# The Artist and the Child

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—An exploration of perspective in Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*—

By: Isaac Hoke

"Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein." (Luke 18;17, KJV)

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*In Search of Lost Time* is a difficult book to define. It has been described as a novel, yet lacks the clarity of plot and clear progression that one could find in something more traditional like Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. It is ostensibly not an autobiography, yet its subjects and concerns are so personal and its characters show such a likeness to reality that it is hard not to think of the book as such. The book is less concerned with the "events" surrounding the lives of its characters and far more focused on their interior lives. Characters like Odette de Crecy, the mistress of M. Swann[1], plays a significant part in the events of the novel yet is hardly ever peered into, never explored from her own perspective, yet characters like M. Swann may occupy dozens of pages filled with their passing thoughts or whims. The book is philosophical but not in a systematic way, it is critical but not solely for the purposes of critical analysis. In short, it is complicated, — as all good books are— yet even beyond this, in its complexity it has an unsettling tone, an eerie feeling to it, as if there were looming large behind the screen a very serious and very threatening realization. This is due, above all, to the profoundly personal manner in which the book approaches a question, which is never stated outright, but is implicit in any consideration of memory or time: who am I? And how did I get here?

It is with this question that the book begins: with a grown man, in bed, who has fallen asleep without realising and who awakens in confusion, unsure of where he is or what time has passed. His mind slowly attempts to rearrange his room so as to solve this confusion, to

[1] Monsieur Swann is a friend of the narrator's family and a prominent figure in *In Search of Lost Time*

reconstruct the scene and put everything back in its proper place. Yet the hour of the night, and his own predilection for dreaming, resists him. In this process, he pages through his memories: memories of past abodes, old rooms, places where he has come to visit and fallen asleep accidentally or where he has just woken before supper. As he proceeds through this array of places and persons, trying to remember the place of his current residence, he happens upon a room of special significance: his childhood bedroom in his family's home at Combray. For a brief moment in his mind, he is once again that child listening for his mother's steps on the stairs waiting to receive the goodnight kiss which so defined the cycle of his life at that time. This recollection makes an impression so tangible, so real, that upon waking the narrator says to himself: "Why, I went to sleep in the end even though Mama didn't come to say goodnight to me."[2] (p.6) believing for a moment even in waking life that he was, once again, that nervous little child so dependent on a bedtime ritual.

By force of habit, having fully emerged from his slumber, the narrator is compelled to sit down at his desk, light a candle, and dive once again, waking, into the expanse of his memory, remembering past places and companions and principal moments of his life. These considerations become the first sections of *Swann's Way*, occupied chiefly with the recollection of a boyhood spent in that small hamlet, with certain centers of gravity such as his family's country home and the literal and metaphorical paths emerging from it.

Beyond a desire to begin writing from the beginning, there is a special significance in the fact that the narrator begins his writing with scenes from Combray. First among those is a recollection of his bedroom and his mother. In Combray we encounter a child with a unique

[2] Pg 6 of Lydia Davis's translation of *In Search of Lost Time* (Penguin Edition), this will be the translation that I will refer to during the course of the essay.

nature —a nervousness, a sensitivity, a predilection for seeing the world in an unusual way. Books, companions, buildings and all the natural world was, in the eyes of this child, transfigured, active, and ineffable vessels of truth or beauty that captured all his attention. Here we gain our first insights into an aspiration present in the narrator since his youth, a passionate desire to write and capture the world in language.

If we understand *In Search of Lost Time* to be concerned with memory and its rediscovery, what is there to be found by delving into the memories of a long gone childhood? From the perspective of the narrator's writing desk, where he holds his vigil and recalls to his mind all these past events, we can at least see in his childhood at Combray an origin of his desire to recall and record in writing. From the very beginning, both in behavior and in desire, the child pictured in Combray has a natural disposition for art. This is even stated explicitly by M. Legrandin, a friend of the family, when the child's family encounters him after Sunday Mass. He says to the boy: "You have a lovely soul, of a rare quality, an artist's nature, don't ever let it go without what it needs"(p.69). An artist's nature, which is one that is able to pierce through the surface of things and into the very soul of objects, casting off the assumptions and tricks that persuade us in adult life that things are just "ordinary". In later life, from the writing desk of the sleepless narrator, we can understand this act of looking back as a way of explaining why he feels the need to remember and to write now after all those years have passed.

