being in debt to someone may generate a number of reactions, A strong and generous person may handle it well and the future relation may develop well. A weaker person may respond badly to such a situation, and react with arrogance and aggressiveness to handle the feeling of inferiority created by the sense of obligation.



«J'ai même diné chez lui, dans sa nouvelle demeure, où on s'assomme autant, au milieu du plus grand luxe, qu'on s'amusait jadis quand, tirant le diable par la queue, il assemblait la meilleure compagnie dans un petit grenier.»

"I have even dined at his place, in his new lodgings, where you are as bored, surrounded by the greatest luxury, as you had fun in earlier times, when being poor, he assembled the best of company in a little attic."

(La prisonnière, II)

Proust's acquaintance, Mr. de Charlus, talks about a friend who married a woman who in his view had a choking influence on his friend's social life and put a lid on his extrovert and joyful character. Mr. de Charlus thought he could have warned him and that his friend's life then could have been different. Mr. de Charlus claimed that he had helped many people out of difficult existential situations and given them the joy of life back. Proust says in a laconic way that Mr. de Charlus evidently had not managed to achieve this with his own life; it is easier to talk about what others should do than to act on your own behalf.



«Quand il tenait sur quelqu'un, sur quelque chose, un couplet tout à fait réussi, il désirait le faire entendre au plus grand nombre de personnes possible, mais en ayant soin de ne pas admettre, dans la seconde journée, des invités de la première qui eussent pu constater que le morceau n'avait pas changé. Il refaisait sa salle à nouveau, justement parce qu'il ne renouvelait pas son affiche, et quand il tenait, dans la conversation, un succès, il eût au besoin organisé des tournées et donné des représentations en province.»

“When he had a grip on someone, on something, a successful story, he wanted as many people as possible to hear it, being careful not to admit, in the second part of the day, guests who had been there in the first part of the day who could see that the story had not changed. He changed the public completely, since he did not change the performance, and when he had, in conversation, a success, he might if need be have organized tours and given performances in the provinces.”

(La prisonnière, II)

Baron de Charlus, of whom Proust is here talking, lived on his fortune, like many of the aristocrats we meet in his work. For him, as for many of the others in the same situation, social gatherings were the stages where they could perform and make themselves important. To be intellectually brilliant was important, also for Mr. de Charlus. He was a very vain person and for him a good story was a piece of social capital from which he wished to obtain the highest possible social profit.



«...sur le ton d'un médecin qui, voulant le bien de son malade malgré ce malade lui même, entend bien ne pas se laisser imposer la collaboration d'un homéopathe.»

“...in the intonation of a physician who, wishing the good of his patient in spite of the patient himself, would not allow the collaboration of a homoeopath to be imposed on him.”

(La prisonnière, II)

Baron de Charlus will be hosting a party that is to be held at Mrs. Verdurin's, who at that time holds one of the salons with the highest social prestige in Paris. Mrs. Verdurin believes that she will be gaining a great social benefit by organizing a party hosted by the baron. The baron is at the top of the ranks of nobility and she has very high social ambitions. During a conversation regarding the guest list, Mrs. Verdurin proposes a name for which the baron has only contempt. His explanations of why uncovers a deep contempt for people who are not part of nobility like himself and who aspire to elevate themselves to the ranks of nobility. In his tone of voice he shows a paternalistic attitude that makes it clear that Mrs. Verdurin, in spite of her good intentions, will hurt her own status if this person is invited. In the quote above, Proust, makes an analogy with a physician of the old school to describe the tone of the baron.



«En réalité, ce que nous exprimons alors, c'est le contraire de notre désir (lequel est de vivre toujours avec celle que nous aimons), mais c'est aussi cette impossibilité de vivre ensemble qui fait notre souffrance quotidienne, souffrance préférée par nous à celle de la séparation, et qui finira malgré nous par nous séparer.»

“What we then in reality express, is the opposite of our desire (which is to always live with the one we love), but there is also this impossibility of living together that gives us daily suffering, a suffering we prefer to separation, and which in the end will, in spite of our wish, lead to separation.”

(La prisonnière, II)

The relationship between Albertine and Proust has come to a point where they still love each other, but where the daily frictions are leading them to separation, without having quite confronted the situation openly. They are saying contradictory things to each other, where the conflicting feelings appear in indirect ways.



«Sans doute je faisais, dans la valeur des arguments que ma raison me fournissais, la part du désir que j'avais de les trouver bons.»

“Maybe I was, in the valuation of the arguments my reason furnished me with, introducing my desire to find them good.”

(La prisonnière, II)

Albertine is on her way to leaving Proust, but he does not see the situation with a clear view. Her conduct is ambiguous, but he looks for reasons to interpret her behavior in a positive way. He finds arguments for her actions that fit in with his wishes to believe that the relationship still is good.



«...parce que, surtout, je lui avais coupé les ailes, qu'elle avait cessé d'être une Victoire, qu'elle était une pesante esclave dont j'aurais voulu me débarrasser.»

“...because, above all, I had cut her wings, she had stopped being a Victory, she was a heavily weighing slave that I would wish to get rid of.”

(La prisonnière, II)

Albertine was no longer this mystic, poetic and aerial figure that Proust had been in love with at distance during the summers near the sea at Balbec. He had, after many efforts, won her over and become her partner. His jealousy and instinct of ownership had gradually lead her into imprisonment with Proust, where she no longer had freedom to go out when she wanted to meet other people without Proust's assent. Proust being himself often chained to bed by his illness and thus staying inside, she was then forced to stay inside with him. This imprisonment had emptied her of energy and charm, and led to a situation where Proust himself was caught in an impossible situation, where he wanted her gone.



