

Community, Communication and Multiplicity in Proust

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Abstract The essay examines the relation between the explicit aesthetic ideology of Proust's *Recherche* and the structure of the "involuntary memory" that is supposed to serve as that ideology's empirical basis. I challenge the apparent solipsism and idealism of the narrator's aesthetics by focusing on the one experience of involuntary memory that he omits from his final reflections, in *Time Regained*, on the relation between memory and art: this is the involuntary memory, in the earlier volume *Sodom and Gomorrah*, of his dead grandmother, a memory that he describes there as an experience of true otherness. Through a close reading of this passage, I argue that Proust's interest in involuntary memory implies a concept of literary art as above all ethical in nature, in so far as it is the only means by which individuals can emerge from the solitude to which they are otherwise existentially condemned. In both the *Sodom and Gomorrah* passage and a later passage from *Time Regained* this emergence is cast in terms of a rhetoric of multiplicity that emphasizes both the disturbing and the productive dimensions connecting literature with life.

Keywords Proust · Memory · Art · Literature · Community · Multiplicity · Ethics · Mourning · Time

What could Marcel Proust's philosophical novel *A la recherche du temps perdu* have to teach us about the relation between ethics and literature? After all, and as many theorists have noted in various ways, the *Recherche* presents what could be called an epic solipsism. The novel amounts to a massive expression of the psychological development of an ultimately isolated observer, whose completion occurs in terms of an aesthetics based on the hero's experience of an escape from time and death – an experience, one might say, of pure subjectivity. The narrator himself alludes to this aesthetic solipsism throughout the work, as for example in the final volume *Time*

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Regained, where he explains that the artist has no time for friends, since conversing with friends is like talking to furniture that one believes is alive:

The artist who gives up one hour to chat with a friend knows that he sacrifices one reality for something that does not exist (friends being friends only account of the sweet folly that accompanies us through life and to which we readily lend ourselves, but which at the bottom of our hearts we know to be the error of a madman who would converse with the furniture around him on account of his belief that it lives.¹

The French narratologist Gérard Genette has described this solipsism in terms of an “invasion” of the story proper by the narrator’s philosophical commentaries, an invasion of what he calls the narrator’s testimonial function by his ideological one. According to Genette, the historical novelty of Proust’s work in fact lies in its conversion of the testimonial “I” into an ideological “we,” that is, in the way in which Proust presents “the Truth” based on a story about himself. Thus, in *Figures III* Genette writes the following:

All humanity, from Bergotte to Françoise and from Charlus to Mme. Sazerat, stands before [the narrator] like “nature,” charged with provoking thought, not expressing it. An extreme case of intellectual solipsism... The consequence is that no one, except the hero under certain conditions, is allowed to contest the narrator’s privileged ideological commentary... The quantitative and qualitative importance of this psychological, historical, aesthetic, metaphysical discourse is such that... one can undoubtedly attribute to it the responsibility – and in one sense the credit – for the strongest shock (*ébranlement*) given in this work, and by this work, to the traditional equilibrium of novelistic form: if the *Recherche du temps perdu* is experienced by everyone as being “not completely a novel any more” and as the work that... concludes the history of the genre (and of genres *per se*) and, along with some others, inaugurates the limitless, indefinite space of modern *literature*, the cause is obviously... this invasion of the story by the commentary, of the novel by the essay, of the narrative by its own discourse.²

The culmination of this invasion of narrative by discourse occurs in the final volume, where the narrator claims to produce a coherent, aesthetic theory based on solving the mystery of the involuntary memories by which he himself has been assaulted or “shocked” throughout his life. On his way to a ball at the ancient, aristocratic Guermantes family – a ball at which he eventually will be shocked to find a new world created by the early 20th century invasion of the aristocratic class by the bourgeoisie – Marcel stumbles on some uneven cobblestones in order to evade an oncoming car. The physical action of stumbling on the cobblestones suddenly brings to mind the world of an earlier trip to Venice, where he had