Yet the question stands: what exactly is the narrator searching for in recalling all of these events of his young life in Combray? What has he lost that now he so desperately wants to regain? To search means that something has been lost; to find again means that that thing was in fact once ours. What precisely it is that the narrator wishes to acquire once again is yet to be

seen, but we can at least observe in Combray a young boy with a heart so profoundly sensitive that it is hard to imagine that heart surviving into adulthood unscathed. It is even more difficult to imagine that great art could be made without it. Here we see a perilous balance that has the potential to be endangered by the progress of time and something which must hold significance as the narrator reflects about the past.

As the book begins by asking the questions "who am I and how did I get here?" in Combray we see these questions considered in greater detail, beginning with the original and unaffected inclinations of a self before it has been altered and corrupted by years. Combray shows us a very careful consideration of a certain state of mind which is more than mere autobiography. In speaking of his later life, the narrator himself admits to the profound impact that a small thing like waiting for his mother had on him. With tears in his eyes, and standing in the hallway of his bedroom for his father's merciful verdict, the narrator writes:

> "It was a very long time ago too, that my father ceased to be able to say to Mama: 'Go with the boy.' The possibility of such hours will never be reborn for me. But for a little while now, I have begun to hear again very clearly, if I take care to listen, the sobs that I was strong enough to contain in front of my father and that broke out only when I found myself alone again with Mama. They have never really stopped; and it is only because life is now becoming quieter around me that I can hear them again, like those convent bells covered so well by the clamor of the town that one would think that they had ceased altogether but which begin sounding again in the silence of the evening." (p.38)

The impressions of childhood, resounding through the narrator's life, have now come to revisit him in quiet solitude. In encountering the quiet and being once again capable of hearing these things, the narrator is now able to acquire a deeper knowledge of self, to rediscover aspects of his person that he had forgotten and which form the substance of what we see in "Combray". That nervous, sensitive child is the original lens through which we are able to see into the heart of our narrator. This becomes the defining context through which we see him in later life.

1. A Kiss and a Madeleine

At the age in which we first encounter the child, the nightly drama of his bedtime ritual and it's stage, his bedroom, are the entirety of Combray. That home and the cyclical motions which occurred within it, were for that young boy an entire world. Looking back, he recalls very little of the rest of the town. For the young boy it was " as though Combray consisted of two floors connected by a slender staircase and as though it had always been seven o'clock in the evening there"(p.44). This sphere is limited, but we should not be mistaken in calling it "small". What the place lacks in physical dimension it makes up in emotional significance and interior depth. The importance of what nightly took place there has for the child crystallized into the very floorboards and scent of that slender hallway and room. His room is as expansive as he is. In his eyes that bedroom was an extension of his own person; it was both externally and internally his own. Here we can witness that drama taking place in a setting which is at once his bedroom and his own heart. That room, with its canopied bed and its mantle of Siena marble over the fireplace, affords us the first glimpses into the child's fascination with artifice. In the comfortable womb of his bedroom, fashioned together out of rougher material by habit, there is a magic lamp of bohemian glass which provides the child's first interaction with art. The lantern, representing the tale of Golo and Genevieve (characters in a Merovingian myth), and staining the walls with the colors and tints of the glass, transfigures the room in a way that is deeply unsettling for the child. The stained glass characters of the lamp take the mundane material of the room and strip it of its habitual character. The mantlepiece, bed, door —the entire expanse of the room is transformed and integrated in the work of art, robbing it of any capacity it would have for

comfort. When we see the connection that the child shares with his room, comfort becomes of the utmost importance. The child feels the room as an extension of himself and the intrusion of art disturbs its essential order.

> "I cannot express the uneasiness caused in me by this intrusion of mystery and beauty into a room that I had at last filled with myself to the point of paying no more attention to the room as to that self." (p.10)

Beauty threatens as change threatens, especially when it is able to touch our hearts. The sensitivity that the child feels for such things only amplifies his disturbance, turning that transfigurative piece of art into a threat to his very person.

We can see repeated again in a simple bedtime ritual, the same serious, almost existential, need for ritual and habit in the child. As a young boy our narrator's mother would come up to his room as he was about to sleep and give him a goodnight kiss; a kiss that he, in his nervous agitation began to rely upon. He required it not only in order to sleep, but also felt it to be an essential necessity in the cycle of his daily life. When he did not receive the kiss, perhaps because of an early bedtime or his parents being predisposed by a guest, he would be heartbroken, despondent. The scene in which we first witness this nightly drama begins with the introduction of an antagonist: M. Swann. Swann's presence (although unknown to Swann himself) poses a threat to the safety and comfort that the child craves. His entrance into the home with the promise of a pleasant evening with the child's parents, has a sinister pallor in the eyes of the poor boy. Because M. Swann has so graciously decided to call on his family, the child is not allowed to participate in the family scene. His age —which also causes this rule to have a terrible significance— excludes him from the refined activities of adults. Instead, by order of his "dictatorial" father, he has to ascend the stairs before his time, "climbing against my heart which wanted to go back to my mother because she had not, by kissing me, given it license to go with

me"(p.28). As he ascends the stairs he is assailed on every side by sensations which crystalize and transfigure his grief into something unintelligible, the scent of the varnish, the creak of the stairs, strike his sense and become the very essence of grief.

