Proustian Desire

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But it is sometimes just at the moment when we think
that everything is lost that the intimation arrives which may save us;
one has knocked on the doors which lead nowhere,
and then one stumbles without knowing it on the only door through which one can enter -
which one might have sought in vain for a hundred years -
and it opens on its own accord. (*In Search of Lost Time*, *vol. 6, 216.*)

Jewish and Greek Literature

According to the French-American scholar René Girard, *Don Quixote* represents one of the first successful depictions of metaphysical desire,[1] where reality and fantasy have become merged through the effects of desire.[2] Precisely the same kind of desire is at stake in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time.* It is mimetic, it is built on deceptive appearances and it is built on the other. Like Schiller, who divides European literature into naïve and sentimental, or like Auerbach, who divides literature between Jewish and Greek, Girard divides the European novelistic tradition into a romantic tradition and a tradition of realism, into professing or revealing the desires that stem from rivalry with the mediator. Auerbach's distinction between a Jewish and Greek way of writing, where the Jewish way of depicting reality is based on inner, psychological qualities, while the Greek way is based on a more aesthetic vision of appearances, is also a distinction between ethically motivated and aesthetically motivated literature. Jewish literature is, according to Auerbach, first and foremost psychological and ethical.[3] To illustrate this point one may observe how Moses is described in detail in several of the books of *The Torah* yet nothing is said about Moses' outward appearance. Nor did the Evangelists or Paul make any attempt to describe Jesus' outer appearance. In *The Odyssey,* on the other hand, one can find the most ornate descriptions of the hero's external appearance; not only the hero himself, but his shield and spear and so on are also described in minute detail. Auerbach's main example of this Greek tendency of not to leave anything 'half in

[1] According to Girard, desire becomes metaphysical when one, instead of desiring an object, tries to acquire the desirable by the aid of someone else's desire.

[2] See René Girard. *Deceit, Desire and the Novel. Self and Other in Literary Structure* (Baltimore Maryland: The John Hopkins Press, 1965), 1-4, 10, 17, 52, 92, 97, 100, 102-104, 141, 231, 232, 268, 291-292.

[3] (…) '*in Homer the complexity of the psychological life is shown only in succession and alteration of emotions; whereas the Jewish writers are able to express the simultaneous existence of various layers of consciousness and the conflict between them*.' Auerbach. *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton U.P., 1974), 13.

darkness and unexternalized,' is shown most clearly in his interpretation of Odysseus' scar, where the long meticulous descriptions of the scar serve to unfold Odysseus' past. [4]

The Jewish way of describing acts and motives is combined in Proust with a somewhat Greek inspired aesthetic approach consisting of minute and precise descriptions of appearances. This tendency to aesthetisize does not only incorporate people, but also flowers, interiors, the weather and so on. Thus, Proust's work is a synthesis of both the Greek and Jewish way of writing.

Undoing the Novel Genre in order to Understand Desire

According to Germaine Brée, the deepest characteristic of Proust's psyche was to create.[5] The desire to be creative was no doubt essential to the young Proust. Yet, if being creative as such had been his highest aim, Proust would no doubt have tried to publish *Jean Santeuil*. There would seem to be a deeper, more profound drive behind the creation of *In Search of Lost Time*, a drive to depict the desires of man. The later Proust seems very far from a writer who typically savours images and characters. He appears to be uncomfortable with the genre of the novel as he constantly expands his narration into reflection, even into philosophy and psychology. His uneasiness about genre is,[6] as I see it, the result of his trying to fulfil his obligation to describe the way desire works within the time-span of a lifetime. Space cannot fathom the way desire works; only time can reveal how desire changes, modifies and destroys people. Also, time is essential in order to show how desire may be extinguished, how it can lose its grip on human beings and liberate them towards time regained.

Thus, Proust is not, as some critics claim, a writer governed by the norm of *l'art pour art*. He consistently tries to reveal the inner meaning of phenomena and constantly refers to ethical problems. The smells, the tastes, the forms, are ways of recapturing and revealing the truth of (Marcel's) life. But at the same time, the desires he so vividly experiences among people are brought into Proust's bedroom laboratory, in order to understand the governing principles of life. It would seem as though Proust's background, where science and realism dominated the outlook on life, also governed, or, at least, edited his literary project.

Regulated Desires

Combray is a haven from the desirous world outside. In Combray a feudal mentality still survives where desire is regulated by impenetrable hierarchies. The reason for this feudal and hierarchical society (against a nineteenth century backdrop) is the externality of Combrayan desire. But Combray too is on the brink of modernity, approaching a state of domination by internal desires. Girard claims that a closer examination of Combray would reveal, in a nascent state, all the features of the worldly salons.[7] In this respect Combray represents a compressed version of European cultural development, the transition from external to internal desires. Thus, Combray is moving rapidly from a life dominated by external desire to one dominated more by internal desires, without people being conscious of the transition. Instead there is a frantic attempt to hold on to traditional values, despite the fact that they are, in many ways no longer of any use, even deceptive tools, with which to function in society. The smallest lapse in habits actually represents a threat to the feudal stability in Léonie's house.

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[4] Auerbach. 'Odysseus Scar' in *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature,* 3-23.
[5] Germaine Brèe. *The World of Marcel Proust* (Boston: Houghton Miffin Company, 1966), 65.
[6] Proust. *In Search of Lost Time*, vol 6 (London: Vintage, 1996), 445-451.
[7] *Deceit, Desire and the Novel,* 213-214.