¹ “L’artiste qui renonce à une heure de travail pour une heure de causerie avec un ami sait qu’il sacrifie une réalité pour quelque chose qui n’existe pas (les amis n’étant des amis que dans cette douce folie que nous avons au cours de la vie, à laquelle nous nous prêtons, mais que du fond de notre intelligence nous savons l’erreur d’un fou qui croirait que les meubles vivent et causerait avec eux),” Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1989) v. 4. 454. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

² Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972) 264–265.

experienced the same misstep. This leads to a series of other, similarly structured involuntary memories experienced by Marcel while he waits in the Guermantes' library for the musical performance inside to end – the sound of a spoon recalls an earlier train ride, a starched napkin recalls the seaside town of Balbec, the discovery of a certain book recalls his childhood in the small town of Combray. The narrator concludes that the differences between these memories are “purely material,” and that they all share an essential experience of ecstasy, which he proceeds to analyze. He attributes his feelings of joy to an experience of a temporality: by experiencing past and present simultaneously, in involuntary memory – and here comes the ideological “we” – we are set free from time and all of the anguish associated with it:

Suddenly the permanent and habitually concealed essence of things becomes liberated, and our true self... is awakened and comes to life... A minute set free from the order of time has recreated in us, to feel it, man freed from the order of time. And one can understand that this man should have confidence in his joy: even if the simple taste of a madeleine does not seem to contain logically the reasons for that joy, one can understand that the word “death” has no meaning for him; situated outside of time, what could he fear about the future?³

Although the narrator at first proceeds to acknowledge the fleeting nature of this experience – it “does not last for long,” and is a “kind of optical illusion” – he soon sets about determining a way to recapture and preserve it. He does so, as is well known by readers of the *Recherche*, by detecting the role played by the trope of analogy in his description of “man freed from the order of time.” In other words, the simultaneous experience of past and present is not described in terms of contradiction – as it is elsewhere in the novel – but in terms of the analogous relation between a past self and a present self, or a past set of cobblestones and a present set. The narrator explains: “[That extra-temporal] being [that I had been at that moment] had never come to me, had never become manifest, except outside of action, outside of immediate joy, each time that the *miracle of an analogy* had made me escape from the present.”⁴ This recognition of analogy's role within the experience of involuntary memory and its manifestation of an essential self, then turns out to be the key to solving the problem of how to prolong the momentary ecstasy it affords: “... This contemplation of the essence of things, I had now decided to attach myself to it, to fix it, but how, by what means was I do to this?”⁵ A few pages later: “Now this means [of fixing it], which seemed to me the only one available, was it anything else than the production of a work of art?”⁶ In this way

³ “Ausstôt l'essence permanente et habituellement cachée des choses se trouve libérée, et notre vrai moi... s'éveille, s'anime... Une minute affranchie de l'ordre du temps a recréé en nous pour la sentir l'homme affranchi de l'ordre du temps. Et celui-là, on comprend qu'il soit confiant dans sa joie, même si le simple gout d'une madeleine ne semble pas contenir logiquement les raisons de cette joie, on comprend que le mot de 'mort' n'ait pas de sens pour lui; situé hors du temps, que pourrait-il craindre de l'avenir?” (4.451).

⁴ “Cet être-là n'était jamais venu à moi, ne s'était jamais manifesté, qu'en dehors de l'action, de la jouissance immédiate, chaque fois que le *miracle d'une analogie* m'avait fait échapper au présent” (4.450, emphasis added).

⁵ “Cette contemplation de l'essence des choses, j'étais maintenant décidé à m'attacher à elle, à la fixer, mais comment? Par quel moyen?” (4.454).

⁶ “Or, ce moyen qui me paraissait le seul, qu'était-ce autre chose que faire une œuvre d'art?” (4.457).

Proust's novel seems to present an aestheticism conceived in terms of analogy, with art appearing as the product of procedures of unification and identification, and as the erasure of material, contingent differences.