«...j’entendais, riche et précieuse dans le silence comme un harmonium d’église, la modulation d’un oiseau inconnu qui sur le mode lydien, chantait déjà matines, et au milieu de mes ténèbres mettait la riche note éclatante du soleil qu’il voyait.»

“...I heard, rich and precious in the silence, like a church harmonium, the modulation of an unknown bird which in the Lydian mode was already singing matins, and in the middle of my darkness produced the bright note of the sun that it was seeing.”

(La prisonnière, II)

Proust is in bed hearing spring come. Albertine, who is in with him, also notes this atmosphere. In his interpretation of Albertine’s tone of voice he nevertheless hears her longing to go out and enjoy spring, to get out of her imprisonment with Proust.



«...comme l'avenir est ce qui n'existe que dans notre pensée, il nous semble encore modifiable par l'intervention in extremis de notre volonté.”

“...since the future exists only in our thoughts, it seems still changeable by an in extremis intervention of our will.”

(Albertine disparue)

Albertine has just left Proust and he is in despair, among other things because he would have wanted to be in control himself of when and how the break were to happen. Even when he now nurtures a hope of making her come back to him, he sees that the future is not influenced only by his own will. Other forces are also at work, and these are forces on which he has no influence. What is the point of still having time to influence the outcome, when he does not have the means to do it?



«Pour se représenter une situation inconnue l'imagination emprunte des éléments connus et à cause de cela ne se la représente pas.»

“To imagine an unknown situation, imagination makes use of known elements and because of that is unable to represent it.”

(Albertine disparue)

We use our experience to understand what happens around us. The more experience we have, the more references we have to enable us to place new experiences in the context of our frame of thought. We categorize events by the characteristics we think they have. The more experience we have, the less are we open for seeing new events without prejudices. A new and unknown situation may be met with curiosity and an exploring mind, and thereby open up for new understanding. Or it may be met with a mind that is placing the situation in an established category of experiences already firmly established in our register of ideas. We are free to decide what state of mind we wish to meet new experiences with. The older we get, the easier it is to place new experiences in known categories of thought. It is less demanding and requires less imagination. To allow imagination to work freely, is a choice that requires stamina and effort of attention.



« - en la doublant d'une sorte d'année sentimentale où les heures n'étaient pas définies par la position du soleil, mais par l'attente d'un rendez-vous; où la longueur des jours, où les progrès de la température, étaient mesurés par l'essor de mes espérances, le progrès de notre intimité, la transformation progressive de son visage, les voyages qu'elle avait faits, la fréquence et le style des lettres qu'elle m'avait adressées pendant une absence, sa précipitation plus ou moins grande à me voir au retour.»

“ – by adding to it a sort of sentimental year where the hours were not defined by the position of the sun, but by the expectation of a meeting appointment; where the length of the days, where the movements in temperature, were measured by the strength of my hopes, the progress of our intimacy, the progressive transformation of her face, the trips she had made, the frequency and the style of the letters she had written to me during an absence, her greater or lesser haste to see me on her return.”

(Albertine disparue)

The feeling of time does not have the same regularity as the movements of the Earth in relation to the Sun. Hope, expectations, doubts about future events, development of a relationship, the intensity of daily tasks, feelings of security and insecurity, all have an influence on the sensations of time. Movements of time leave their traces in our emotional life in a different way than the mechanical movements of a clock.



«Même dans mon amour l'état changeant de mon atmosphère morale, la pression modifiée de mes croyances n'avaient-ils pas, tel jour, diminué la visibilité de mon propre amour, ne l'avaient-ils pas, tel jour, indéfiniment étendue, tel jour embellie jusqu'au sourire, tel jour contractée jusqu'à l'orage?»

“Even in my love, the changing nature of my state of mind, the modified pressures of my beliefs, had they not, one day, reduced the visibility of my own love, had they not, another day, magnified it indefinitely, yet another day beautified it into a smile, yet another day contracted it into a storm?”

(Albertine disparue)

The strength in our feeling of love may move independently of what is objectively happening between us. Atmospheres and sensations in our own mind cause changes in our moods, for reasons often unknown to ourselves, independently of what actually happens in our relations with the loved one. These swings in moods affect our feelings of love and may actually influence the course of our relationship, irrespective of the other person's behavior.



«Et aussitôt, par un brusque déplacement, de la torture de la jalousie je passais au désespoir de la séparation.»

«And in the same instant, by a sudden movement, from torture and jealousy I went to the despair of separation.»

(Albertine disparue)

Associations change, and the moods follow. From a state of mind where he had buried himself into all sorts of suspicions about what Albertine was doing when he was not close to her, his thoughts had shifted to reflections over all the good aspects of Albertine, aspects which made her so attractive.



«...une femme est d'une plus grande utilité pour notre vie si elle y est, au lieu d'un élément de bonheur, un instrument de chagrin, et il n'y en a pas une seule dont la possession soit aussi précieuse que celle des vérités qu'elle nous découvre en nous faisant souffrir.»

“...a woman is of more use to our life if she is, instead of an element of happiness, an instrument for sorrow, and there is not one we may possess which is of more value than the truths she uncovers for us by making us suffer.”

(Albertine disparue)

When life does not offer resistance and we live in a state where things move our way without major problems, we do not get the chance to discover the potential capabilities and forces that reside within us. Neither will we get the chance to discover our weaknesses and what it takes to fight them. We develop a mental and physical laziness that puts our whole organism to sleep. Resistance and suffering is what tests our personality and our capacity to transgress the limits we live under in daily life.