The child is not simply upset over not having his way or not receiving what he has become accustomed to receive. For the boy this kiss is of the utmost importance, and to go without it is a torment. Hoping to be able to snatch that kiss in public before he is ordered to bed, he chooses the precise place on his mother's cheek where he would place his kiss, readying his heart to receive every last morsel of an experience that must sustain him through the length of the night. When the proposal of his grandfather enters his ear: "the boy looks tired, he ought to go up to bed"(p.27) and is seconded by a damning verdict from his father: "Yes, go on now, up to bed with you."(p.28) All hope is lost. A final vain attempt from the child to place that longed for kiss is quickly rebuked, and, without hope, without blessing, and without the sacred article which was for him the only source of life, he must ascend. Or rather descend, for all that the child has to hope for in this moment is one more hellish night without comfort.

In the eyes of the child, this series of events expands beyond the scale of a simple country home and into a realm of epic or biblical proportions. The child is caused to view this drama as on par with those given to us by ancient voices and great poets. Surrounding and embedded into this scene are numerous references to sacraments, holy mysteries, and Abrahamic figures, which must transform our understanding of this passage into so much more than the nervous need of a child for what is habitual. The narrator describes himself as departing from the table "without my viaticum" (p.28) viaticum being the last rites performed for a dying man. Francoise's[3] devotion

[3] The family's chambermaid, a frequently recurring character of the *Combray* Section.

to etiquette is compared to ancient (and apparently arbitrary) laws of Moses, his father, in his nightshirt and cashmere shawl draped over his head resembles Abraham in a painting by Gozzoli. Looking up from below, those who hold dominion over him have a biblical character, carrying with it all the connotations of divine authority. The goodnight kiss is to the child an event of serious divine import; the ritual is sacred, its offering is salvific, and its disruption is a blasphemous violation. The defining conflict of this scene has been transformed into one of the most ancient and original in human experience, the struggle between life and death, salvation and damnation.

This opening section and its expanded drama is our first introduction to the soul and character of our narrator. We are able for a brief time to look through the eyes of a child in order to understand more deeply the nature of the whole person. In particular we understand through this section the predilection that the child has for looking into seemingly mundane objects and events and perceiving beneath the surface something deeper and more meaningful. We see this same capacity applied in one of *In Search of Lost Time's* most famous passages, the often referenced "Madeleine Scene".

The scene begins with the narrator journeying with his mother by carriage, presumably in Combray. In the midst of the carriage ride the narrator is offered by his mother a small piece of madeleine[4] dipped in a concoction of tea. Although the narrator typically does not indulge in sweets of that type and despite the quite ordinary nature of the pastry and tea the moment the crumps of the madeleine touched his lips he is filled with an overwhelming and absolute pleasure. The sensation which fills his body is not simply the pleasure one would associate with

[4] A pastry often shaped like a scallop's shell.

delicious foods, it is deeper, more profound, and as the narrator attempts to interrogate the sensation's origins it flees from him, every subsequent taste of the pastry is less and less pleasurable until he finds himself chasing something which refuses to return to him. Of the sensation the narrator writes:

> "A delicious pleasure had invaded me, isolated me, without my having any notion as to its cause. It had immediately rendered all the vicissitudes of life unimportant to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory, acting in the same way that love acts, by filling me with a precious essence: or rather this essence was not merely inside me, it was me." (p.45)

The rapturous state in which the narrator is left is one which progresses beyond a sensation of pleasure. This experience, blossoming out of his sense yet simultaneously emerging out of his own heart, places him for a brief moment in a state at once new and old. To be for a moment unaffected, uncaring of the grander consequences of adult life, to be momentarily freed from its enemies and worries, is in many ways to return not temporally, but emotionally back to childhood.

