The Proustian Mind

MEMORY

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On a carriage-ride with Mme de Villeparisis through the no-man's-land that lies between the fictional seaside town of Balbec and the real Normandy village of Hudimesnil, Proust's Narrator has a curious experience. He is struck by the sight of three trees together in a formation that seems to stir a memory deep within him. The visual impression calls to a similar one from his past in a way that turns his surroundings to a dream as if, in Georges Poulet's words, two places 'are fighting over the same space' (1963: 17). Searching his mind, he gropes for the memory image that is rising towards consciousness, and with it the lost moments of his past which might return to life, 'as when an object is placed out of our reach, so that our fingers, stretched out at arm's-length, can only touch for a moment its outer surface, without managing to take hold of anything' (*BG*, 343; II 77). And then, nothing. The presence of the aristocratic lady in the carriage beside him makes the moment unpropitious for introspection, the trees are lost to sight and the memory lost to mind. 'Of those trees themselves I was never to know what they had been trying to give me nor where else I had seen them. And when, the road having forked and the carriage with it, I turned my back on them and ceased to see them, while Mme de Villeparisis asked me what I was dreaming about, I was as wretched as if I had just lost a friend, had died to myself, had broken faith with the dead or repudiated a god' (*BG*, 345; II 79). A happier experience of involuntary memory with a madeleine and a cup of tea awaits him in the

future, as his narration foreshadows while recounting the Hudimesnil episode, but this is the first encounter with the phenomenon in the course of the Narrator's life, and it is a failure.

The failings of Proust's other kind of memory, voluntary memory, are very much to the fore in the novel; indeed, failure seems to be its principal characteristic. Consumed by jealous suspicions of Albertine's lesbianism after her death, the Narrator tries to recall her reaction one evening in his Balbec hotel room when he spoke negatively of lesbian relationships:

> I could not recall whether Albertine had blushed when I had naively expressed my horror of that sort of thing, for it is often only long afterwards that we long to know what attitude a person adopted at a moment when we were paying no attention to it, an attitude which, later on, when we think again of our conversation, would elucidate an agonising problem. But in our memory there is a blank, there is no trace of it. (*F*, 583; IV 91)

At each stage of the process there is the possibility of fatal error. Perception may fail to register, attention may fail to note, memory may fail to store, to safeguard across time or to retrieve when needed. Voluntary and involuntary memory alike are presented in Proust as unreliable, apt to let us down even when we need them the most. We can forget something that happened, like Albertine's blush, or falsely remember something that did, as we see in *Sodom and Gomorrah* with the incident of the Prince de Sagan's farewell to the Duchesse de Guermantes: 'I can see all that departing crowd now; I can see, if I am not mistaken in placing him upon that staircase, a portrait detached from its frame, the Prince de Sagan, whose last

appearance in society this must have been, paying his respects to the Duchess' (*SG*, 138 ; III 118). Moreover, our memories of the past can be distorted by the present. We can be convinced by others that we remember differently, as when the Narrator's recollection of La Berma's performance as disappointing is revised upwards by Norpois's more positive opinion (*BG*, 33; I 449), and we can convince ourselves of similar distortions if they cohere with our preconceptions, as when the Narrator's memory gifts Gilberte blue eyes to accord with her blond hair (*SW*, 168; I 139), or to better suit our self-image, as when, many years later, Gilberte's journey to Tansonville at the outbreak of the First World War is retrospectively reconfigured in her mind as an attempt to confront the Germans rather than to flee them (*TR*, 79; IV 334). We can lose track of the chronology of past events like a sailor losing his bearings when a mist descends on the sea (*F*, 680; IV 173), we can lose our whole sense of self as age-related decline cuts us off from our own history (*TR*, 325; IV 529), and even with a young and healthy brain the selectivity and arbitrariness of memory may furnish a poor record of reality, as the Narrator laments in one particularly pessimistic moment on a return visit to a Balbec that fails to live up to expectations: 'The images selected by memory are as arbitrary, as narrow, as elusive as those which the imagination had formed and reality has destroyed. There is no reason why, existing outside ourselves, a real place should conform to the pictures in our memory rather than those in our dreams' (*SG*, 175; III 149).