The asymmetrical Saturday when lunch is served an hour earlier than on other days, allowing Françoise to go to the market, can actually be seen as the first symptom of a crumbling order,[8] of an introduction to a more chaotic and individual life-style, based on internal desires.

At the beginning of the novel, Aunt Léonie's house represents a bastion against the changing world. But gradually, with the aid of Marcel's naïve perception, we see the decomposition of yesterday's world taking place. The hierarchy, exemplified by the relationship of unequality between Léonie and the maid Françoise, is a relationship built upon external desires such as money, care and so on. There is no threatening rivalry, no desire in Françoise to reach the same social level as Léonie. She is content with the prestige she gains by working for Léonie. This medieval mentality of extreme loyalty to society, to the superiority of one's master or mistress, is gradually disturbed by the introduction of a more intense and individual desire. One example of a desire which, still weak in its manifestation, seems to question the externality of the desires regulating Combray society, is Françoise sudden objection to Léonie giving money to a poor guest called Eulalie who comes every Sunday.[9] She objects to Léonie giving money to poor people, while she would have accepted her giving gifts to people of great wealth, the narrator tells us.[10] Proust reveals this objection as Françoise 's rivalry with Eulalie. The internalization of this rivalry with the hated Eulalie is not, however, intensely metaphysical as it involves mainly an element of rivalry over Léonie's money. Although Françoise's desires are basically external, there are, in incidents like this, certain indications of a more intense internal desire creeping into the mind of the Combray inhabitants.

Léonie's attempt to live anti-mimetically, shunning the interaction of everyday life, may be seen as her strategy of trying to avoid the daily doses of desire, even if the consequence is a most morbid interest in all kinds of external events. Léonie's craving for support in her illness[11] becomes, despite its rather cerebral nature, a scapegoating of anyone who does not support her or her views. The bed-ridden Léonie becomes a symbol of the death of the old world, the slow decomposition of a hierarchical world in which external desires are being gradually transformed by the intensity of new models. There is an evolution in *In Search of Lost Time*, from the world of Léonie's house and the people living in it, who live a life of traditional values, controlled by external desire, to the intensely degraded life of Baron de Charlus during World War I, where every kind of hierarchy is threatened by desire. Thus the further a character is distanced from the norms and customs associated with Léonie's house, the more acute internal desire becomes.

The new kind of desire creeping into Combray society is described against the backdrop of old fashioned snobbery. But snobbery in the late nineteenth century is no longer an uncomplicated matter where one can, from the perspective of a certain class-background, behave in a superior manner. The middle-class Legrandin, for example represents a person who tries to live according to modern, liberal norms, while, at the same time, erecting ancient mental barriers between himself and others, based on individual hierarchy. Legrandin's veneration for the aristocracy is not medieval, it is modern. Legrandin's desire towards people of the aristocracy can only be evoked in a modern, post-revolutionary world, where the hierarchical boundaries have become fluid and uncertain. This modern attitude allows Legrandin's sister, Mme Cambremer, to marry into the aristocracy. But the conflicting desires

[8] Roger Shattuck interprets this break of routine as a symbol of Combray life falling apart. See Shattuck. *Proust's Way* (N.Y., London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), 28.
[9] *In Search of Lost Time* vol 1, 127-128.
[10] Ibid., 127.
[11] Ibid., 81-82.

of envy and admiration make Legrandin outwardly despise the aristocracy, calling snobbery the sin which cannot be forgiven,[12] while in actual fact he is totally spellbound by the aristocracy, thus making him avoid people from the middle class whenever someone from the aristocracy is present.[13] Legrandin's love-hate relationship towards the aristocracy is only possible because the model of desire (aristocracy) has come closer to him, and his desire to be their equal is, in a rapidly changing world, both illusory and yet not illusory. Legrandin's snobbery is modern snobbery in the sense that he vocally is democratic and politically correct, but behind this correctness he gives way to the most fervent desire towards the privileged, the upper classes. Legrandin also uses literature and art to both hide and flaunt his desires, using lofty, romantic vocabulary as a means of distancing himself from his fellowmen. His act of not allowing Marcel and his grandmother to be invited to his sister's home is a subtle way of reverting to ancient, hierarchical codes, in order to fulfil his more internal desires of snobbery and exclusion.[14]

Triangular Desire in the Bedroom Scene

Also, the desires in Marcel himself are gradually transformed and intensified. The desire for his mother's kiss, which can so easily be taken as an illustration of a Freudian triangle, is not motivated by any hatred for his father. (Otherwise Marcel would behave like this every evening). Marcel is testing out the boundaries of his mother's love. Proust is giving an example of a child's transgression. This decisive moment, seen from the perspective of a child's experience of desire, actually consists, in Marcel's life, in a breaking down of the hierarchical and bourgeois world. In Marcel's family certain laws must be upheld, not least when there are visitors present. The intensity and transgressive nature of Marcel's behaviour also indicates the crumbling of the hierarchical world between the child and the grown-up. There is something of a child's liberation in the intense decision not to go to sleep before he has received his mother's kiss. The intensification of desire means that children's desires are also legitimate and taken into consideration. This zest for affection is indicative of a more general collapse in hierarchies. The crumbling of hierarchies does not only indicate the elimination of the difference between the haves and the haves not, but also the collapse in the grown-ups authority over the child. However, the scene's intensity must also be seen as the result of his father's paying no heed to principle.[15] The internality of the scene is caused by the fact that the son imitates his father's lack of respect for the laws governing nineteenth century hierarchy. If Marcel had not sensed, in some way, that it was possible to break down these not so solid walls of authority, his desire would never have been so intense. This reveals the double function Proust gives to desire: it not only breaks down the laws of morality, it also breaks down the laws of authority. A fiercer rivalry between the subject and the law is evolving. The sacred law of society becomes the semi-sacred law of the model, who will gradually, in all areas of society, become someone who is challenged and rivalled. Proust seems to be attempting to reveal different kinds of imitative behaviour, behaviour which is not governed by the changes in mentality taking place in society, but where the desirous behaviour itself is changing the mentality of society. In this respect Proust seems to indicate that desire is the force changing the various social structures.