It is then no surprise that when the narrator has finally unearthed the source of this sensation, he finds that what sparked the whole event was in fact a memory of childhood. This surprising discovery adds a curious element to the experience previously described. If what the narrator felt was simply original or new, we could name as its culprit a sensitivity of soul or perhaps, blind chance. Yet the fact that this emerges from a childhood past brings us to wonder how the memory had been lost and why it was"refound" in such a dramatic fashion? Why would a memory of the past affect someone in this way? And if so many other events and recollections cascade out of this scene, does its origin in memory affect how we must look at it?

The conflict present in this scene is perhaps even more relevant for our inquiry than what we saw with the goodnight kiss. Here we are able to see the elevated and transformative capacity

of the heart of the narrator, and here we are presented with not only a problem but also the process of resolution that the narrator pursues in order to hunt down the origin of his rapture. At the very beginning of his search, the narrator writes:

> "I put down the cup and turn to my mind. It is up to my mind to find the truth. But how? Such grave uncertainty, whenever the mind feels overtaken by itself; when it, the seeker, is also the obscure country where it must seek all its baggage will be nothing to it. Seek? Not only that: create. It is face-to-face with something that does not yet exist and that only it can accomplish, then bring into its light."(p.46)

This is not some futile attempt to regain a pleasure that has already passed. This is also not a simple act of remembrance. This is a project, a creation, and in the mind of the narrator the act of traversing the interior is necessarily a search and a production. In the simultaneous act of seeking and creating the narrator has arrived at a memory, something which is both past and present, lost to time yet still reverberating through the heart of the man who experienced it. In refinding a lost piece of his past, he finds a lost piece of himself, incorporating it into himself to create a man which is either entirely new or long forgotten. When we are told that the sobs of his childhood are echoing through his past into his present life, we know now that in the quiet of his room this same process is occuring, of regaining what has been lost or neglected due to convention, laziness or fear.

2. <u>The Power of the Senses and the Soul of Things</u>

To be able to see the world with interest, with freshness, with an almost naive receptivity that renders every sensation meaningful, is a power found in only a few blessed souls. To be able to sense, to touch, hear, smell and taste in a way that is not only attentive but entrancing is

something only reserved for those who have devoted themselves to cultivating sensitivity. A delicate palate and an open heart must be above all the essential tools of an artist. To be able to fully and sincerely experience beauty in the world and then undergo the effort of capturing it and transporting it into a medium unaltered —this is the difficult task that artists have before them. Yet even with this, before the capture or translation into something sensible (like a painting or a book) there must be the ability to find that beauty, to see through all of the layers of assumption and banality in the world and peer into the very soul of a thing. After this is possible and after this has been accomplished, only then can someone concern themselves with extracting that beauty and sharing it in art; first it must be found, it must be felt. The young boy that we meet in Combray has this ability — and perhaps all children do — to sense not only significance but existential import in the world around him. In the eyes of this youth the world is fresh and its impressions are a means to discover essential elements of truth in the material world.

Objects, buildings, and places for this young lad are not simply material things, they have an ability to affect him as a living person, they have their own souls: *animas* which enable them to have a significant and active presence not only in his life, but also generally. A prominent and moving example presented to us early on in the book is the church of St. Hilaire in the center of Combray, an ancient Gothic church, which to an unfeeling eye, may appear crude or typical of its period, to the child it has a resounding and meaningful voice. With the church we are also able to see a unique example of the upbringing of the child, in particular the way his grandmother pushes him to experience the world differently, which in turn shapes the church into a meaningful figure for him and his family's life in Combray. Perhaps in the same light as the young boy, when his grandmother looks up at that church she feels a connection which is not

simply an emotional attachment to a place: it is to the building itself as if it were a character in her life. Although her sentimentality may become an object of ridicule from her sisters, we can see it in full bloom when she journeys past the church with our young narrator. To him and to their family she has this to say: “My children make fun of me if you like, perhaps it isn’t beautiful according to the rules, but I like its strange old face. I’m sure that if it could play the piano it would not play *dryly”*(p.65). The church to her is less of a place and more an individual, capable of its own actions and having the same depth and interest that a person would have, perhaps even more. Under this tutelage the child is also able to look at that ponderous building with a feeling of significance, understanding it as if it were alive and speaking to him in a language which perhaps only he and his grandmother can understand. The child senses the “thoughtfulness” imbued in it which separates it from other things; when he enters the church he feels as if he were entering both into the heart of some ancient creature and into a place which has transcended the passage of time.