I open with these negative examples, not only so that we can remind ourselves of the diversity inherent in Proust's representation of memory through some of its less discussed aspects, but also to emphasise the vital point that Proust's memory is *our memory*. *In Search of Lost Time* is not about the mastery of advanced mnemotechnics, nor is the Narrator's

madeleine experience some superhuman feat. The madeleine moment is miraculous, not because the Narrator has a miraculous memory, but because memory itself is a miracle. Rather than singling out the Narrator as special, the novel is drawing attention to the nature of memory as both ordinary, in the sense that its characteristics are shared by all, and extraordinary, in its immense powers that go unrecognized and often untapped. Memory is a faculty of mind that can take our life's experience, from our innermost feelings to the smallest nuance of our perceptions, bury them deep below our consciousness for half a lifetime, and then restore them to us with a vividness that is like living through the moment for a second time and with a joy that comes from the recovery of lost time and the unifying of our own self across the years. At the same time it is about as reliable as a skittish race-horse, erratically performing or withholding its wonders according to its own whims. For Proust, the fascination with memory arises from its failings as well as its marvels, and his exploration enthusiastically ventures into both. As his Narrator puts it at a more cheerful moment: 'An unfailing memory is not a very powerful incentive to the study of the phenomena of memory' (*SG*, 60; III 52).

Proust's most sustained and systematic discussion of memory comes right at the start of *In Search of Lost Time* in the run-up to the madeleine episode, where the Narrator explains his theory of voluntary and involuntary memory. Having described at length his one persisting memory from his childhood visits to Combray, that of waiting anxiously at bed-time for a good-night kiss from his mother which may or may not come, the Narrator acknowledges that other details of his Combray life were also within reach of memory:

> I must own that I could have assured any questioner that Combray did include other scenes and did exist at other hours than these. But since the facts which I should then have recalled would have been prompted only by voluntary memory, the memory of the intelligence, and since the pictures which that kind of memory shows us preserve nothing of the past itself, I should never have had any wish to ponder over this residue of Combray. To me it was in reality all dead. (*SW*, 51; I 43).

The quality of recollection that is available to us via, as it were, a manual search of our memory storage is so low, so devoid of the vivid experience of life and of the pleasure that comes from its rediscovery, that the Narrator deems the reward not worth the effort. Proust expands on this view when he returns to the topic in *Time Regained*, this time setting up an illustrative comparison with the small contrivance of having the Narrator's dispiriting dip into voluntary memory immediately and coincidentally followed by the triggering of an involuntary memory of the same past experience. As he arrives at the Guermantes mansion for a party after a long absence from Paris, the Narrator is feeling downhearted at the lack of creative inspiration afforded to him by present perceptions, and turns to memories of foreign travels in the hope of greater riches: 'I tried next to draw from my memory other "snapshots", those in particular which it had taken in Venice, but the mere word "snapshot" made Venice seem to me as boring as an exhibition of photographs' (*TR*, 215; IV 444), he says expressing the lifelong 'overt denigration of photography' that Áine Larkin (2011: 56) has analysed. Moments later, still lost in thought, he stumbles on uneven paving while avoiding an oncoming car, and as with the

sight of Hudimesnil trees and the taste of the madeleine before them, the feel of the paving stones beneath his unsteady feet sets a memory floating to the edges of consciousness:

> The dazzling and indistinct vision fluttered near me, as if to say: 'Seize me as I pass if you can, and try to solve the riddle of happiness which I set you.' And almost at once I recognised the vision: it was Venice, of which my efforts to describe it and the supposed snapshots taken by my memory had never told me anything, but which the sensation which I had once experienced as I stood upon two uneven stones in the baptistery of St Mark's had, recurring a moment ago, restored to me complete with all the other sensations linked on that day to that particular sensation, all of which had been waiting in their place – from which with imperious suddenness a chance happening had caused them to emerge – in the series of forgotten days. (*TR*, 217-18; IV 446)

Involuntary memory, then, is like a photograph as the early twentieth century conceived them: colourless, sometimes indistinct images in shades of grey, impersonal framings of famous landmarks for the tourist market, and in Proust's original French term, *instantanés*, there is also the connotation of a frozen moment, snapped lifelessly out of the noise and movement of reality. Implicit in the metaphor is photography's inadequacy both against the object of its gaze, with the black-and-white freeze-frame offering a feeble imitation of the multisensory experience unfurling in time that was before the camera lens, and against the superior visual representation afforded by painting. Painting, as we see explored elsewhere in this volume, is a privileged medium of representation in Proust, combining as it does the full-colour sweep of

the visual panorama laid out before the artist with the unique subjectivity of the painter, encoding onto the canvas the personality of the artist, their emotional state as they painted, and the private connotations evoked by each element of the scene.