Many critics have celebrated or complained or at least in some way acknowledged the idealizing aestheticism that the narrator proceeds to develop as the foundation for his final commitment to the vocation of writing. Michael Sprinker, for example, in his 1994 book *History and Ideology in Proust*, writes that "Marcel's aesthetic, and the novel he would produce is ineluctably and quite conventionally idealizing."⁷ Sprinker, however, emphatically distinguishes between Marcel's future, hypothetical literary project and the *Recherche* we are reading. By juxtaposing the aestheticization of the self that becomes legible here to the ongoing descriptions of the material decay of social organizations (of the bourgeoisie's invasion of the Guermantes aristocracy, for example), Proust's text in fact demonstrates "the failure of this aestheticizing strategy to arrest the forces of historical change." Moreover, according to Sprinker, Marcel's final aestheticism is simply exemplary of the rise of bourgeois ideology and its replacement of the aristocratic order.

Regarding the very coherency of Marcel's aestheticism, which Sprinker associates with the bourgeoisie and opposes to historical erosion, I will point out in passing that the apparently rhetorical questions punctuating the passage from *Time Regained* – "what [could a man experiencing involuntary memory] fear about the future?" and "was [this means of fixing the experience] anything else than to make a work of art"? – indicate that, by focusing on the rhetorical complexities of this passage, a reader might discover much more going on within it than a simple, unambiguous aestheticization and essentialization of the theme of involuntary memory. Rather than performing the close reading that Proust's syntax inevitably demands, however, for the sake of economy I am going to start reading this culmination of the *Recherche* by turning back to a passage that appears as both its structural precedent and emotional inverse: this is the scene of Marcel's involuntary memory of his dead grandmother, which takes place in the earlier, middle *Sodom and Gomorrah* volume of the novel. This scene is, in more ways than one, the negative of the culminating and theorized repetition of involuntary memories presented in *Time Regained*, where it is omitted from the retrospective list of involuntary memories experienced by Marcel throughout his life.

The table of contents points to the scene with the subheading "The Intermittencies of the Heart (*Les Intermittences du cœur*)," and was later referred to by Proust as "The Retroactive Loss of My Grandmother." Only a few critics have leant the passage importance, and they have done so generally by describing it as containing a kind of negative truth of the novel. Deleuze, for example, in his 1964 *Proust et les signes* describes it as the moment at which Marcel grasps the idea of death inherent in involuntary memory, an idea that is necessary to the production of art. Antoine Compagnon, in his 1989 *Proust entre deux siècles*, picks up on Deleuze's insight into the scene's negativity by approaching it in terms of what he regards as the entire

⁷ *History and Ideology in Proust: A la recherche du temps perdu and the Third French Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995) 176.

work's fundamentally and overdetermined "in-between" status. In his book Compagnon approaches the *Recherche* as not only in between two centuries, but also in between literature and philosophy, and he expands on Genette's study by also addressing it as "in between" a novel of memory and a novel of jealous love. In this context, he privileges the *Sodome and Gomorrah* volume as the dead center of the novel's "in-between" production, a center "which would appear to provide the finest vantage point from which to observe the novel as a whole." Compagnon lends weight in particular to the passage describing Marcel's involuntary memory of his grandmother on account of its situation *in between* the pre-war manuscript and the postwar manuscript of the novel, as well as its situation "in between" the original novel of memory and its midway inclusion of a novel about jealous love. The pathos and thematization of the passage furthermore match its structural importance: Compagnon describes it as "more moving and less dogmatic than all of the other involuntary memories" and argues that

the idea of "The Intermittencies of the Heart" – that is, the discontinuity of our powers of sensitivity, the unruly succession of the many selves that make up our subjectivity – is fundamental; let us not forget that at one time Proust thought of calling the entire novel *Les intermittences du cœur*. It is an idea even more important than the scene with the madeleine and the concept of involuntary memory that, raised to the stature of an aesthetic law, was to provide a structure for the novel's creation. If involuntary memory is the aesthetic foundation of the novel, perhaps intermittency corresponds to its origins in lived experience. Indeed reminiscence is a kind of transcended or domesticated intermittency, but pure intermittency... is too absolute an event to undergo the kind of theoretical taming applied to the madeleine, the cobblestones, the spoon or the napkin. Moreover, reminiscence is a form of happiness; it fills one with joy. By contrast intermittency is a catastrophe, a form of mourning and sorrow.⁸