Swann, a Transgressor of Combray's Regulated Desires

[12] Ibid., 79.
[13] Ibid., 141-143, 148-158.
[14] Ibid., 155-158.
[15] Ibid., 41.

Imitation in Combray is difficult to fathom because it is different from a democratic imitation where everyone wants to be the most successful, the best, and where there is no reasons in principle why this could not be the case. Bourgeois imitation in Combray, however, is self-preserving, where the desire to aspire to the upper classes is curbed by certain social prohibitions. Combray, with its feudal mentality, reveals the desire to preserve one's own class structure than social climbing. Therefore, the fact that Swann also belongs to aristocratic circles is a kind of threat to Combray stability. Swann has broken the bourgeois code by trangressing his social position, mingling with the Prince of Wales and the Princess de Guermantes and their likes. There is, of course, a danger in such mingling, not only because it blurs the laws of hierarchy, but also because it can potentially transform external desires into more internal ones. And Swann's marriage, which is a marriage at the other extremity of the hierarchy, poses even more of a threat to a community built on external desire. The threat provoked by Swann's marriage to Odette is so strong and intense that Marcel's family not only cannot invite her, they must also, on their daily walks past Swann's house, make a detour in order to avoid meeting Odette and Gilberte.[16] But because of the gradual loosening up of hierarchy, such a prohibition creates the fiercest desire in Marcel to meet Odette and, especially, Gilberte.[17]

Swann represents the modern world, and the desire to stop the evolution towards modernity is exemplified in the way Swann is treated. Swann represents the modern world of fallen hierarchies. He has married in a socially democratic manner by marrying a déclassé, and he is, not because of any aristocratic background, but because of his wealth and distinguished personality, given access to the most exclusive aristocratic salons. By overstepping the class boundaries, Swann becomes a dangerous threat to the stability of Combray. His desires are not limited (or moderated) by his own middle-class background; they encompass all classes, or anywhere where desire reveals something potent. The reaction among the bourgeoisie in Combray is to scapegoat Swann, mildly, but in a consistent manner, by excluding his family from their homes. This attitude of self-preservation makes Marcel's grandmother ignore everything that points to the exceptional social position possessed by Swann.[18] And she is perhaps the least envious and most tolerant towards Swann. Marcel's family cannot bear to hear about Swann's worldly successes. Their way of avoiding the threat of evolving internal desires is to stop, or, subdue, all conversation which could awaken desire. Proust reveals this as comedy as, for example, when the highly symbolic conversation of Marcel's aunts is intended as an indirect thanks regarding the bottles of wine that Swann had brought as a present. The sterility of the conversation, where the desire to give thanks is hidden in subtle phrases, is revealed by the fact that it only makes a puzzling effect on Swann.[19] Likewise, the general conversation in Marcel's family, reveals the lifeless formality of ancient ways of conversing, whereas at a time when the world is rapidly changing. Their stiffly upheld norms, their exclusion of the modern, must be seen as an attempt to rid themselves of all traces of desire.

Swann is Marcel's Imitative Model

Swann also uses the forms of neutral, impersonal conversation in order to hide his latent desires, desires which threaten to crop up when he acts spontaneously, by avoiding concrete topics or topics tinged with emotion. Swann's technique of emphasizing important words with

[16] Ibid., 162.
[17] Ibid., 162-173.
[18] Girard. *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (London: Athlone Press, 1987), 68.
[19] *In Search of Lost Time*, vol 1, 27-39.

irony[20] is a sign of internal desire taking a hold on reality. But although Swann is able, in conversation, to hide anything reminiscent of internal desire, his life is possessed by it. This dualism between words and acts, demonstrated by Swann and, also, to a lesser degree, among other members of Combray society, is what Girard calls organic falsehood.[21] Swann's distant and consciously impersonal way of talking can be seen to be an attempt to preserve the world of external desire, to avoid passing on the germs of internal desire to Combray society. But Marcel has already been smitten by the desire for the world of the salons. Swan becomes Marcel's mimetic model, the ideal in which his desires to enter the world of aristocracy and refined culture are ignited.

Outside Combray, Swann is totally prey to internal desires. Behind Swann's formal language, the young Marcel senses a man of great passions, living a life of refined deception. And later in life, Marcel will imitate just the same kind of love-relationship with Albertine as Swann with Odette. In a way Swann prefigures Marcel's development, his future life-style, his pains. He also becomes his spiritual leader, unconsciously guiding him towards the salon world of internal desire.