With a sense of wonder for the otherworldly shapes and colors descending from the stained glass and a sense of reverence for the mysterious rituals conducted therein, the child senses the very soul of the church whenever he and his family visit it for Sunday Mass. In passing through the threshold of that ancient building, the child is at once presented with a spectrum of color shining out of the windows, which were fashioned in colored glass to model certain events from Combray’s epic history. Among them is a figure from the same Merogvingian legend featured in his bedroom’s own magic lamp, Genevieve; her presence is enough to convince the child that despite the rules of sense and propriety that govern adult life, he has in fact entered into that ancient time. That same stained glass, in the light of gloomy

late-winter day, transforms, or more accurately transfigures, the banal objects and normal people occupying the space. Delicate pinks, blues and greens smile on the worn stones and faces of the worshippers. Fields of fragile and immaterial forget-me-nots and mountains of pink snow find their places in hidden nooks and crannies and ephemeral sapphires press themselves into the stones as if set into the breastplate of some ancient king. Midst all these flashing colors and set in the center of the church, flanking the altar with their delicate whites and alluring scent are bouquets of hawthorns. These flowers set in devotion to the month of Mary, carry with them and fill that stony cavern with perfume and a premonition of spring. These flowers both embellish the interior of the church and form a connection to another fascinating moment of sense experience that we witness with the young boy.

Emerging out of the family's garden at the rear of their home are two pathways, the Meseglise Way and Swann's Way. These names also feature as the titles of two separate volumes of *In Search of Lost Time* and are representative of certain paths of life which the narrator takes. At the end of Swann's way, winding alongside a gentle stream and over bridges, you will find the park of Swann's estate. At the beginning of spring, once the frosts of Normandy have broken and leaves begin to bud, the section of path which weaves through Swann's estate is studded with those same flowers that we found in the church, hawthorns, framing on each side the garden path. On one fateful evening the family journeys out for a walk along this same path, arriving at Swann's Park and encountering those precious flowers. The narrator has this to say:

> "But though I remain there in front of the hawthorns, breathing in, bringing into the presence of my thoughts, which did not know what to do with it, then losing and finding again their invisible and unchanging smell, absorbing myself in the rhythm that tossed their flowers here and there with youthful high spirits and at unexpected intervals like certain intervals in music, they offered me the same charm endlessly and with an inexhaustible profusion, but without letting me study it more deeply, like the melodies you replay a hundred times in succession without descending further into their secrets."(p.141)

The scent of those bunches of flowers draws the child into a state of pure sense experience: into a realm where smell and sight transcend any rational or analytic faculties. Beauty and sensation are the only ruling powers here. Yet, despite this, the child persists in reaching further, in delving into what precisely it was in the hawthorns that captivated him so, unable either to name what was so delightful in the flowers, or precisely what emotion they aroused in him. The charm presented to his senses remains obscured behind a stubborn veil. Here we can see well reflected the same inquiries and preoccupations that framed the madeleine scene. We see our speaker confronted with an overpowering pleasure and intrigued by its cause, desperate to capture and understand that hidden thing within his own heart stirred up by some chance occurrence in the natural world.

With the narrator and the madeleines, it is with his sensitivity to the natural world and its pleasures that he shows reveals a desire to grasp at the hidden truth lying behind such things, to move beyond experience and into a sort of knowledge. The object of the child is not to *dissect* the objects in front of him, but rather to find a means to preserve them in bloom, to retain them, and their pleasures, and their beauty, in his heart. When confronted with the profundity of his experience his first instinct is to begin questioning. He begins to interrogate the objects of his senses, performing a sort of dual inquiry, with his focus directed both externally and internally, asking questions both of the object and of himself. In opening himself up to sensation, our narrator is testing a device with which to map the interior of his heart and better grasp the landscape of his own mind. Making here the first attempts we see of acquiring self knowledge. Hence we can understand why these seemingly trifling events have such grave importance for

our narrator: for him all the world, all of its beauty and pleasures, is a key with which to gain the greatest treasure, knowledge of self and ability in art.

Yet despite the noble intentions and passions we see present in the narrator even from his youth, we can also observe in these passages a serious and ever present problem, the passage of time. However sincere these experiences may be, however powerful their initial effect, the passage of time and the compounding of further events seems always to weaken whatever grand conclusion would have emerged out of them. Even with the madeleine scene we can immediately observe this conflict. Not even a moment after the narrator has felt that profound pleasure from his cup that he begins to chase it, to taste his tea again and again, first finding nothing more and then feeling his pleasure diminish. The unassailable truth that all pleasure fades and nothing lasts poses an existential threat to the project of capturing experience and drawing truth from it. Even with the hawthorns, though the child is preoccupied with their color and scent, and before his search for meaning in the flowers can be brought to fruition, he is distracted. Swann's daughter, Gilberte, enters the scene, and whatever the boy was undertaking before is left behind to pursue his thoughts of her. Once she is gone and he tries to return to the flowers, time has diminished their power and rendered further search futile.