Both of these missing elements from voluntary memory – the multisensory flow of real life and the mood-coloured subjectivity of the painter's view of it – are clearly to be seen in Proust's characterization of its more celebrated counterpart, involuntary memory. As we saw with the Hudimesnil trees, the midwifing process for these involuntary memories is fragile, emotionally fraught, and despite their label, requires active participation and mental effort on the part of the person recollecting. In the madeleine moment itself, as in the subsequent instances of the phenomenon, the first consequence of the triggering sense impression in the present is one of joy: 'An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, and with no suggestion of its origin' (*SW*, 52; I 44). While it does not yet connect to the memory in question, this happiness does have a curious and counterintuitive link to time itself, which the narrator remarks upon: 'At once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory – this new sensation having had the effect, which love has, of filling me with a precious essence, or rather this essence was not in me, it *was* me. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, contingent, mortal' (*SW*, 52; I 44). This feeling of an escape from mortality accompanies the Narrator's subsequent experiences of involuntary memory, and on the paving slabs of the Guermantes courtyard he resolves to work out why. When two further involuntary memories follow in quick succession – the sound of a spoon against a plate recalls a hammer on a train wheel heard from a carriage, and a starched napkin brushed against his face evokes a stiff towel in the Balbec hotel – he divines the answer.

Involuntary memory restores past experience to the present mind in a way that not only spans the gap of years between them but abolishes the gap as if abolishing time itself. The narrator says of each of the revived memories:

> I experienced them at the present moment and at the same time in the context of a distant moment, so that the past was made to encroach upon the present and I was made to doubt whether I was in the one or the other. The truth was surely that the being within me which had enjoyed these impressions had enjoyed them because they had in them something that was common to a day long past and to the present, because in some way they were extra-temporal, and this being made its appearance only when, through one of these identifications of the present with the past, it was likely to find itself in the one and only medium in which it could exist and enjoy the essence of things, that is to say: outside time. (*TR* 222-23, IV 450)

The link across time thus brings the real of the past experience back to life and into contact with the present experience, but also brings the ideal. Through the common attributes of the two experiences the rememberer is afforded access to a shared essence between them. This essence allows the narrator not only to retrieve but to *comprehend* the experience that is returning to him – for Gilles Deleuze it is the *sens* that the *signe* of the memory image is pointing towards (Deleuze 1964: 50). And since these shared elements are attributable neither to the present nor the past experience alone, they take the essence of the experience outside time, and in doing so take the Narrator with them.

These essences of experience are, of course, personal to the Narrator. The singular conjunction of events, whereby the taste of a madeleine dipped in lime-blossom tea connects directly to the same sensation decades earlier, with no intervening experience of a similar sensation to contaminate the link, is particular to his life, and no amount of madeleine-dunking will replicate the phenomenon for us. Rather, our own madeleine moments are scattered in objects around us that can arouse sense impressions with analogous connections to our own pasts, as Proust explains with his parable of the trapped souls. According to Celtic belief, the Narrator claims, dead souls will remain trapped within objects until a loved one comes into contact with their prison and thereby restores them to life. The Narrator draws the following conclusion from the tale:

> So it is with our own past. It is a labour in vain to attempt to recapture it: all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) of which we have no inkling. And it depends on chance whether or not we come upon this object before we ourselves must die. (*SW*, 52; I 44)

Voluntary memory may be a weak substitute for the time regained of involuntary memory, but at least the former puts access to our past experience within our conscious control. The arbitrariness of involuntary memory depends on good fortune to match its keys with its locks, and if we are short of luck we may never in our lives bring them together.