Swann represents the new world threatening to penetrate Combray. And because this new world is governed by desire, it has no conscious understanding of its own evolution. Swann has no wish to introduce Combray society to this new mentality, although he is totally in the hands of internal desires displayed in the worldly salons. (His formalistic conversation could actually be seen as an attempt to avoid it.) But Combray gradually begins to reveal in a nascent state, all the features of the worldly salons.[22] Therefore the movement from Combray to Paris and the salons marks a continuity without any perceptible transitions. In my view, the opposition between external and internal desire marks no opposition between good and evil; it indicates no absolute separation; it is only a development towards more intense and individual desires, which, with a paradoxical logic, end up in a most rigid monotony.

Swann Becomes Marcel's Double

In Swann, Proust seems to build up a mimetic ideal, a man of the world, given most of the attributes needed to succeed in the realm of desire. Only the fact that he is a Jew and not from the aristocracy, diminishes his prestige to some extent. Swann gradually becomes Marcel's alter ego. Both are middle-class. They both live from their father's wealth, they are both aesthetes, and they both get entangled with an uneducated lover from the lower classes, who is unfaithful. Both their female lovers have a certain penchant for pleasure with their own sex, and they both experience devastating periods of jealousy. Both Marcel and Swann seem to waste their lives, never managing to accomplish any of their planned projects. They are both, at various times, totally engrossed in the world of the salons, a world where desires such as envy, jealousy and social success are at their most intense.

Swann's Hybris

The symmetry between Marcel and Swann is so elegant and technically understated that as a reader, one has no feeling of any forced, form-driven mechanical symmetry. And because the description is based on mimesis and not identity, there is no forced psychology of doubles. One might wonder, however, if there is a kind of romantic desire in the way Proust describes

[20] Ibid., 130.
[21] *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 197.
[22] Ibid., 213-214.

Swann. From a superficial or external point of view it appears as though Proust endows Swann with all his sympathy and admiration. Swann is certainly Marcel's mimetic ideal, even if the age difference makes mimetic desire materialize on rather external terms. But the young Marcel is not blind to the fact that Swann is not able to relate in a personal manner, that he hides his feelings behind a formal manner, making conversation awkward.[23] There is also the description of Swann's mind going blank every time something occurs that forces him to question himself. From this point of view Swann is like Jean Santeuil, a relatively successful man in the realm of desire. But the disintegation of the desirously successful Swann makes him evolve as a person deceived by his wife, his child and his aristocratic friends, turning him into somebody sympathetic but, also, pathetic, in that all his desires are slowly inverted; at the end of the novel, when he is mortally ill, his only comfort is his beloved daughter, who, after his death, also deceives him, by changing her name (not by marriage), thereby causing his name to vanish entirely from the world.

Marcel's Desires Become Internalized

In the scene where Marcel breaks the laws of self-discipline in order to obtain his mother's kiss, Swann is the guest who makes his mother stay up entertaining instead of giving her son the good-night kiss. A kind of triangular situation arises where Marcel is threatened by Swann, since his desire for his mother's attention is thwarted. The triangular situation is entirely external in the cases of Swann and Marcel's mother, as on their part no kind of rivalry is implied. But Swann becomes a (distant) obstacle to Marcel, showing how the triangular scheme ignites, not because of any Oedipal family structure, but whenever desire is obstructed. In this respect there is something of a latent rivalry in Marcel's relation to Swann. Swann is able to hinder his mother's affection; he is capable of making her neglect the sacred ritual of the good-night kiss. Because of this Swann has a certain fascination for Marcel. Swann evolves, in the eyes of the young Marcel, as a secular god, able to make people desire his presence, and hindering others in fulfilling their desire.

In this context Swann's smallest comments are of extreme importance. When Swann mentions the beauty of Siena, Marcel immediately begins dreaming of travelling to Siena. And Marcel is so spellbound by Swann's description of the Romanesque church at Balbec, that the real church turns out to be a total let-down. Swann thus introduces Marcel to metaphysical desire, making the world of art larger than life.

Marcel's preoccupation with Swann rises at times to high comedy, for example when the young Marcel wants, more than anything else, to be as bald as Swann.[24] Other examples of Marcel's attempts to be like Swann are when he sits at the table pulling his nose and rubbing his eyes, trying to resemble Swann's foibles, and making Marcel's father exclaim that his son is an idiot.[25]

Marcel is highly relieved when he hears from his mother that she had met Swann at a shop-counter buying an umbrella. Apart from the all-encompassing interest Marcel takes in Swann's whereabouts, the prosaic act also makes Swann more of a human and less divine figure.

[23] *In Search of Lost Time*, vol 1, 17.
[24] Ibid., 497.
[25] Ibid.

> *What a melancholy pleasure to know that Swann, that very afternoon, his supernatural form silhouetted against the crowd, had gone to buy an umbrella.* (*In Search of Lost Time,* vol 1, 498).

His reaction illustrates how admiration contains competitive desires, and that, while admiring a person we simultaneously feel satisfied when something lowers that person in our eyes. Admiration also contains the desire of envy, because we want to become what we admire, and when the person we admire falls or appears prosaic, we feel that we have come closer to what we admire. Hence Marcel's ecstatic relief when he is told about Swann buying an umbrella becomes understandable. The same reaction occurs when Marcel hears that Swann has been to the dentist. The deity actually goes to a dentist! Any indication of some kind of human weakness means the utmost relief to Marcel. Also in this passage about Swann going to the dentist, Proust emphasizes the sacredness with which Marcel regards Swann.