«Un simple croissant, mais que nous mangeons, nous fait éprouver plus de plaisir que tous les ortolans, lapereaux et bartavelles qui furent servis à Louis XV, et la pointe de l’herbe qui à quelques centimètres frémit devant notre oeil, tandis que nous sommes couchés sur la montagne, peut nous cacher la vertigineuse aiguille d’un sommet si celui-ci est distant de plusieurs lieues.»

“A simple croissant, which we are eating, gives us more pleasure than all the ortolans, baby rabbits, and rock partridges which were served to Louis XV, and the tip of grass which moves a few inches before our eyes, as we are lying down in the mountain, may hide for us the dizzying tip of a summit if this is at a great distance.”

(Albertine disparue)

We are not capable of judging things that are outside of ourselves in the same way that we judge things we have a direct relationship with. Our senses are the filter through which we see, hear and feel the world. Nothing exists for us outside of that which we experience through our senses. The connection between the human being as a thinking subject and the outer world as a spatial object was for the French philosopher René Descartes (1596 – 1650) a central question which he purified and expressed in his famous phrase: “I think, therefore I am.”



«Tous ces instants si doux que rien ne me rendrait jamais, je ne peux même pas dire que ce que me faisait éprouver leur perte fût du désespoir. Pour être désespéré, cette vie qui ne pourra plus être que malheureuse, il faut encore y tenir.....mais le “moi” auquel j’étais attaché maintenant, le “moi” qui constituait ces vives réserves que mettait en jeu l’instinct de conservation, ce “moi” n’était plus dans la vie.”

“All these instants so sweet that nothing would ever give me back, I cannot even say that what I felt by their loss was despair. To be in despair, this life that could no longer be anything but unhappy, one would have to wish to hold on to it....but the “I” which I was linked to now, the “I” which possessed these vivid resources which mobilized the instinct of conservation, this “I” was no longer in life.”

(Albertine disparue)

The forces of life, which are so strong, are challenged by the will to live. Through the loss of Albertine, Proust feels that his will to live has left him. His “I” is outside of life, without force or sense of purpose.



«Heureusement je trouvai fort à propos dans ma mémoire – comme il y a toujours toutes espèces de choses, les unes dangereuses, les autres salutaires dans ce fouillis où les souvenirs ne s'éclairent qu'un à un – je découvris comme un ouvrier l'objet qui pourra servir à ce qu'il veut faire,...»

“Fortunately I found very conveniently in my memory – as there are always all sorts of things, some dangerous, others salutary, in this disorder where memories are only clarified one by one – I found like a workman the tool that could serve for what he wants to do,...”

(Albertine disparue)

Albertine being no longer with Proust, he felt like he was lonely on a vast, unlimited beach – where it would be impossible to find her again. His feeling of loss was overwhelming. Then he remembered something his grandmother had said, which put him on to other thoughts and led his reflections in a new direction.



«Soulevant un coin du voile lourd de l'habitude (l'habitude abêtissante qui pendant tout le cours de notre vie nous cache à peu près tout l'univers, et, dans une nuit profonde, sous leur étiquette inchangée, substitue aux poisons les plus dangereux ou les plus enivrants de la vie quelque chose d'anodin qui ne procure pas de délices), ...»

“Lifting a corner of the heavy veil of habit (the stupidifying habit which during the whole course of our life hides almost all of the universe to us, and, in a deep night, with an unchanged label, exchanges the most dangerous or exciting poisons of life for something ordinary which does not procure pleasure),...”

(Albertine disparue)

Proust catches a memory which appears to him with the same freshness he felt when the event itself happened the first time. This freshness we experience when our mind has not yet had time to categorize the event in our catalogue of already known experiences, which leads to an elimination of the vitality of the new experience, transforming it into something already known and thereby less interesting. The capacity to see an event with a fresh look, without allowing the heavy veil of habit to cover it up and place it in a mental box which closes it for further examination, is a life-giving force that brings the joy of life back and makes it possible to see the beauty and mystery of life. This capacity depends entirely on not removing the uniqueness of the event from our mind, thus resisting our extreme need to categorize events in such a way that the challenge they might pose to us is removed.



«Sans doute c'est seulement par la pensée qu'on possède les choses, et on ne possède pas un tableau parce qu'on l'a dans la salle à manger si on ne sait pas le comprendre, ni un pays parce qu'on y réside sans même le regarder.»

“Maybe it is only through our thoughts that we possess things, and we do not possess a painting just because we have it in our dining room if we do not understand it, nor a country if we stay in it without even looking at it.”

(Albertine disparue)

What does it mean to possess something? Do you own it because you have the right to dispose of it? Is a property only of value to you if you have a living relationship with it? Are your real possessions the things and people you are concerned with? The Chinese say that you only can own five things. If you own more than five things, the things own you more than you own them. Your freedom gets gradually more restricted for every object you acquire. The things increasingly require your attention, but your time available for that attention is not expanding.



«Même à propos des mots qu’il avait dits, des objets qu’il avait donnés, on prit l’habitude de ne plus le nommer, et celle qui aurait dû rajeunir, sinon perpétuer sa mémoire, se trouva hâter et consommer l’oeuvre de la mort et de l’oubli.»

“Even regarding the words he had spoken, the objects he had given, the habit was acquired to no longer mention them, and the one who should have rejuvenated, if not perpetuated his memory, found herself hastening and completing the work of death and oblivion.”

(Albertine disparue)

Swann’s daughter Gilberte was more concerned by burying the memory of her father than to remember him. For her, the inheritance from her father was more important than the memory of him. Proust, who admired Swann, saw this as a great treason.