Proust's theory of memory is thus sketched through a series of contrasts between its two modes. Voluntary memory escapes the element of chance by being within the control of our intellect, but this intellect can only bring back colourless facsimiles that give us information about the past but neither the richness of the experience nor the insight into its essence. Involuntary memory requires a link to be set up through a singular sense impression, and the chance event of a connection sparked by a matching sense impression in the future. Any sense will do, as Proust underlines by using all five: taste and smell in the flavour of the madeleine, sound with the spoon, touch with the napkin and paving stones, and sight in the abortive incident of the trees. It would seem to be no accident that sight, the everyday workhorse of our senses, is portrayed as the least successful in replicating a unique sensation across a span of years, whereas the prime example of an involuntary memory trigger is given to taste and smell, widely experienced (and confirmed by neuroscience) as the royal road from perception to memory. The memory that returns is equally rich and multisensory. From the recaptured moment itself, the past moment expands outwards -- like an origami flower unfurling in water in Proust's memorable image – to recover days, weeks or even years of lost time. These memories begin at their triggering sensation. The Narrator's Combray memories start with the great aunt who was the supplier of *tilleul* and madeleines to his childhood self and retain a preponderance of tastes and smells in their opening episodes. Then they head outwards in expanding ripples, proceeding through association of ideas as mention of Catholic mass leads to memories of the Church, or a room associated with Uncle Adophe leads to the episode of Adolphe and the lady in pink. All of this is recaptured in the vivid detail of the real and the emotional and connotative colouring of the subjective: visual details of stonework and flower

petals, accents and intonations of voices are minutely recorded, along with the private feelings, connotations and misunderstandings that are unique to the Narrator's perspective. All these particularities are blended with elements of the typical, the essential and the timeless, especially in the madeleine memories of Combray that overlay repeated experiences from summer after summer. The balance of particular and essential is reflected through the famous Proustian imperfect, which recounts scenes as if they 'would happen' time and again across the years, but offers details too specific to have plausibly occurred more than once, including entire conversations rendered in direct speech.[1] The particular instance stands for the typical, and we infer that, while the details of the gossip between Aunt Léonie and Françoise will vary depending on who she sees from the window that day, the exchanges between the pair will be variations on the theme we have been given.

The binarism of voluntary and involuntary memory is a real and fundamental part of Proust's conception of the mind, but there are some uncomfortable problems that arise if one takes it too systematically. One difficulty arises with the very first memory we encounter in the novel, that of the Narrator's childhood anxiety awaiting a good-night kiss. Into which of our two categories should this memory be placed? In the method of recall, it would seem to fall clearly into the category of voluntary memory, and critics refer to it as such (e.g., Carter 2000: 550). There is no madeleine moment to trigger the memory's return, and the Narrator's presentation of it as brought to mind repeatedly 'when I lay awake at night and revived old memories of Combray' (*SW*, 50; I 43) plainly implies intentional recollection. However, the quality of the memory itself has nothing in common with the dry snapshots of voluntary memory. On the contrary, everything about it accords with the characteristics ascribed to *involuntary* memory:

the vivid detail, extending to include direct speech, the personal perspective and emotional resonance from anguish to delight, even the overlaid instances from different remembered evenings that allow him to extract the essential features of the repeated trauma. Most telling of all is the Narrator's own characterization of the memory: it is brightly illuminated as if in the glare of a searchlight beam, and as we saw in an earlier quotation, it is the *other* aspects of his time at Combray, those lost in the darkness beyond the edge of the beam, that are available only in the drab guise of voluntary memory. This is the means by which Proust *introduces* the concept of voluntary memory, by defining it in explicit opposition to the memory of the kiss.

The likely solution to this conundrum is not hard to find. This vivid childhood memory needs no madeleine moment to evoke it because it has never left the Narrator's mind. Seared into his recollection by the traumatic nature of the experience – a trauma that is presented as utterly real, despite the apparent triviality of the circumstances – the memory has remained, fresh and raw, within reach of consciousness throughout the Narrator's adult life. (This is one point, incidentally, on which Proust's view of mind and memory differs from the psychoanalytic model, which would expect traumatic memories to be less likely to be available than happy ones.) Once we begin to look, we find other examples too of memories that do not fit neatly into the voluntary and involuntary categories as the novel describes them. There are, for instance, involuntary memories that do not bring joy, as Jean-Yves Tadié (2012: 79) has pointed out. Leaning forward to remove his boot one night in Balbec, the Narrator's gesture brings back a similar one in similar circumstances from his grandmother, returning as 'the living reality in a complete and involuntary recollection' (*SG*, 180; III 153), except that, rather than a joyful transcendence of time, it brings with it an outpouring of grief and an awareness of the finality