> *On other days we would go along the boulevards, and I would take up a position at the corner of the Rue Duphot, along which I had heard that Swann was often to be seen passing on his way to his dentist; and my imagination so far differentiated Gilberte's father from the rest of humanity, his presence in the midst of the real world introduced into such an element of wonder, that even before we reached the Madeleine I would be trembling with emotion at the thought that I was approaching a street from which that supernatural apparition might at any moment burst upon me unawares. (In Search of Lost Time, vol 1, 501.)*

Like anyone captured by intense desire, Marcel thinks that his model exists on a completely different plane from himself, finding it strange that his mediocre family even knows Swann. This masochistic tendency, enhanced by the repetitions of desire, makes Marcel feel proud when Swann even so much as recognises him when he comes to fetch Gilberte.

The Anger of the God

When Marcel tries to convey to Gilberte how highly he regards her parents, he encounters the anger of the Swann family. In a world where metaphysical desire is to the fore, the most damaging thing for the self is to proclaim its desires. Gilberte tells Marcel that his parents cannot stand him.[26] Swann has detected some strong desire in Marcel, which makes Swann despise the child, thinking he has a bad influence on his daughter. Swann, as a social climber, has no tolerance for someone desiring him, as he, like Legrandin, in reality has no strong self-esteem or any genuine pride in his own human qualities. As with any snob, there is the element of despising oneself, and of looking upon any person who desires oneself with disrespect and anger. When Gilberte tells Marcel that her parents cannot stand him, Marcel writes a sixteen page letter,[27] driven by the most urgent desire to convince Swann of his qualities. Thus, he is bound to make Swann receive a most unfavourable impression of him. If Marcel had been older and not protected by their difference in age, such display of the most intimate desires could easily have lead to serious conflict – as Dostoevsky reveals in numerous scenes.

Swann is not threatened, however, by Marcel's veneration, but he regards the letter as something embarrassing, an indication of Marcel's uncontrolled desires, desires which he himself has taken so many years to control. Swann's statement that it would be pointless to meet Marcel face to face[28] indicates a kind of rivalry, a tendency to treat Marcel as an adult. The fact that Swann is not willing to give Marcel any sign of acceptance indicates the role of

[26] *In Search of Lost Time*, vol 2, 72.
[27] Ibid., 73-74.
[28] Ibid., 76.

desire on Swann's part. The desire Marcel displays on behalf of his daughter Gilberte, turns Marcel into a rival, and the desires he detects in Marcel's behaviour towards Gilberte are a reminder of his own disastrous desires towards Odette. In this way, desire, although distanced by the difference in their ages, seems to evoke double desire by the fact that Marcel's desires evoke Swann's previous desires. Swann seems to retract to a previous stage of his life, and via the mimetic binds of the past, becomes Marcel's rival.

Desire towards Gilberte

Gradually, when Marcel begins to play with Gilberte in the Champs Élysées Park, the desire Marcel feels towards Swann is projected onto Gilberte, showing that his desires are not directed towards any specific human qualities, but towards desire itself, or towards that which is desirous. After a short interval of playing with her in the Champs Élysées Park, the whole world for him revolves around Gilberte. A day when Gilberte is not there is a day without meaning. And the desires which the young Marcel shows towards Gilberte, are clearly more based on imitative desire than 'true' sensual desires. The way in which Proust allows children (Marcel and Gilberte) to have the same kind of desires as a grown-ups, reveals the universality of these desires. There is, Girard claims, no break in continuity between the child and the snob. Both imply the desire according to the other.[29] Thus, desire according to Proust, is one and the same; it only takes different forms.

Not even the child can escape the terror and entanglement of metaphysical desire. The relationship between Marcel and Gilberte is not very different from Swann's relationship with Odette (apart from the sexual dimension). As Swann saw Odette through the eyes of Botticelli, so Marcel sees Gilberte through his fascination with Swann. Even before Marcel has met Gilberte, he sees her as the privileged girl who goes on cultural trips with Marcel's favourite author, the famous writer Bergotte. So when Marcel finally meets Gilberte, accidently, when with his family on a walking tour, his desires are so strong that he is capable only of making faces at her. His seeing Gilberte through the images of Swann and Bergotte[30] makes her absolutely terrifying in her fascination, as the little girl, through Marcel's mimetical fascination, comes to embody art, aesthetics, style and elegant worldliness. Gilberte incarnates most of the things that Marcel desires. Thus, when they meet in the Champs Élysées Park, there is, on Marcel's side, not the least spontaneity.

Proust depicts the relationship between Gilberte and Marcel as a relationship where Gilberte is totally in control. Gilberte has become both object and model in Marcel's initiation into the world of Swann. This insight into Gilberte's metaphysical role is indicated by the narrator.

> *Did I not then know that what I felt for her depended neither upon her actions nor upon my will. (In Search of Lost Time, vol 1, 495.)*

Their relationship is not conducted according to a natural, healthy feeling of getting on well together, of enjoying playing games. Gilberte represents Marcel's life-line to the most sacred of existences. This prestigious role makes Marcel behave in the most servile manner towards Gilberte, feeling that her view of him represents the ultimate truth about his existence. Gilberte's claim that there are many other boys she prefers to Marcel[31] is both a result of her childish honesty and roughness, and Marcel's infatuation. Marcel behaves in such a way that

[29] *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 34.
[30] *In Search of Lost Time*, vol 1, 493.
[31] Ibid., 481, 495.

he is likely to be treated in a dismissive manner. The way Marcel begs her to tell him what he must do in order for her to like him again, [32] reveals a rather unusual desperation for a child, on the verge of masochism. Marcel gives Gilberte the feeling that she must come and play with him every day. Therefore, she triumphantly, and a bit cruelly, announces the days when she will not come and play with him.[33] Their relationship already contains some of the same ingredients of exclusion, of master and slave, as in the relationship between Swann and Odette. Marcel naïvely imitates his alter ego Swann, while Gilberte unconsciously imitates her mother.