Proceeding from Compagnon's approach and the biographical and historical background informing it, Julia Kristeva, in her 1994 book on Proust,⁹ also regards the passage as a "pivotal episode" within the novel's genesis. More specifically, she addresses the conjunction within *Sodom and Gomorrah* of a profanation of the mother – for whom the fictional grandmother serves as a substitute – with the theme of sexual inversion. Just as Proust ignored his own mother while she was dying (and while he was writing his novel), only to be overcome by guilt once she had died, so too does Marcel mercilessly avoid his dying grandmother while exploring the mysteries of Parisian homosexual relations. Proust's own ambivalence to his mother, in other words, became more explicit in the process of writing his novel, and more specifically, in his process of including within it the theme of sexual inversion. Kristeva argues furthermore that this passage stands out because it is the one scene

⁸ Proust *Between Two Centuries*, trans. Richard Goodkin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992) 123–124. First published by Seuil (Paris 1989).

⁹ *Le temps sensible: Proust et l'expérience littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard 1994).

within the entire *Sodom and Gomorrah* volume that relates the themes of inversion and profanation of the mother to the larger novelistic exploration of memory.

If Kristeva is right to point to the association within this passage of profanation of the mother, sexual inversion (which is in fact a little hard to locate within the passage itself) and the theme of memory, she, like Compagnon and Deleuze, nevertheless spends very little time actually discussing the passage. Instead, each of these critics points to the peculiar, striking emotional resonance of the passage, and proceeds to interpret that resonance in terms of a context external to the passage. The uniqueness of this passage, however, lies not simply in its emotional resonance. What is unique about it, as Kristeva indicates, is the way in which it expresses this resonance in terms of the structure of involuntary memory, which will turn out to be so important to the structure and thematics of the novel as a whole. Compagnon's distinction between the emotion of this passage and the theoretical clarity of other descriptions of involuntary memory is belied by the narrator's claim here that "the troubles of memory are closely linked with the heart's intermittencies." In fact, rather than presuming that the omission of this memory from the narrator's recapitulation in *Time Regained* of his past involuntary memories indicates that in some way its anguish has been sublated by the joy and aestheticism celebrated in the final volume, I will argue that this scene and its negative implications remain structurally inscribed in the final volume, where they resurface more explicitly in the narrator's eventual description of the work of art as the only means of true "communication." There, art is presented not in terms of unification and identity, but in terms of a multiplying experience of otherness. This multiplying, communicative function of art is inscribed in the apparently negative implications of the scene from the *Sodom and Gomorrah* passage, which is to say, in its emphasis on the emotional anguish of mourning, and in mourning's implication of an intersubjectivity or ethics that the solipsism of the other involuntary memories does not admit. I will argue then that this emotionally charged passage makes explicit the ethics inherent in Marcel's understanding of involuntary memory and in Proustian aesthetics in general.

Kristeva is right to point out that the end-result of Marcel's "retroactive" experience of his grandmother's death appears, however, to be his enjoyment of or solipsistic indulgence in the guilt it produces. The experience of guilt is presented here as an epistemological resolution of the ambiguous experience of mourning, the experience of the other as simultaneously there and not there; Marcel's guilt is a way of completing the phenomenalization indicated by his grandmother's ghost, of attaching himself to her and thereby evading the pain of the psychic breakdown inflicted by the experience of mourning on the mourner. The role of guilt in this passage, then, apparently plays the role of aesthetic theory in the *Time Regained* passage: it resolves the contradiction of involuntary memory and makes it comprehensible. Unlike the passage in *Time Regained*, however, this one ends with Marcel explicitly recognizing that the resolution of the contradictory experience of involuntary memory (or of mourning), through the clarity of guilt, is in fact intellectually false. And, as I mentioned above, in spite of the apparent decline of the narrative from an experience of true mourning or awareness of the other, to an experience of subjective guilt, the overall passage still stands out from the rest of the *Recherche* in so far as what is presented here is an involuntary memory of the other, and not of the self. Like the other memories recapitulated in *Time Regained*, this memory is also a memory of a subjective