of loss. Elsewhere we see involuntary memories that are not sparked by connected sense impressions, as when Albertine mentions having been a friend of the woman known by the Narrator to have been Mlle Vinteuil's lover (*SG*, 596; III 499), and the memory of spying on the lovers at Montjouvain surges back into the Narrator's consciousness. Plus, along with these dramatic resurrections, there are instances in Proust of a more humble, everyday kind of involuntary memory. When the Narrator hears himself say to Andrée on the telephone, 'Are you coming to call for Albertine tomorrow?', a memory sparks of Swann telling him 'Come and see Odette' (*C*, 106; III 607), but this leads only to a brief meditation on proper names on the Narrator's part and has none of the trappings of an incidence of involuntary memory 'proper'. What we learn from these exceptions to the rule, the vivid voluntary memories and the joyless or banal involuntary ones, is that Proust's theorizing on the nature of memory was never intended to be a watertight typology, with the faculty of memory made up of two entirely separate systems and every recollection assigned to one or other of them. Rather, memories can be vivid or lifeless, recall can be unbidden or deliberate, and the strong association of these four possibilities into two couplets does not rule out other combinations, as Proust is careful to demonstrate with the very first example in the text. What does hold true, though, in the novel's view of memory, is that once an experience is beyond the reach of conscious recall, no amount of deliberate searching will ever restore it to life. Only involuntary memory can return the flavour and colour to what we have lost to the darkness.

Proust's theory of memory is unique, but that does not mean it was conjured up out of introspection alone, and much discussion has been made of his possible influences. As discussed elsewhere in this volume, early readers of Proust looked primarily to Henri Bergson

for the source of Proust's ideas, often to the author's dismay. Proust's conception of time is fundamentally different to Bergson's, as Poulet (1963: 9) has discussed, and Proust himself suggested that his distinction between voluntary and involuntary memory was not only absent from Bergson's philosophy but in contradiction to it (Proust 1965: 287). Deleuze sees a passing resemblance between Proust's view of memory and Bergson's, in that both see the experience of memory as an immersion in time past (Deleuze 1964: 73). But when we come to Bergson's fundamental conception of memory, which in his mystical view is the mind's perception of a still-existing past in a manner analogous to the eye's perception of the present, the thoroughly unmystical Proust could not disagree more. For Proust, the mind is the product of the brain, as he states in explicit opposition to Bergson in his notebook (Proust 2008: LIX, 17), which receives our perceptions and either encodes them into memory or fails to do so (*C*, 160; III 653). The novel's one reference to Bergson asserts this materialist view and expresses scepticism towards the idea of memories as anything other than the physical traces of experience in the brain:

> In spite of all that may be said about survival after the destruction of the brain, I observe that each alteration of the brain is a partial death. We possess all our memories, but not the faculty of recalling them, said, echoing M. Bergson, the eminent Norwegian philosopher whose speech I have made no attempt to imitate in order not to slow things down even more. But not the faculty of recalling them. What, then, is a memory which we do not recall? (*SG*, 444; III 374)

Other figures proposed as influential on Proust's view of memory include Saint-Simon (Kristeva 1994 : 229-30), the early psychologist Paul Sollier, in a controversial reading by Edward Bizub (2006), and perhaps most promisingly, the philosopher Elie Rabier, whose work Proust studied as a teenager and who, as Joyce Megay has shown, has a number of ideas on memory in common with Proust.[2] For both, memory has a role in establishing self-identity in an experience that transcends time, allowing a permanent self to exist beyond the everyday experience of discontinuity; like Proust, and unlike Bergson, Rabier also situates memory firmly among the neurons of the brain (Megay 1976: 22, 76).