Creating a Private Symbolism

From this obsessive state of mind arises a private symbolism. The name of the street in which Swann and Gilberte live becomes sacred to Marcel, while Swann's name evokes the most vibrant feelings in him whenever it is uttered.[34] The personal symbolism is generated out of Marcel's desires, creating a world of subjectivity, devoid of anything common or general. His symbols cannot be shared by anyone or refer to anything outside his private desires. Thus, when deleted from the context of his personal desires, Marcel's private symbolism reminds one of an artist who, in creating his own symbolic world, is incapable of communicating it to others. Marcel's father, whose insight into Marcel's private world is meagre, reacts with the same irritation[35] as a person who fails to understand anything of an artist's symbolic world.

Swann in Love

While Marcel seems to have no impact on Swann's life whatsoever, Swann's drama is seen as a drama based on erotic desires. Swann is not only a womanizer; all his acts and motives are driven by his liaisons with different girls and ladies from all spheres of society. Swann is obsessed by women. He becomes friendly with a family because he is attracted, for example, by their cook, and unscrupulously breaks off contact with the same family when the liaison with the cook is over. Swann has no work, and his reputation as an aesthete rests more on the works of art he has bought than on any profound work he has written on the great masters. It is Swann who causes Marcel to become conscious of finding living models that resemble great works of art. The desire to make life match art has had a most profound impact on Swann's life since his desires towards Odette were aroused when he discovered that Odette's physical appearance bore a striking likeness to Jethro's daughter in Botticelli's painting of Moses' life.[36] Initially, however, Swann does not find Odette attractive. Her eyes are too big and her skin too pale. She is also quite banal and boring. But gradually she manages to seduce Swann by making him feel important and her companionship indispensable. There is, in fact, a motif of master and slave in their relationship, where Odette initially speaks of Swann as some kind of master, entirely superior to herself, but when he is caught up in his desires, the roles change dramatically: Swann becomes Odette's slave (due to his desire for her), and Odette becomes the master of rejection, using the triangular game, flirting with the aristocrat Forceville in order to provoke Swann's desperate jealousy. Swann's seeing Odette in the light of Botticelli's great masterpiece actually begins after her attempt to seduce him and make him long for her. The identification with Jethro's daughter transforms Odette into a more desirable creature. The combination of Odette offering sexual satisfaction, acting as slavishly

[32] Ibid., 495.
[33] Ibid., 490-491.
[34] Ibid., 496.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid., 267-270.

dependent, and creating a triangular situation, with Swann's discovery of her imitative likeness to one of Jethro's daughters are the ingredients needed to make Swann spellbound by Odette, who, from outside of the realm of desire, would otherwise seem vulgar and mediocre. Mimetic desire transforms Odette into a sacred goddess, an object upon whose life he is totally dependent. The development is entirely in accordance with the laws of desire. The repetition of small acts of rejection enhances Swann's jealousy to such a degree that he gradually believes he going mad.

The relationship between Odette and Swann is a study in the laws of desire, where the most desirous becomes the slave of the least desirous. Odette knows perfectly well that she has no means of conquering Swann by any spontaneous attraction or by any natural or inner qualities. The only way she can win Swann's heart is by the aid of metaphysical desire, by making him fall prey to the repetitive sado-masochistic pattern of inclusion-rejection. The initial strategy is to humble herself, to be totally available, totally disposed to any of Swann's desires, so as to make him dependent on her affection and sexual willingness, then gradually to make the availability a little bit more difficult to attain, and then to gradually remove all the privileges, making him long for her affection and availability until he becomes so desperate that he will do anything, even marry her, to be liberated from the torment of his desire. The paradox, which in fact is no paradox but totally logical, culminates in a Swann who, like a patient cured from a deadly disease, is freed from his desires, feeling neither lust nor love, and admitting to himself that she did not appeal to him, was not even his type.[37]

The scene where Swann, after being rejected by Odette and the Verdurin-clan, meets Mme Cottard by chance on the omnibus, reveals Swann's blindness as regards the game of desire. Swann thinks that Odette really has no feelings for him, and he thinks that the rejection is a real rejection, not a rejection that aims to make him fall desperately in love with her. When Swann meets Mme Cottard, after Odette and the Verdurin-clan have returned from a year's grand tour, Mme Cottard, due to the need to find something to talk about during the time span before the bus reaches Rue Bonaparte, begins to tell Swann about the preoccupation with him that Odette displayed while they were on the trip.[38] Throughout the entire grand tour Odette, according to Mme Cottard, was unable to experience anything without thinking how Swann would have reacted, what Swann would have said.[39] This scene, which for Swann reveals Odette's love for him, also shows the contingency of their affair. As the revelation of Odette's preoccupation with him is totally dependent on the time span, on the minutes to be filled with interesting conversation, before Mme Cottard alights from the omnibus at Rue Bonaparte, Proust also reveals the weak foundation of their love. The truth about Odette's feelings, which enables Swann to renew contact and later marry Odette, is actually founded on this chance meeting with Mme Cottard. But behind this happy encounter, giving Swann the courage to marry Odette, the same old pattern is repeated. Odette continues to be unfaithful, and Swann, having no real love for Odette, continues to waste his life in the aristocratic salons.