«Tout à coup, au bout d'une de ces petites rues, il semblait que dans la matière cristallisée se fût produite une distention. Un vaste et somptueux campo à qui je n'eusse assurément pas, dans ce réseau de petites rues, pu deviner cette importance, ni même trouver une place, s'étendait devant moi entouré de charmants palais pales de clair de lune. C'était un de ces ensembles architecturaux vers lesquels, dans une autre ville, les rues se dirigent, vous conduisent et le désignent. Ici, il semblait exprès cache dans un entre-croisement de ruelles, comme ces palais de contes orientaux où on mène la nuit un personnage qui, ramené chez lui avant le jour, ne doit pas pouvoir retrouver la demeure magique où il finit par croire qu'il n'est allé qu'en rêve.»

“Suddenly, at the end of one of these small streets, it appeared as if crystallized matter had extended itself. A vast and sumptuous campo which I could not assuredly have guessed the importance of, not even found room for, extended itself in front of me, surrounded by charming palaces paling in moonlight. It was one of those architectural ensembles towards which, in another city, the streets direct themselves, lead you and designate them. Here, it seemed hidden on purpose in a crossing of streets, like these palaces in oriental tales where one leads by night a person, who, upon being brought back to his own quarters before dawn, will be incapable of finding again the magic place where he in the end will believe that he only went in a dream.”

(Albertine disparue)

Proust is wandering in narrow streets in Venice.



«Cette vélocité avait d'ailleurs diverses raisons psychologiques, la crainte d'être vu, le désir de ne pas sembler avoir cette crainte, la fébrilité qui naît du mécontentement de soi et de l'ennui. Il avait l'habitude d'aller dans certains mauvais lieux, et, comme il aimait qu'on ne le vît ni y entrer, ni en sortir, il s'engouffrait pour offrir aux regards malveillants des passants hypothétiques le moins de surface possible, comme on monte à l'assaut. Et cette allure de coup de vent lui était resté.»

«This velocity had in fact several psychological reasons, the fear of being seen, the desire of not seeming to have this fear, the febrility born from discontent with himself and boredom. He had the habit of going to certain bad places, and, as he liked not being seen neither entering them nor leaving them, he shot in to offer as little surface as possible to the malevolent gazes of hypothetical passers-by, like when you mount an attack. And this appearance of windblast had stayed with him.»

(Le Temps retrouvé, I)

Robert de Saint Loup, an aristocratic friend of Proust, is possessed by this self-consciousness that so often characterizes people in the highest circles of nobility. When this self-consciousness is combined with a lack of self-confidence and a need to hide parts of his activities to the public eye, even when they are taking place in the public space, one sees this weird piece of acting containing quick apparently self-confident motions covering several layers of psychological camouflage.



«...l'intrépidité apparente de quelqu'un qui veut montrer qu'il n'a pas peur et ne veut pas se donner le temps de penser.»

«...the apparent intrepidity of someone who wishes to show that he is not afraid and does not want to give himself time to think.»

(Le Temps retrouvé, I)

The arrogant speed of Saint Loup's movements takes the appearance of a psychological shield that aims to protect him from his own lack of self-confidence, while at the same time presenting to his surroundings an image which is in harmony with his high social standing. His youthful nervousness makes it impossible for him to attain the necessary dignity given by slow, measured movements found with the older specimens in the same social circles. He compensates by going to the other extreme through creating an image of assurance and control through quick, seemingly sure movements.



«....depuis la faveur dont jouissent les exercices physiques, l'oisiveté à pris une forme sportive, meme en dehors des heures de sport et qui se traduit par une vivacité fébrile qui croit ne pas laisser à l'ennui le temps ni la place de se développer.»

“...following the favour enjoyed by physical exercise, inactivity has taken on a sporting appearance, even outside the hours reserved for sport, and which translates into a febrile vivacity which believes it will not allow boredom neither the time nor the room to develop.”

(Le Temps retrouvé, I)

The aristocratic Robert de Saint Loup had, like all others in his social position, no remunerated activities. He lived on his own or his family's fortune. This meant that all his time was, at the outset, free. Boredom and distance was a natural consequence of this situation. Inactivity, combined with a feeling of social superiority, lead to nonchalance. He was an intelligent person and his inactivity prevented him from achieving the potential he had within him. Energy and desire for action found their way through sport, all the more frenetic to compensate for the boredom lurking under the surface.



«M.Bontemps ne voulait pas entendre parler de paix avant que l'Allemagne eût été réduite au même morcellement qu'au Moyen âge, la déchéance de la maison de Hohenzollern prononcée, Guillaume ayant reçu douze balles dans la peau. En un mot, il était ce que Brichot appelait un «Jusqu'aboutiste», c'était le meilleur brevet de civisme qu'on pouvait lui donner.»

“Mr. Bontemps would not hear of peace before Germany had been reduced to the same fragmentation as in the Middle Ages, the dispossession of the House of Hohenzollern pronounced, Wilhelm having received twelve bullets in his skin. In short, he was what Brichot called an “All the way”-man, this being the best certificate of civism one could give him.”

(Le Temps retrouvé, I)

This aggressivity, being expressed through the words of Mr. Bontemps, reflects the collective desire for vengeance present in France both before and after World War I and which got its expression through the catastrophic Treaty of Versailles, where Germany was saddled with an obligation of payment of damages that contributed to the economic and political chaos which subsequently brought Hitler to power. The more pure your desire for vengeance was, the more of a patriot you could consider yourself to be. In polarized situations the extremists become the “pure and unalloyed souls” who receive the consideration of the general public.



«Dans la conversation, Mme Verdurin, pour communiquer les nouvelles, disait «nous» en parlant de la France. «Hé bien, voici: nous exigeons du roi de Grèce qu'il se retire du Péloponèse, etc; nous lui envoyons, etc».