As well as these links between Proust's representation of memory and theories in circulation as he was writing his novel, *In Search of Lost Time* also displays parallels with ideas on memory that have subsequently come to prominence, including from psychoanalysis (Kristeva 1994: 18-46; Tadié 2012), twentieth-century phenomenology (Richard 1974; Hughes 1983), and twenty-first-century sciences of the mind and brain. Emily Troscianko notes several aspects of Proust's involuntary memory that accord with modern cognitive neuroscience, including that the Narrator's reminiscence and dissatisfaction with the present leave him psychologically primed for such a memory event to occur, and that the literal proximity of the olfactory system with centres of memory and emotion in the brain would seem to account for the scientifically documented potency of odours and flavours in triggering memory, and the emotional intensity of the memories that can result (Troscianko 2013: 442-44). Also of interest is the way that phenomena now categorized under the name of unconscious or nondeclarative memory feature prominently in Proust's novel, even though they were not often considered forms of memory at all at the time of writing. Notable among them is Proustian habit,

presented specifically in the novel in terms of a diminution of the distressing sensory overload caused by unfamiliar environment, such as when the higher ceiling than the Narrator is used to in his Balbec hotel room causes him a series of sleepless nights:

> For a neurotic nature such as mine – one, that is to say, in which the intermediaries, the nerves, perform their functions badly, fail to arrest on its way to the consciousness, allow indeed to reach it, distinct, exhausting, innumerable and distressing, the plaints of the most humble elements of the self which are about to disappear – the anxiety and alarm which I felt as I lay beneath that strange and too lofty ceiling were but the protest of an affection that survived in me for a ceiling that was familiar and low. Doubtless this affection too would disappear, another having taken its place (when death, and then another life, had, in the guise of Habit, performed their double task). (*BG*, 288; II 32)

What Proust presents here as an act of forgetting – the dying of the old self who liked his ceilings low above the bed – is also of course an act of remembering. The new dimensions of the Narrator's bedroom imprint themselves on his mind to become, over time, comfortably familiar instead of strange and disorienting. This habituation to his surroundings is a form of nonassociative learning (Squire and Kandel 2009: 16): repeated exposure to a particular stimulus has modified the Narrator's attitude towards it, and this learning is stored and employed by his memory without conscious control. Habituation, and its counterpart, sensitization (where the repetition of harmful or threatening stimuli leads to *increased*

response) are considered nondeclarative memory, in that they produce changes in attitudes and behaviour without conscious recollection of an image or proposition. They occur in even simple life-forms that are almost certainly devoid of conscious experience, and when they happen to us they must be unravelled after the fact by a process of introspective deduction, as the Narrator embarks on in this case.

Memory is a central concern in itself of *In Search of Lost Time*, but also one that entwines closely with the novel's other major themes of art, love and self, and we should end by establishing its place in the weave. Here again, of central importance is the idea of the essence that Proust associates with involuntary memory. Where artistic creation is concerned, memory is the source of a writer's subject matter in the most banal sense: 'there is not a single gesture of [the writer's] characters, not a trick of behaviour, not a tone of voice which has not been supplied to his inspiration by his memory' (*TR*, 259; IV 478). But true value in art comes from the discovery and communication of essence, and it is for this reason that literature derived from voluntary memory, material found to hand in the recent past or perhaps noted down at the time of experiencing for future use, will never have the power of that derived from the doubly experienced transfiguration of involuntary memory:

> As for the truths which the intellectual faculty – even that of the greatest of minds – gathers in the open, the truths that lie in its path in full daylight, their value may be very great, but they are like drawings with a hard outline and no perspective, they have no depth because no depths have had to be traversed in order to reach them, because they have not been re-created. […] I felt, however, that these truths which the intellect

> educes directly from reality were not altogether to be despised, for they might be able to enshrine within a matter less pure indeed but still imbued with mind those impressions which are conveyed to us outside time by the essences which are common to the sensations of the past and the present, but which, just because they are more precious, are also too rare for a work of art to be constructed exclusively from them. (*TR*, 257-58; IV 477)

Proust's ideal literary work, then, subsidises the essential truths gained from involuntary memory with representations drawn from less exalted forms of memory, but even in these latter it is the generality drawn from comparing repeated instances that is the writer's goal. The writer hones 'a feeling for generality' and 'remembers only things that are general'; he pays attention to people when 'stupid or absurd though they may have been, they have turned themselves, by repeating like parrots what other people of similar character are in the habit of saying, into birds of augury, mouthpieces of a psychological law' (*TR,* 260; IV 479). It is the associative nature of memory, connecting the present to the past or linking past instances to each other, that is at the heart of its artistic value, since it is the interrogation of these associations that brings understanding of the laws and essences of experience that it is the mission of literature to express, and which thus allows Proust's Narrator to reach the paradoxical conclusion that 'reality takes shape in the memory alone' (*SW*, 219; I 182).