In the Odette-Swann relationship Proust depicts the development of desire based on exclusion. The outer circumstances change, while the inner processes stay the same. The laws of desire are at work, giving the repetitious monotony of infidelity and snobbery many different faces, but always amounts to the same modifying and unhappy effect on each individual.

[37] Ibid., 460.
[38] Ibid., 450-453.
[39] Ibid., 452-453.

Proust and Dostoevsky

Girard claims that the most visible formal difference between Dostoevsky and Proust is that Dostoevsky shows without reflecting on the showing (thereby enhancing the sense of drama), while Proust first shows and then reflects on what he has shown.[40] [41] But this formal difference and the difference in style and themes are subordinated to their common revelation of metaphysical desire. According to Girard, internal desire is caused by the increased closeness between the subject and the model. Thus, the intensity of jealousy, envy, hatred, and admiration is enhanced. Simultaneously the act of desiring through a model has become, over the centuries, more tabooed and hidden. Proust is seen as a master in revealing an intensified version of metaphysical desire. Among the novelists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Girard holds only Dostoevsky to be a more radical interpreter of desire than Proust. The reason he gives for Dostoevsky's greater radicality is the fact that in Dostoevsky's novels desire creates a total disruption of personality and human relationships, thus revealing the total destructiveness of desire. In Proust's world there are always some remnants of civility, of manners and form. Actually, the most destructive acts are commited within the setting of highly refined culture and wealth, and the cruellest behaviour and debased acts against a backdrop of style and pretentious politeness. In Proust's work the formal setting never dissolves into total disrupture. According to Girard, there is not even a semblance of permanence and homogeneity in Dostoevsky's later works.[42] There are no two worlds (as in Proust) of stability and chaos.[43] Everything is chaos.[44] Dostoevsky's characters have reached the paroxysmal stage of metaphysical desire.[45] One could claim that in Dostoevsky's universe the subject and mediator are drawn even closer together, leading the most desirous to suicide, murder and madness. Dostoevsky can also be seen to be the most radical of authors in the way he reveals the inverse effects of desire [46] by introducing suffering and conversion,[47] more emphatically and convincingly than any other nineteenth-century novelist.[48]

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[40] See chapter X 'Technical Problems in Proust and Dostoevsky', especially pp. 243-255, in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel.*

[41] Samuel Beckett also mentions this difference between Proust and Dostoevsky. '*Proust can be related to Dostoevsky who states his characters without explaining them.*' But Beckett somewhat modifies this difference. '*Actually Proust does explain them, but he explains them away,'* he adds. Beckett. *Proust* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1931), 66-67.

[42] *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 245.

[43] There is an exception in the first chapters of *The Possessed* where 'the Fathers' live the same bourgeois life, with the same mentality of permanence as the Proustian bourgeois. See *Deceit, Desire and the Novel,* 250.

[44] *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 247.

[45] Ibid., 248.

[46] Girard seems, in his judgement of the novelistic tradition, to follow a linear development of ascendancy. This is, in my opinion, overstating the case, both in his work on Dostoevsky (especially in *Resurrection from the Underground: Feodor Dostoevsky*) and on Proust. Dostoevsky's personal development, which, in my view, better suites the line of ascendancy than Proust's, also reveals remnants, in some ways, of a romantic worldview. Girard has located this breach in Dostoevsky with his pan-slavism, but does not consider the more bellicose sides of Dostoevsky, which probably remained until death.

[47] Despite the fact that conversion is not such a dominant theme in modern biography and fiction, there is, even in the modern autobiography and in the structure of modern novels, a similar perspective of conversion. The most clear-cut structures of conversion, however, have been compartmentalized into a more edifying religious literature, but also in novels and biography there is still an element of concluding, either in the scheme: fate-fortune, or as to how a person has changed. Especially novels built on a biographical structure, tend to entail something of a *Bildungs*-perspective. In some respects there are reasons to interpret novels like Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* and Proust's *In Search of Time Past* as fictionalized biographies. They can also be seen as imitations of more hagiographic, Christian motives in conversion-literature. The underground man's conversion, however, is a modern conversion story where the conversion is omitted. The *Notes from the Underground* text initially entailed a conversion, a need for believing in God. This was deleted by the publishers. (See Geir Kjetsaa. *Dostojevskij - et dikterliv* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1985), 183.) Proust's work can be read as a

Desire has Many Forms but is still One

Another important aspect of Proustian desire is that he sees the oneness or the unity of desire. Desire does not work differently in each individual. Proust, instead of primarily interpreting life from the viewpoint of space, sees his characters in *In Search of Lost Time* in relation to *time*, how desire modifies and changes them in time so that when the characters finally assemble at the home of the Prince de Guermantes, they have all become the victims of the harsh laws of desire. Desire is responsible for its own evolution and becomes a caricature of itself as it aggravates the symptoms.[49] The desire among the characters in *In Search of Lost Time* to be original and superior to others, ends in the most banal uniformity.