Yet, despite these difficulties, we can observe another outlet that the boy finds for these passions: reading and writing. His first travails into literature and the landscape of the written word usher in a new age and a new avenue through which to pursue these noble intentions. The atemporality of the written world and the power of literary fiction is another more secure place in which this same passion can find a foothold. With the writing of the likes of Stendhal or Sand

and particularly Bergotte[5] the young narrator is able to finally see what it means to capture the beautiful, and to display it in full color.

3. Bergotte and the Truth of Fiction

To believe as a child does is a task which grows in difficulty as we age. Although we consider a belief in the Tooth Fairy to be juvenile and worth growing out of, often we fail to recognise that the innocence (or naivete) which produces that belief is also what enables beliefs in more powerful things. The child that we meet in Combray, from the very beginning, has a sincere and voracious interest in literature. Every author cited to him and every book recommended for his reading is treated as an arbiter and vessel of some profound, original truth. Those that are studied in literature and who provide the boy with material to read are seen as sages, prophets who have the means to initiate him in what he sees at the most holy of mysteries. A belief in the power of writing, the truth in literature and the sanctity of the written word, transforms what the child reads into an elevated and deeply personal experience.

> "What was first in me, innermost, the constantly moving handle which controlled all the rest, was my belief in the philosophical richness and the beauty of the book that I was reading, and my desire to appropriate them for myself, whatever that book might be.... the fact was that I had recognized it as having been mentioned to me as a remarkable work by the teacher or friend who appeared to me at that period to hold the secret of the truth and beauty half sensed, half incomprehensible, the knowledge of which was the goal, vague but permanent, of my thoughts." (p.86)

This belief is indiscriminate, it is unshakeable, and it is admirable in the way that we can only ever admire things that we wish we ourselves had.

[5] A fictional author, perhaps modeled after Anatole France.

To believe —to *really* believe— in the power of writing, is something that is sadly all too rare. We encounter in Combray (and perhaps also in our own lives) so many that may have a penchant for literature because of its power to entertain or even out of a more vague devotion to culture, but we meet so few that look at such books as truly precious. In a very similar way as to how we were guided to look at the church of St. Hilaire, the novels that the child acquires are not mere repositories of facts or a few hours diversion, they are living, breathing edificies which contain anything and all that that child desires. Just as the church was to so many others just a strange old relic from a lost age, to the boy it was an animated active creature. Even when considering the characters of the novels that that boy was so fond of, he goes so far as to look past their fictional exterior and sees into the living and profound world which they both resided in and represented. While Francoise, the family's maid, may make distinctions between the "real" people present in one's life, and the "fictional" characters of a novel, the boy abhors any such division. In fact, in the eyes of the young narrator there is in fictional characters a capacity to delve into the clear, unadulterated truth of a life that is simply not possible in the living world.

> "A real human being, however profoundly we sympathize with him, is in large part perceived by our senses, that is to say, remains opaque to us, presents a dead weight which our sensibility cannot lift… The novelist's happy discovery was to have the idea of replacing these parts impenetrable to the soul, by an equal quantity of immaterial parts, that is to say, parts which our soul can assimilate. What does it matter thenceforth if the actions, and the emotions, of this new order of creature seem to us true, since we have made them ours, since it is within us that they occur, that they hold within their control, as we feverishly turn the pages of the book, the rapidity of our breathing and the intensity of our gaze."(p.86-7)

To the narrator, there is no difference between the real and the unreal, between fact and fiction. There is merely a divide between the external and the internal. Only the internal can have a full and potent impact on the individual. When we regard the external we must employ our empathy, use our imagination and we can only ever sympathize with a shadow of what is presented to us.

This perspective even forces us to reconsider how we understand his "belief" in the truth of writing and fiction; it is not simply a faith in the power of writing to describe, fiction is the language of the heart, the only key to the interior.

This does not only apply to people. Within this belief we see a similar devotion and interest in the description of places and times which he encounters in his reading. The young boy begins to see and imagine far away cities and realms through the lens of what he has read and to apply those prosaic and beautiful sentences he encounters to shape his understanding of the far off world. Under the tutelage of Stendhal or Bergotte, places like Balbec, Parma, Venice, all transform from what they are in reality to what they have been shaped to be through these novels. To visit these places would be for the boy as if he were stepping either into their books or into their very hearts; to enter a place and see it as they would, transformed through a revealed and beautiful truth accessible only by the heart of an artist. He says himself that "If my parents had allowed me, when I was reading a book, to go visit the region described, I would have believed that I was taking an invaluable step forward in the conquest of truth."(p.88) When presented with an opportunity to actually visit these places the young narrator readies his heart as if he were about to undertake a life-changing pilgrimage, that is, until his heart's desire is thwarted by his own ill health.