experience or gesture – bending over to unbutton a shoe – but it is at the same time emphatically the memory of an other person, and of that person’s “living reality.” A close reading of this passage then can help to indicate what the final aesthetic theory expressed in *Time Regained* implies for the significance of art in terms of its reception by others, or for the significance of art as communication.

I would like to focus now on the claim within the passage from *Sodom and Gomorrah* that the “retroactive loss” or involuntary memory of the grandmother amounts to a true experience of otherness, and show how this claim prefigures the description of art as ethical relation that will appear in *Time Regained*. Rhetorically, the passage stages an agon between the true appearance of the other (or of the other “in-itself”) and the *significance* of this appearance *for* the subject. The fact that this is an agon between the coherency of the other and the coherency of the self is announced by the first line of the passage, which abruptly interrupts what so far had been a jocular description of Marcel’s return to the Grand Hotel of Balbec and his conversation with the grammatically amnesic manager, who met Marcel at the train station and brought him to his room. Upon arriving there, Marcel thanks him for his courtesy, to which the manager responds “‘Oh it was nothing! The loss of time has been quite infinite’ (by which he meant infinitesimal).”¹⁰ The following paragraph begins abruptly as: “Bouleversement de toute ma personne” – literally, “Overturning of my entire person,” a phrase translated by Moncrieff as “Complete physical collapse.” The “overturning” or collapse is indeed cardiac or “of the heart,”¹¹ but the word also alludes to the physical act of bending over to undo his boots, a gesture that then invokes the presence of the grandmother, who enters and fills the container which is Marcel’s body, pushing out Marcel’s “person.” The passage will proceed to describe how there is not enough room here for both of them at once.

No sooner had I touched the upper button of my boot than my bosom swelled, filled with an unknown, divine presence, sobs shook me, tears streamed from my eyes. The being who came to my aid, who saved me from barrenness of spirit, was the same one who, many years before, in a moment of identical distress and solitude, in a moment when I no longer had any part of myself left, had entered and had restored me to myself, for that being was myself and more than myself (the container that is more than the contents, which it was bringing to me).¹²

¹⁰ “‘Oh! De rien. Cela ne m’a fait perdre qu’un temps infini» (pour infime)” (1954) v. 2. 755.

¹¹ The second sentence of the paragraph reads: “Dès la première nuit, comme je souffrais d’une crise de fatigue cardiaque, tâchant de dompter ma souffrance, je me baissai avec lenteur et prudence pour me déchausser” (755).

¹² “À peine eus-je touché le premier bouton de ma bottine, ma poitrine s’enfla, remplie d’une présence inconnue, divine, des sanglots me secouèrent, des larmes ruisselèrent de mes yeux. L’être qui venait à mon secours, qui me sauvait de la sécheresse de l’âme, c’était celui qui, plusieurs années auparavant, dans un moment de détresse et de solitude identiques, dans un moment où je n’avais plus rien de moi, était entré, et qui m’avait rendu à moi-même, car il était moi et plus que moi (le contenant qui est plus que le contenu et me l’apportait)” 2.755–756.