The self too is for Proust formed in and from memory. We see the definitive loss of self with age-related memory failings, as with M. d'Argencourt at the final matinée, who in his dementia 'had so far become unlike himself that I had the illusion of being in the presence of a

different person, as gently, as kindly, as inoffensive as the other Argencourt had been hostile, overbearing and dangerous' (*TR*, 288; IV 501), as well as in the last, tragic portrait of Odette, dismissed and humiliated as 'a bit gaga' as she sits alone, bewildered by her surroundings and failing to recognize old friends (*TR,* 325; IV 529). For Proust, though, this is just the most catastrophic manifestation of an everyday phenomenon that attends us all through our lives. 'Since my childhood I had already died many times' (*TR*, 437-38; IV 615) states the Narrator matter-of-factly of the serial selves he perceives within him as his forgotten love for Albertine (in this instance) replaces the person who loved her with someone else, in a process that is so much more than simply a metaphor for death that it convinces the Narrator it is 'the merest folly' (*TR*, 438; IV 615) to fear the end of life itself. But as we know, unlike the irreversible losses of senility, these dead selves are not altogether lost. Things forgotten 'know of secret paths by which to return to us' (*F*, 558; IV, 70), deep-buried sedimentary layers of self can be thrown to the surface by the great emotional earthquakes of our lives (*F*, 622; IV 125), and 'the memory of the most multiple person establishes a sort of identity in him' (*TR* 2, IV 268), seeing to it that the promises made by the former self are fulfilled by its successor. These are the insights the Narrator realizes most fully at the very end of the novel, as the succession of involuntary memories and the sound of the Combray gate-bell still ringing in his mind prove to him that 'there must have been no break in continuity' (*TR*, 450; IV 624), an underlying unity of self for which memory is both the proof and the means.

Proust's conception of memory, then, is founded upon the double experience of involuntary memory that brings together the past and present in a moment of vivid recollection, while unlocking an essence of experience or a law of human nature through the

overlaying of multiple instances. This is distinct, although not rigidly so, from ordinary experience of memory, which retrieves information from our past without bringing that past fully to life. While failures in both kinds of memory lead to blanks and distortions in recall, Proust dwells less on the shortcomings than on the extraordinary potential of this most ordinary of faculties to store up a lifetime of impressions, and to release them to us in an unexpected moment of joy and unity. The findings of his introspection concur with empirical investigations into memory that have come after him, and science's expansion of the concept of memory into non-declarative forms finds a precursor in the Proustian conception of habit. Memory in its involuntary form is seen by Proust as vital in artistic creativity, which deals at its best with the generalities and essences that memory supplies, as well as in countering the dispiriting sense of fragmentation we feel within ourselves as we grow and change through the course of our years. It makes of us 'amphibious creatures who are plunged simultaneously in the past and in the reality of the present' (*F*, 610; IV 114), and even this present reality is composed to a large extent of associations from the past: 'what we call reality is a certain connexion between these immediate sensations and the memories which envelop us simultaneously with them' (*TR*, 246; IV 468). Within us and around us, memory makes up much of the world we perceive, and most of the enduring self that we are. The three trees glimpsed on the road to Hudimesnil may leave the Narrator frustrated as they refuse to give up their secret. They have value nonetheless in affording him the first lesson in his long apprenticeship towards understanding the nature of memory and its pervasive role in our existence.

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[1] See, for instance, *SW*, 65; I 54, where Proust's consistent use of verbs in the imperfect tense, 'répondait Françoise', 'disait Françoise', etc., are rendered in the translation as 'would be the answer' or 'Françoise would say', but a single, highly specific conversation is being narrated.

[2] Bizub's theory is contested by Joshua Landy in Landy 2011.