Of all the authors mentioned in the Combray section, Bergotte stands above them all by how deeply he has affected the young bookworm. His writing has the gravity of gospel, his perspective is the object of envy and admiration; above all else the child wishes to experience the world through the eyes of this man.

> "Unfortunately, concerning almost everything in the world I did not know what his opinion was. I did not doubt that it was entirely different from my own, since it came down from an unknown world toward which I was trying to rise: persuaded that my thoughts would have looked like pure ineptitude to

> that perfect mind, I had made such a clean sweep of them all that, when by chance I happened to encounter in one of his books a thought that I had already had myself, my heart would swell as though a god in his goodness had given it back to me, had declared it legitimate and beautiful."(p.98)

In cherishing Bergotte the child demonstrates first a devotion to beautiful prose that extends beyond a healthy appreciation and secondly a veneration for the perspectives of an artist, a desire first and foremost to somehow acquire or model the way that Bergotte is able to sense the world, for this would be a path to truth. In this desire to imitate and gain the perspective of an artist we see a natural transition to desiring to become a writer himself and making his own first trials in the art of prose.

This desire to become a writer is a natural development from what we encountered in the previous section. Prose is a means of translating the rapturous experiences that the child so cherishes and savors into an object of beauty, to be preserved and beheld by anyone. By means of the artful sentence, the shape of language and those components of fiction which can pierce to the very heart of sympathy, the young narrator can capture, preserve and dive into the very nature of those beautiful objects that so puzzled him before. In his trials before, his attempts to search into the natural world to discover their substance were conducted entirely within himself. It was merely the application of his mind against some hidden thing which fled him at every turn. Now, finally, he has found the means by which to crystallize, to capture and keep for himself that which so evaded him before.

In the midst of  a family walk down the Guermantes way, whilst the young lad journeys behind his family soaking in all that he can see around him, the rocks, the streams,  and crystallizing it in his heart in prose, the family is caught by the setting sun, already quite a ways away from home. By chance they happen upon a friend of theirs in his carriage, and along the ride home the boy reflects on the experiences of the evening, the natural beauty and graceful

architecture of the countryside, and begins what we see as his first piece of writing: a brief description of the steeples of the neighboring town churches chasing their carriage and fading into the distance. Although seemingly insignificant on their own this small piece of writing represents the first attempt at materializing something that the narrator feels inborn in him, a passion which emerges both out of the sensitivity of youth and out of a sincere and desperate desire for knowledge. To be an artist is this child's dream, and although it may seem almost a necessary product of his nature the belief that this young boy has is paramount to being able to preserve and act upon this dream, for without a belief in the beautiful, all else is for nothing.

4. The Artist and the Child

So why is it that we have spent so much time dwelling on the passing feelings and whims of some nervous little boy? That the child is remarkable is of no question, yet there remains in this account of boyhood a persistent, bothersome question: why is it that the narrator has gone into such great detail? Why is it that that memory of his boyhood drew him to his writing desk and sent him diving once again into days long gone? That the narrator is persisting in his boyhood hope of reflective writing is obvious, but how precisely did he get there? Why is it that his nights are now filled with scribbling and waxing poetic on what in other eyes would seem inconsequential? We know that we, and the narrator, are still in the midst of our search, but a search for what?

In the previous sections we saw numerous events in which the normal, mundane world was transformed by the naive yet complex heart of the child. In these scenes we see a

compendium of driving inclinations and desires, a thirst for truth, a hunger for beauty. But, in the midst of all of this, we know that these are only the scenes of an earlier time in life, before those lofty appetites and curiosities were ever checked by the demands of prudence or obligation in adult life. Throughout *Swann's Way* we see no examples of a character who has been able to sustain this perspective into adulthood. The perspective of the young boy is in fact at odds with how the adults in his life see the world. The state of mind that the child has is precious, but difficult to maintain, even more difficult when assailed on all sides by the demands of the world.