Et dans tous ses récits revenait tout le temps le G.Q.G.»

“In the conversation, Mrs. Verdurin, when communicating the news, said “we” when talking of France. “Well, here it is: we demand from the King of Greece that he withdraws from the Peloponese, etc; we send him, etc”. And in all her talks, reference to the General Headquarters came back all the time.”

(Le Temps retrouvé, I)

Mrs. Verdurin is the main model of the Parisian salon hostess from the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Very concerned with her own importance, a high degree of attention directed at social classes and social rankings, very apt at staging herself in a way that makes her look influential and with great power to define people in or out of the “right” social circles. She commands the social scene in the higher bourgeois circles with unlimited self-confidence.



«On peut remarquer d'ailleurs, qu'au fur et à mesure qu'augmenta le nombre de gens brillants qui firent des avances à Mme Verdurin, le nombre de ceux qu'elle appelait les «ennuyeux» diminua.»

“One may notice furthermore that, as the number of brilliant people making advances towards Mrs. Verdurin increased, the number of those she called the “boring” diminished.”

(Le Temps retrouvé, I)

Mrs. Verdurin worked hard and systematically in order to increase the social status of her salon. In the beginning she attracted a group of friends through the lavish receptions she gave. Gradually she managed to attract people with high cultural status due to their intellect or their capacities as musicians. When a person declined an invitation from her, this person was immediately labelled as “boring” by her. If somebody then suggested to her that it might be a good idea to invite this person, she answered that he or she was much too boring to deserve that. As her salon grew in status, fewer and fewer people declined her invitations – more and more people made advances to her to obtain an invitation. The number of “boring” people decreased accordingly.



«...elles s'expriment selon la catégorie d'esprit à laquelle elles appartiennent et où il y a aussi énormément de bourgeois. Les classes d'esprit n'ont pas égard à la naissance.»

“...they express themselves in accordance with the class of minds they belong to and where there are also a great many commoners. The classes of minds do not concern themselves with birth.”

(Le Temps retrouvé, I)

People had a great need to prove that they were in tune with the modern tendencies. They used words and expressions that were in fashion, even if these words were in complete disharmony with their style of language. This could be the case with high nobility wanting to show that they were in tune with the evolution of society. It could affect commoners with social ambitions who by impertinent use of nicknames of important persons only used by close friends, wanted to show that they were received in the inner circles.



«Et plus que n'eût fait tel chœur de Sophocle sur l'orgueil abaissé d'Oedipe, plus que la mort même, et toute oraison funèbre sur la mort, le salut empressé et humble du baron à Mme de Sainte-Euverte proclamait ce qu'a de périssable l'amour des grandeurs de la terre et tout l'orgueil humain. M. de Charlus, qui jusque-là n'eût pas consenti à dîner avec Mme de Sainte-Euverte, la saluait maintenant jusqu'à terre.»

“And more than would have done a choir of Sophocles on the beaten vanity of Oedipus, more than death itself, and all funeral prayers, the eager and humble salutations from the baron to Mrs. de Sainte-Euverte made clear how perishable the love of the earth's greats and human vanity is. Mr. de Charlus, who until then would not have consented to dine with Mrs. de Sainte-Euverte, was now saluting her to the ground.”

(Le Temps retrouvé, I)

Baron de Charlus was a very arrogant and socially self-conscious person, who through his status as prince belonged to the inner circle of high aristocracy in the French society. He was very restrictive regarding who he recognized as partners for conversation or other social contacts. In spite of her being an aristocrat, Mrs. de Sainte-Euverte was not elevated enough for him. He did not want to have contact with her, even though their paths crossed each other in many social settings. Then, one day, the baron was hit by a stroke. He became invalid, but he managed to recover his mental capacities and sufficient physical mobility to move outdoors. At the same time, his self-consciousness had received a serious blow, and his vanity had disappeared. On the way to a party he met Mrs. de Sainte-Euverte, and he then saluted her with eagerness and humility, while her triumph consisted in accepting his salutations with dignity.



«Il ne cessait d'énumérer tous les gens de sa famille ou de son monde qui n'étaient plus, moins semblait-il, avec la tristesse qu'ils ne fussent plus en vie qu'avec la satisfaction de leur survivre.....Et chaque fois, ce mot «mort» semblait tomber sur ces défunts comme une pelletée de terre plus lourde, lancée par un fossoyeur qui tenait à les river plus profondément à la tombe.»

“He did not stop to enumerate all the members of his family or his world who were no longer there, less, it seemed, with the sadness that they no longer were alive than with the satisfaction of surviving them....And each time, this word “dead” seemed to fall down on the deceased like a heavier shovel of earth, thrown by a grave-digger bent on getting them deeper down in the grave.”

(Le Temps retrouvé, I)

Baron de Charlus sits in his loneliness after convalescing from his stroke and he consoles himself that he has, after all, recovered from it. He has also survived a great number of his contemporaries. His own life is no longer a life, but it is after all better than death – which now preoccupies him all the time.



«Mais c'est quelquefois au moment où tout nous semble perdu que l'avertissement arrive qui peut nous sauver: on a frappé à toutes les portes qui ne donnent sur rien, et la seule par où on peut entrer et qu'on aurait cherché en vain pendant cent ans, on y heurte sans le savoir et elle s'ouvre.»

“But sometimes, it is at the moment when everything seems lost that the warning which may save us comes: we have knocked on all doors leading to nothing, and the only one through which we may enter and which we would have searched for in vain for a hundred years, we stumble upon unknowingly and it opens.”