The narrator will go on to say that this container is the “living reality” and “truth” of his dead grandmother. In the process, however, he revises it from having the status of a divine presence that restored *him*, to having the status of a “reality” which *he* had “found (*retrouvai[t]*).” The passage continues:

I had just perceived, in my memory, bent over my fatigue, the tender, preoccupied and dejected face of my grandmother, as she had been on that first evening of our arrival, the face not of that grandmother who I was astonished – and reproached myself – to find that I missed so little and who was no more of her than just her name, but of my own true grandmother, of whom, for the first time since that afternoon on the Champs-Élysées when she had had her stroke, I now found (*retrouvais*), in an involuntary and complete memory, the living reality. That reality does not exist for us, so long as it has not been recreated by our thought (otherwise the men who have been engaged in a gigantic combat would all of them be great epic poets); and so, in my mad desire to fling myself into her arms, it was not until this moment – more than a year after her burial, on account of that anachronism which so often prevents the calendar of facts from corresponding to that of our feelings – that I became aware that she was dead.¹³

The memory of the true grandmother and of her living reality is at the same time an experience of absolute death. After an ongoing struggle between describing her, on the one hand, and what the memory of her meant for *him*, on the other, the narrator writes:

I recalled how, an hour before the moment at which my grandmother had stooped down like that, in her dressing gown, to unfasten my boots, as I wandered along the stiflingly hot street, past the pastry-cook's, I had thought that I could never, in my need to embrace her, live through the hour that I had still to spend without her. And now that this need was reviving in me, I knew that I might wait hour after hour, that she would never again be by my side. I had only just discovered this because I had only just, on feeling her for the first time alive, real, making my heart swell to the breaking point, on finding her at last, I had only just learned that I had lost her forever. Lost forever; I could not understand and I struggled to endure the anguish of this contradiction. On the one hand an existence, a tenderness surviving in me as I had known them... on the other

¹³ “Je venais d’apercevoir, dans ma mémoire, penché sur ma fatigue, le visage tendre, préoccupé et déçu de ma grand’mère, telle qu’elle avait été ce premier soir d’arrivée; le visage de ma grand’mère, non pas de celle que je m’étais étonné et reproché de si peu regretter et qui n’avait d’elle que le nom, mais de ma grand’mère véritable dont, pour la première fois depuis les Champs-Élysées où elle avait eu son attaque, je retrouvais dans un souvenir involontaire et complet la réalité vivante. Cette réalité n’existe pas pour nous tant qu’elle n’a pas été recréée par notre pensée (sans cela les hommes qui ont été mêlés à un combat gigantesque seraient tous de grands poètes épiques); et ainsi, dans un désir fou de me précipiter dans ses bras, ce n’était qu’à l’instant – plus d’une année après son enterrement, à cause de cet anachronisme qui empêche si souvent le calendrier des faits de coïncider avec celui des sentiments – que je venais d’apprendre qu’elle était morte” (756).

hand... the certainty... of an annihilation that had effaced my image of that affection, that had destroyed that existence, that had retrospectively abolished our mutual predestination, made of my grandmother at the moment when I found her again as in a mirror, a mere stranger whom chance had allowed to spend a few years in my company, as she might have in anyone else's, but to whom, before and afterwards, I was, and would be nothing.¹⁴

This emotive and untimely eulogy ends with an emphasis on Marcel. The sorrow about his grandmother's annihilation slowly is figured as his *certainty* of annihilation and finally, ends up as his awareness of *his own nothingness*. From the redoubled lament "lost forever. Lost forever" we move to "I could be nothing." The movement back and forth between an emphasis on the true experience of the other and its solipsistic, first-person recuperation will continue throughout the passage, without reaching any definitive conclusion on either side – (the passage ends in a disjointed dream about the grandmother). I would conclude then that, in spite of the explicit, intermittent claims, this passage as a whole is devoted *neither* to the truth of the other, *nor* to its inevitable sublation by the subject, but specifically to the irreducible agon between the two. The duration of this agon, furthermore, is maintained by various allusions to figures of multiplicity, figures that elude the singularity and identity of both Marcel and his grandmother. For economy's sake I will point to just one instance of this, within the comparison, quoted above, of the relation between Marcel and his grandmother to that between "great epic poets" and "men who have been engaged in gigantic conflict."