When we look to the grown man ( that is, the narrator in later life) we find someone that would be almost unrecognizable compared to the young boy that we considered before. That man, (whom we meet in *Place-Names: The Name* a later section of this first volume) is tired, disillusioned, unimpressed by the world he has grown into. In short, he has lost every fragment of freshness and life which the child had in excess. When we meet him, in the "Bois de Boulogne"[6], he is equally concerned with that precious "belief" that we saw in the child —a belief in the tangible reality of beauty or truth— yet now he is preoccupied with its loss rather than its presence.

> "I no longer had any belief to infuse into all these new elements of the spectacle, to give them substance, unity, life; they went past scattered before me, randomly, without reality, containing in themselves no beauty that my eyes might have tried, as they had in earlier times, to form into a composition. These were ordinary women, in whose elegance I had no faith and whose dress seemed to me unimportant. But when a belief disappears, there survives it -more and more vigorous so as to mask a power we have lost to give reality to new things—a fetishistic attachment to the old things which our belief once animated, as if it were in them and not in us that the divine resided and as if our present lack of belief had a contingent cause: the death of the Gods." (p.442)

What he was seems all but lost. In the disillusioning light of middle-age the narrator no longer feels the draw to capture and imitate what beauty he senses in the world. He has even lost the

[6] A park in Paris, presumably at this time the narrator is nearing middle-age.

means with which to sense it. And with the ability to see the freshness in the world so has gone any ability or desire to write. The things that he sees around him now are desperately uninspiring, the women he sees are ordinary, their clothing drab. All that is left for him is a vague and inexplicable attachment to things past and a sense of loss.

Compared to the boy that preceded him and the older man at the desk that succeeds him, this man in the park is in a pitiful state. Having lost any need or desire to write and every fragment of belief this man is in the very depths of insensibility. By viewing the narrator in this despondent state we are able to discover the true importance of what he has lost. Without the sensitivity he had before, without a belief in the existence of beauty the narrator's life has gone astray, lost its path. A belief in tangible beauty is the only thing which can lend any meaning to the act of writing, without it the narrator feels no draw, no push to compose. There is no need to capture the world in writing for the world is now no longer worth the trouble.

If the narrator is going to regain color in his life, if he is going to regain that faith so suddenly lost, he has to find a way to rediscover the passion and the openness of his boyhood. Yet where to begin? For such a thing certainly can never be found in the world and to search inside oneself is a tricky thing. To be able to write with vulnerability and sincerity that perspective must be found again, but how? Can innocence be regained? Can passion? If the narrator were to traverse the landscape of his inner self and mapped each and every corner of his mind, perhaps in some long forgotten nook he could find some faded remnant of what once was and revive it. The sleepless man that we meet at his writing desk is diving into the depths of his childhood and into himself, but to what end? Merely to relive the events of the past, to regain boyhood by isolating himself in its memories? God forbid, in the search for what has been lost, it

is not sufficient to regress, to return to what was. Instead, in searching for the past the narrator must find a means to incorporate what was, into what is. The memory of his boyhood must exist as a memory, but its echo has the power to reform the person that has grown out of those events into a more complete man. One that has recaptured that elusive belief and grafted it into the maturity and experience that is finally capable of creating what the boy dreamed of: great art.

The man that we meet at the writing desk is from the tight confines of his bedroom undertaking a grand expedition. He is delving into the very depths of himself, both creating and discovering simultaneously in the expanse of his heart. Creating, for he is crafting both a story and a person, making himself whole again by means of a search for self knowledge. Discovering, because what is to be found in looking back is suddenly transformed by who he is at the moment, constantly unfolding into something new which again shapes the man undertaking the search. The landscape of the mind is not easy ground to traverse, it is treacherous and paradoxical, one is confronted constantly by the conflict between self and other. When the narrator seeks to refind himself he attempts a contradictory act. He is, in a way, already what he is looking for, yet somehow something else entirely.

This is the task of the artist: to reveal the world as it truly is, to turn what we in our folly see as ordinary into something transfigured, fresh, surprising. His aim is to find the very soul of things, to pierce through assumption and conceit and reveal the true character of the world around us. This is what Proust accomplishes in such florid and captivating detail. His winding sentences and musical prose faces the reader with a reality that is far truer than their own. The narrator of his great accomplishment is an artist as well, an artist in two senses, crafting both a story and a man. From the heights of his writing desk, the narrator wields the power of

recollection to invoke what was, recalling what has passed with the true spirit of an artist, with the true heart of a child. And from that same desk, in the act of remembrance he is able to finally hear the calls which herald from long distant memories. He is able to feel and sense and find again what once was, allowing them to become pieces of himself again, rebuilding from the rubble, himself, refound.