(Le Temps retrouvé, I)

The author Bergotte (most probably a pseudonym for Anatole France) says to Proust that he may be ill, all right, but he has the joys of spiritual life. Proust reflects on this and tells himself that this life is sterile. Lucidity gives no joy in itself and in his depression from having lost Albertine he doubts whether he would have wanted to prolong life even if health permitted and he recovered completely. But then, following a sudden disturbance he is subject to in the street, his mood changes completely, and he remembers all the good moments he has had with his reflections – and he is filled with joy.



«Tant de fois, au cours de ma vie, la réalité m'avait déçu parce que, au moment où je la percevais, mon imagination, qui était mon seul organe pour jouir de la beauté, ne pouvait s'appliquer à elle, en vertu de la loi inévitable qui veut qu'on ne puisse imaginer que ce qui est absent.»

“Many times, during my life, reality had disappointed me, because, at the moment I perceived it, my imagination, which was my only organ available to enjoy beauty, would not apply itself to it, because of the inevitable law that says that you can only imagine what is absent.

(Le Temps retrouvé, I)

Standing face to face with a person, an object, a landscape or something else that appears very specifically in front of us, imagination is given no room to play itself out. It is locked completely in by the specific image we have in front of us. If we in the times preceding the moment we meet this reality have fantasized extensively about what this reality could be like, what features it could have, we have built expectations about this reality before we meet it. If these expectations have been positive, we will often be disappointed when we are faced with reality – and inversely if we have had negative expectations. Imagination generally surpasses reality, be it positive or negative in its content.



«J'avais trop expérimenté l'impossibilité d'atteindre dans la réalité ce qui était au fond de moi-même. Ce n'était pas plus sur la place Saint Marc que ce n'avait été à mon second voyage à Balbec, ou à mon retour à Tansonville, pour voir Gilberte, que je retrouverai le Temps Perdu, et le voyage qui ne faisait que me proposer une fois de plus l'illusion que ces impressions anciennes existaient hors de moi-même, ne pouvait être le moyen que je cherchais.»

"I had too often experimented with the impossibility of finding in reality what was deeply set in me. It was not more at Saint Marc's square than it had been at my second trip to Balbec, or at my return to Tansonville, to see Gilberte, that I would find again the Things Past, and the journey that was only proposing once more the illusion that these old impressions existed outside of myself, could not be the way that I was searching."

(Le Temps retrouvé, II)

The wish to recreate the feelings we have had in the past, through repeating the meetings with the persons and the places that have given us important memories, do not recreate the same feelings. Our memories may be an edited version of what we actually experienced at the time of these meetings, and therefore impossible to recreate in a new encounter with this reality. In addition, the reality we meet today may be different from what that reality was in the past, because its content has changed or because our way of perceiving reality has been changed by our own mental development. If we wish to recreate the feelings we had in the past, we will need to recreate the context in which the feelings appeared, go back in time and recreate the surroundings, circumstances and moods in which the feelings appeared. With his persistent capacity for concentrated attention, Proust could achieve that, but how many of us could?



«La seule manière de les goûter d'avantage c'était de tâcher de les connaître plus complètement là où elles se trouvaient, c'est à dire en moi-même, de les rendre claires jusque dans leurs profondeurs.»

“The only way to feel them stronger was to get to know them more completely where they were, which meant within myself, to make them clear where they were deepest down.”

(Le Temps retrouvé, II)

Proust recognizes that it is not possible to get in touch with the feelings he has had about people, places and events in his past by seeking these people, places and events once more. If he is to get in touch with these feelings again, he must seek them where they took place, within himself. He must go into himself and through his capacity for sustained attention and concentration dig deep down into his memories to see if he is capable of finding his way back to the feelings he had when they occurred.



«Car l'instinct dicte le devoir et l'intelligence fournit les prétextes pour l'éluder. Seulement les excuses ne figurent point dans l'art, les intentions n'y sont pas comptés, à tout moment l'artiste doit écouter son instinct, ce qui fait que l'art est ce qu'il y a de plus réel, la plus austère école de la vie, et le vrai Jugement dernier.»

“Because the instinct dictates the duty and the intelligence gives the pretexts to avoid it. However, excuses do not exist in art, intentions have no place there, at every moment the artist must listen to his instinct, which makes art what is the most real, the most austere school of life, and the real Last Judgment.”

(Le Temps retrouvé, II)

Proust tells how he, in his search for his inner feelings, constantly gets distracted by thoughts which evade the challenges he faces, how he gets pretexts to think about other things and thereby loses his concentration. When good literature is created, he says, the instinct has to be the one that governs the process, while intelligence becomes a tool that supports the instinct in its role as pathfinder. There are no excuses for breaking this concentration and your intentions are without importance if they do not also lead to results through will and persistence.



«Une heure n'est pas une heure, c'est un vase rempli de parfums, de sons, de projets et de climats. Ce que nous appelons la réalité est un certain rapport entre ces sensations et ces souvenirs qui nous entourent simultanément – “

“An hour is not an hour, it is a vase full of scents, sounds, projects and atmospheres. What we call reality is a certain relationship between these sensations and these memories that surround us simultaneously – “

(Le Temps retrouvé, II)

In his notion of time the philosopher Gaston Bachelard distinguishes between the past, the present and the future. The past is acting on us through the memories we have built up, and these memories appear as good or bad ghosts. He talks about the ghosts of the past. The future appears to us as dreams, wishes, anguish – a series of illusions about what we think or wish for the future. He talks about the illusions of the future. Only the present is real for Bachelard. Reality is the present.