The comparison occurs in the parenthetical phrase that concludes the sentence in which the narrator explains his claims to have found his "true grandmother" and her "living reality" for the first time since she fell ill. He explains what this living reality of a dead person is: "That reality does not exist for us, so long as it has not been recreated by our thought (otherwise the men who have been engaged in a gigantic combat would all of them be great epic poets)." By itself, the parenthetical phrase simply seems to describe the memorial function of poetry by distinguishing between the lives of military heroes and the poets who commemorate them. Within the overall context, however, this is a strange point to make. The phrase is supposed to illustrate the affective force of an involuntary memory – that procedure which the

¹⁴ "Je me rappelais comme, une heure avant le moment où ma grand'mère s'était penchée ainsi dans sa robe de chambre vers mes bottines, errant dans la rue étouffante de chaleur, devant le pâtissier, j'avais crue que je ne pourrais jamais, dans le besoin que j'avais de l'embrasser, attendre l'heure qu'il me fallait encore passer sans elle. Et maintenant que ce même besoin renaissait, je savais que je pouvais attendre des heures après des heures, qu'elle ne serait plus jamais auprès de moi, je ne faisais que de le découvrir parce que je venais, en la sentant, pour la première fois, vivante, véritable, gonflant mon cœur à la briser, en la retrouvant enfin, d'apprendre que je l'avais perdue pour toujours. Perdue pour toujours; je ne pouvais comprendre, et je m'exerçais à subir la souffrance de cette contradiction : d'une part, une existence, une tendresse, survivantes en moi telles que je les avais connue . . . et, d'autre part . . . la certitude . . . d'un néant qui avait effacé mon image de cette tendresse, qui avait détruit cette existence, aboli rétrospectivement notre mutuelle prédestination, fait de ma grand'mère, au moment où je la retrouvais comme dans un miroir, une simple étrangère qu'un hasard a fait passer quelques années auprès de moi, comme cela aurait pu être auprès de tout autre, mais pour qui, avant et après, je n'étais rien, je ne serais rien" (757–758).

narrator elsewhere praises for its arbitrary and material force and the way in which it acts upon the subject, in explicit distinction from *voluntary* memory, an act by which the subject consciously and (as he points out over and over) falsely recalls the past. Clearly, what is explicitly asserted and theorized in *Time Regained* – that the experience of involuntary memory is essentially bound up with the work of the writer – here is asserted, implicitly, by a parenthetical metaphor. Nevertheless, the syntax interrupts the analogy we would expect to see between the experience of the involuntary memory of the grandmother and the memorial function of poetry. The narrator does *not* say that the reality of the dead has no existence for us until it has been recreated by our thought, just as the reality of gigantic combats do not exist for us until they have been recreated by a poet. In fact, the subjective viewpoint of the “for us” in the first phrase – (“That reality has no existence for us”) – does not appear in the parenthetical metaphor that distinguishes between the multitude of men engaged in “gigantic conflict” (“all of them”) and the singularity of “great poets.” Instead, the second, parenthetical phrase focuses on the position of the ancient soldier (representative of the grandmother), and emphasizes the relation between how *many* of them there are in comparison to how few will become great poets. Although the point seems to be a celebration of the uniqueness of the poet, the phrase also places him in dialectical relation to those from whom he stands out. The metaphor effectively praises the work of the epic poet (and the narrator of the *Recherche* is as epic as any), but it does so by describing him in relation to a multitude of men who do not become poets, *and* upon whose existence the epic poet depends. It is the figure of the multiplicity of these men that mediates a relation (between the dead and the living) that is supposed to illustrate the difference between forgetting and remembering. In this way, the passage from *Sodom and Gomorrah* indicates that a critical reading of the aesthetic ideology of the final volume *Time Regained* should examine the mediation of such an ideology by rhetorics of multiplicity. To conclude, I will turn to one such passage in which a rhetoric of multiplicity is used more explicitly to explain the relation of the artist to ordinary men *and* the relations of individuals to each other. In this passage, which seeks to define “real life,” art is described as the only means of communication and therefore as the only available evasion of solitude.