However, the moods that govern us in the present are strongly influenced by the ghosts of the past and the illusions about the future, something that is clearly apparent when we are in a modus of daydreaming. The quote from Proust above illustrates this in full.



«...le seul livre vrai, un grand écrivain n'a pas, dans le sens courant, à l'inventer puisqu'il existe déjà en chacun de nous, mais à le traduire. Le devoir et la tâche d'un écrivain sont ceux d'un traducteur.»

“...the only true book, the great novelist needs not, in the common interpretation, invent it since it already exists within each of us, but to translate it. The duty and the task of the novelist are those of a translator.”

(Le Temps retrouvé, II)

Great novels create a reality we enter into when we read them. We are in the novel and we are part of the people, thoughts and events we find there. There is no distance between them and us. Such a unity cannot be created when an author finds himself or herself outside of the story. It must be part of the author's reality. This is why a great novel always will be a mixture of autobiography and imagination.



«...il y a plus d’analogie entre la vie instinctive du public et le talent d’un grand écrivain, qui n’est qu’un instinct religieusement écouté au milieu du silence, imposé à tout le reste, un instinct perfectionné et compris, qu’avec le verbiage superficiel et les critères changeants des juges attitrés.»

“...there is more in common between the instinctive life of the public and the talent of a great writer, which is nothing more than an instinct attentively listened to within the silence, imposed on all the rest, a perfected and understood instinct, than with the superficial verbosity and changing criteria of the appointed judges.”

(Le Temps retrouvé, II)

The instincts of the author and the instincts of the public are of the same kind. The author distinguishes himself or herself by obtaining such a strong contact with these instincts, and by making them visible in such a way that the public recognizes itself in them.



«Et ainsi leur passé est encombré d'innombrables clichés qui restent inutiles parce que l'intelligence ne les a pas "développés".»

"And thus their past is encumbered with innumerable clichés that remain useless because the intelligence has not "developed" them."

(Le Temps retrouvé, II)

Memory stores a series of imprecise and erroneous impressions where little of what we have felt remains. This chain of unrefined impressions appear to us in our memory as the sum of our thoughts and our life. It represents our reality. Without having, through life, reflected on these impressions with the help of our instincts, with the aim of exploring their meaning, memory will produce a life that appears as false, boring and void of beauty. This life that memory produces is not the real life as we have felt it at the moment we lived it, because we have not explored the nature of our feelings when they occurred, and thereby not stored them in our mind.



«Grâce à l’art, au lieu de voir un seul monde, le nôtre, nous le voyons se multiplier, et autant qu’il y a d’artistes originaux, autant nous avons de mondes a notre disposition,...»

“Thanks to art, instead of seeing only one world, ours, we see it multiplying, and the larger the number of original artists, the more numerous will be the worlds at our disposal,...”

(Le Temps retrouvé, II)

Through original art we may experience our world anew every time, with new eyes, and we enlarge our own capacity to use our senses in new ways to perceive what happens around us. Through these processes we may change what we wish to emphasize in daily life and become different from what we were before.



«Le rêve était encore un de ces faits de ma vie qui m'avait toujours le plus frappé, qui avait dû le plus servir à me convaincre du caractère purement mental de la réalité, et don't je ne dédaignerais pas l'aide dans la composition de mon oeuvre.»

“The dream was another of those facts of my life that had always struck me the most, that had convinced me the most about the purely mental character of reality, from which I would not disdain the help of in achieving my work.”

(Le Temps retrouvé, II)

To what extent there exists a reality outside of our own consciousness, is a question that has preoccupied philosophers in all times – as pointed out earlier. Our experience of reality is taking place through our senses, and that reality is a product of our mental state at the moment we experience it. It is our own reality and it changes all the time, together with the quality of our own sensorial capacities. It is our own reality we recreate when we create art, not other people's realities, and our dreams are part of that reality.



«...seule la perception grossière et erronée place tout dans l'objet
quand tout, au contraire, est dans l'esprit.»

“...only the brute and erroneous perception places everything in the
object when everything, on the contrary, is in the mind.”

(Le Temps retrouvé, II)

A thing, an object, takes on a different character in the hands of different people and, for each person, a different character at different times and in different mental states. The thing, the object, releases a mental reaction when we relate to it, and this reaction is different at different times and in different situations. The thing is a catalyst for something happening within us, independently of the characteristics we might think the object contains.



«..., le Temps qui d'habitude n'est pas visible, qui pour le devenir cherche des corps et partout où il les rencontre, s'en empare pour montrer sur eux sa lanterne magique.»

“..., Time which normally is not visible, which to become so searches for bodies and wherever it finds them, takes hold of them to show on them its magic lantern.”

(Le Temps retrouvé, II)

A place where time has stood still is a place where we experience that nothing has changed. If the buildings look like they always have, the people sit on the same places and do the same things, then time is not moving – it is invisible. The mysterious things happen when we see small, almost imperceptible changes that do not show differences in what we see, but yet contain something different which we cannot put our fingers on. That is Time.



«Les traits où s’était gravée sinon la jeunesse du moins la beauté ayant disparu chez la plupart d’entre elles, elles avaient alors cherché si, avec le visage qui leur restait, on ne pouvait s’en faire une autre. Déplacant le centre, sinon de gravité du moins de perspective de leur visage, en composant les traits autour de lui suivant un autre caractère, elles commençaient à cinquante ans une nouvelle sorte de beauté, comme on prend sur le tard un nouveau métier, ou comme à une terre qui ne vaut plus rien sur la vigne on fait produire des betteraves.»

“The traits where were inscribed if not youth at least beauty having disappeared among most of them, they had looked for the possibility, with the face they were left with, of making themselves another one. Moving the center, if not of gravity at least of the perspective of their face, by composing the traits around it following another character, they started at the age of fifty years another type of beauty, like later in life you start another profession, or like with a field that is no longer good for vineyards you start growing beets.”

(Le Temps retrouvé, II)

To realize that a time is over and choose a new start in life is a god sign of energy in life. How many are not those who try to cling to what they once have been and refuse to accept that conditions of life have changed and rendered the old life impossible? Sports stars who are no longer at their old level of excellence, but spend all their energy to come back to where they once were, without making it because age no longer offers them the possibility, and who enter mentally and physically into decay as a result of this denial. Old beauties which do not accept the image the mirror is offering them in the morning and assume the problem rests with the mirror, and compensate by painting an ever thicker mask on their face to conceal age, an age that everybody except themselves is seeing. When they then seek the pleasures they had in their younger years and do not find them again, the setbacks are all the more brutal.



«L'intérêt de ne pas s'être trompé quand on a émis un pronostic faux abrège la durée du souvenir de ce pronostic et permet d'affirmer très vite qu'on ne l'a pas émis.»

“The interest one has in not being wrong after having made an erroneous prediction, shortens the recollection of this prediction and permits very fast to claim that one never made it.”

(Le Temps retrouvé, II)

Our capacity to remove disagreeable things from our memory is very great, and this capacity is also present among those who consider themselves to be honest. Among the dishonest this capacity is a natural part of their normal repertoire, and some go as far as to always describe reality in such a way that it fits with what they wish their listeners to think.



«Mais ma mère, au contraire, se faisait à elle-même l'effet de l'avoir emporté dans un concours sur des concurrents de marque, chaque fois qu'une personne de son âge "disparaissait". Leur mort était la seule manière dont elle prît encore agréablement conscience de sa propre vie.»

"But my mother, on the contrary, achieved on herself the effect of having won in a competition against remarkable competitors, every time a person of her age "disappeared". Their death was the only way in which she pleasantly still was conscious of her own life."

(Le Temps retrouvé, II)

Our innate tendency to compare ourselves with others manifests itself from early age and lasts the whole life, consciously or unconsciously. In most cases such comparisons make us unhappy, because we always find people who are richer than us, more beautiful than us, or more intelligent than us. The capacity to disregard such comparisons may give peace of mind, but there are not many who over time are able to hold on to such a capacity. Old age is something one does not normally look forward to, but one of the joys old age gives is that of, when comparing with others, a sort of satisfaction from seeing that you got to be older than another person who did not get that old.



«...partir des illusions, des croyances qu'on rectifie peu à peu, comme Dostoïevski raconterai une vie.»

“...leaving illusions, beliefs that you rectify little by little, like Dostoievsky would describe a life.”

(Le Temps retrouvé, II)

Things we observe are not necessarily rational, linked to clear strategies and targets. Human actions may be governed by impulses and intuitive motives that are not easily explained. Even if we after the act may be able to place an action in a reasonable perspective, it is not sure that it was this perspective that was the basis for the action when it took place. It is important to question our illusions and convictions, and allow the irrational and the emotional to get more space in the description of what is happening.



«Le temps incolore et insaisissable s'était, ..., matérialisé en elle et l'avait pétrie comme un chef-d'oeuvre, tandis que parallèlement sur moi, hélas! il n'avait fait que son oeuvre.....Je la trouvais bien belle, pleine encore d'espérances. Riante, formée des années mêmes que j'avais perdues, elle ressemblait à ma jeunesse.»

“The colourless and intangible time had,...., materialized in her and had worked on her like a masterpiece, while in parallel on me, regretfully! It had only worked....I found her quite beautiful, still full of hope. Laughing, shaped by the very years that I had lost, she resembled my youth.”

(Le Temps retrouvé, II)

Proust describes his encounter with a woman he loved as a young man, seeing her arrive with her teenage daughter and shining from the happy life she has had. Time has only made her more beautiful, while at the same time it has worked very differently on Proust, the way he feels it.



«Que celui qui pourrait écrire un tel livre serait heureux, pensai-je; quel labeur devant lui! Pour en donner une idée, c'est aux arts les plus élevés et les plus différents qu'il faudrait emprunter des comparaisons; car cet écrivain, qui d'ailleurs, pour chaque caractère, aurait à en faire apparaître les faces les plus opposées, pour faire sentir son volume comme celui d'un solide devrait préparer son livre minutieusement, avec de perpétuels regroupements de forces, comme pour une offensive, le supporter comme une fatigue, l'accepter comme une règle, le construire comme une église, le suivre comme un régime, le vaincre comme un obstacle, le conquérir comme une amitié, le suralimenter comme un enfant, le créer comme un monde, sans laisser de côté ces mystères qui n'ont probablement leur explication que dans d'autres mondes et dont le pressentiment est ce qui nous émeut le plus dans la vie et dans l'art.»

“How he who could write such a book would be happy, I thought; what hard work awaited him! To get an idea, it would be from the highest and most diverse arts that one would have to draw comparisons; because this writer, who in addition, for each character, would have to make the most opposed facets appear, in order to make the volume felt like a solid substance, would need to prepare his book in minute detail, with perpetual reordering of forces, like for an offensive, endure it like an exhaustion, accept it like a rule, construct it like a church, follow it like a diet, surmount it like an obstacle, conquer it like a friendship, overfeed it like a child, create it like a world, without leaving apart these mysteries which probably have their explanations only in other worlds and the feelings of which are what move us the most in life and in art.”

(Le Temps retrouvé, II)

With this quote, where Proust describes his dream about the book on life, it is natural to round off these tastes of Proust's great work.