Real life, life that is discovered and illuminated, the only life that consequently is fully lived, is literature. In a sense this life inhabits at every instant all men no less than the artist. But they do not see it, because they do not try to illuminate it. And for this reason their past is encumbered with innumerable clichés that remain useless because the intelligence has failed to “develop” them. Our life; and also the life of others; for the writer’s style just like the painter’s color is a question not of technique but of vision. It is the revelation, which by direct and conscious means would be impossible, of the qualitative difference within the way in which the world appears to us, a difference which, if there were no art, would remain the eternal secret of every individual. Through art alone are we able to emerge from ourselves, to know what another person sees of that universe which is not the same as our own and whose landscapes would remain as unknown to us as those that may exist on the moon. Thanks to art, instead of seeing one world only, our own, we see that world multiply, and as many

original artists as there are, so many worlds do we have at our disposal, more different one from each other than those that roll about in infinity...¹⁵

Unlike the famous passage toward the beginning of *Time Regained* that associates involuntary memory with hypothetical artistic creation and an escape from the material, contingent world, this passage focuses on art as communication and on the liberation from solitude that art offers. According to this passage, art communicates not by the transmission of one intention, identity or “vision” to another. Instead, art communicates through an inscription, on the level of “style” or “color,” of difference between one identity and another. This difference, furthermore, is not something that can be recuperated by an additional, identifiable form (or by the singularity of the noun “difference”). Instead, Proust goes out of his way here to describe it in terms of a process of open-ended, infinite multiplication. According to this description, art – and specifically, *literary* art – does not communicate by bringing one identity to another and effecting a community based on procedures of identification. Instead, art communicates by eliciting the individual from its solitary confinement, and by doing so through an inscribed proliferation of a multitude of differences. This multitude may be understood in terms of casts of characters, intermittencies of the heart, interior or outer “landscapes,” the “worlds” of world literature, or extra-terrestrial galaxies, but it cannot be understood in terms of identity, whether that of the narrator, author or reader, “national” tradition or psychological character. Such figures of identity called upon to justify the reading of literature would, according to this passage, simply act as supports of the multiplying function that may be called the ethics of aesthetic work. The purpose of reading then would be to follow these inscriptions of multiplicity as they emerge within the more explicit, canonically emphasized terms within which we otherwise tend to misrecognize “ourselves” and our common humanity. What is common to humanity, Proust’s work suggests, is the existential curse of solipsism. Literary art, on the other hand, interrupts this curse by actively producing “community” as the multiplication of otherness.

¹⁵ “La vraie vie, la vie enfin découverte et éclaircie, la seule vie par conséquent pleinement vécue, c’est la littérature. Cette vie qui, en un sens, habite à chaque instant chez tous les hommes aussi bien chez l’artiste. Mais ils ne la voient pas, parce qu’ils ne cherchent pas à l’éclaircir. Et ainsi leur passé est encombré d’innombrables clichés qui restent inutiles parce que l’intelligence ne les a pas «développés». Notre vie; et aussi la vie des autres; car le style pour l’écrivain aussi bien que la couleur pour le peintre est une question non de technique mais de vision. Il est la révélation, qui serait impossible par des moyens directs et conscients, de la différence qualitative qu’il y a dans la façon dont nous apparaît le monde, différence qui, s’il n’y avait pas l’art, resterait le secret éternel de chacun. Par l’art seulement nous pouvons sortir de nous, savoir ce que voit un autre de cet univers qui n’est pas le même que le nôtre et dont les paysages nous seraient restés aussi inconnus que ceux qu’il peut y avoir dans la lune. 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 à notre disposition, plus différents les uns des autres que ceux qui roulent dans l’infini...” (4.474). The variants list the following, erased note from the margins of the manuscript: “Cette vie que, en un sens la foule a aussi bien que l’artiste mais qui habite...” (4.1267). The editors also cite a note from the 1908 preliminary sketch, which directly connects this passage to the madeleine episode (1267–68, n.2).