> *These key Proustian texts make the point that we are always dealing with the same structure – in other words, that desire is not really as interesting as it would like to make out. Far from being limitless in their possibilities, the surprises sprung by desire are always the same, always predictable and calculable. They only succeed in surprising desire itself, which is invariably caught in its own game and works against its own interest. No strategy can ever bring desire what it seeks, but desire never abandons strategy. (Girard. Things Hidden, 301.)*

The paradox concerning desire is that the desire for uniqueness creates, after a while, homogenity, while abandoning desire can actually make a person more original, as it means distancing oneself from one's desirous models. Originality then is not something exclusive or something unique, but is created from the process of desire no longer having the same grip on a person. Girard claims that critics are living in a fictional world if they believe that imagination is drawn from the self,[50] and uses Proust to underline this view. So the paradox is that while Proust is hailed by Girard as one of the most significant revealers of borrowed desire, he is also hailed by other critics to be a writer who creates autonomous individuals driven by autonomous desires.

Desires which Feeds on Themselves

The great importance with which Girard endows Proust in the context of a historical understanding of desire, is mainly based, as far as I can see, on Proust's understanding of *borrowed desire*. Girard claims that Proustian desire is always a borrowed desire[51] and that nowhere in *In Search of Lost Time* is it possible to detect a desire which feeds on itself.[52] There is nothing *In Search of Lost Time* which corresponds to a solipsistic theory, he claims.[53]

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development of revealing mimetic desire, of showing the possessed states of living through the act of secretly desiring the other, leading to an existential desperation where mimetic desire is finally abandoned, and resulting in a series of involuntary memories, which gradually lead to an opening up of the enchanted garden of remembering the past. If this is conversion in a religious sense, I will try to determine in this article.

[48] Although Girard interprets Dostoevsky as the most modern and acute novelist of desire, he opts out of psychological realism when he interprets Stavrogin in *The Possessed* as not having a mediator. Stavrogin functions, in Girard's interpretation, only as model for all the other 'sons', without being driven and formed by any mediator/model himself. I have criticized this in my MA thesis 'Metafysisk begjær i Dostojevskijs roman, *De besatte,*' Universitetet i Bergen, Fall 1988. ('Metaphysical Desire in Dostoevsky's Novel, *The Possessed'*). My main aim was, through a psychoanalytic and mimetic reading of *The Possessed*, to interpret Stavrogin as unconsciously driven by an imitation of his scandalized father's desires, which take the most hidden and destructive forms.

[49] *Things Hidden*, 304.

[50] *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 27-28.

[51] *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 34

[52] *Things Hidden*, 397.

[53] *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 34

Everything is mimesis, even regained time is a representation of past experiences, a repetition of Marcel's previous experience, but now purified from the desires which blurred the 'original' experience. Proustian desire is, in Girard's view, desire according to the other. But this is not the case, in fact, when Girard interprets Proust's conclusion. Proust, according to Girard, recaptures the past by recapturing the original impression beneath the opinions of others which hide it. This, according to my own impression, leaves the final insight to a rationality which is not mimetic, a discovery which actually presupposes an element of anti-mimetism. Although Proust, according to Girard, reveals that one has always copied others,[54] the final insight is based upon a freedom from copying. Therefore Girard's claim that nowhere in *In Search of Lost Time* is it possible to detect a desire which feeds on itself[55] smacks too much of using Proust for his own purpose. There are also incidents in *In Search of Lost Time* where desire is described as biologically determined, for example in the scene describing Saint-Loup's falsity regarding his homosexuality.

> *The falsehood consists for them in the fact that they do not want to admit to themselves that physical desire lies at the root of the sentiments to which they ascribe another origin. (In Search of Lost Time, vol 6, 68.)*

Here Proustian erotic desire is clearly more Freudian than Girardian, emphasizing physical or biological desires as decisive as regards to all other desires. In this statement the transformation of desire is caused by an inherent, physical desire, that then produces compensatory desires.

Dissolving of the Self

Mimesis, according to Proust, works in such a way that we do not know what comes from ourselves and what comes from the other.[56] For example, a writer imitates another writer, and by forgetting the imitative dimension, thinks he is a genius. And when desire blinds the mimetic dependence or influence, the mimetic reality is sublimated into an autonomous illusion. Desire makes a person blind to the fact that he or she is imitating. Desire, because it is dependent on mimesis, makes mimesis taboo. Desire wishes to quieten mimesis, make it uninteresting, common and base, because desire cannot exist without new desires and, at the same time, cannot continue to enchant the ways of the world once it has been revealed as an act of imitation. As desire itself is mimetic, it does all that it can not to be revealed as desire. Proust's great discovery in *In Search of Lost Time* thus revolves around the role of the other towards the self.

This is exemplified in the way in which Marcel tries to become original, but his experience of being totally in the hands of others, makes him gradually surrender to the fact that all his desires are borrowed. The characters' development in Dostoevsky and Proust's novels, are caused by a *transformation* of desire. This transformation, despite being a variation of desire, has a fundamental impact on a person's psychological disposition. Critics of *In Search of Lost Time* claim that almost all heterosexual characters turn out in the end to be homosexual, and view this as something rather overdone.[57] But these shiftings can be seen, in fact, as an act of internal desire, of initially showing desire towards what is not desirous. In *In Search of Lost Time* Proust seems possessed by this revelationary insight into the falsity of desire, describing

[54] *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 38.
[55] *Things Hidden*, 397.
[56] *In Search of Lost Time*, vol 2, 61.
[57] See Henry Peyre. 'The Legacy of Proust' in *Proust: A Collection of Critical Essays* (NJ.: Prentice Hall, 1962), 30-31.

almost all his characters as being governed by the game of metaphysical desire, and thus professing false desires. This, however, does not mean that the characters need to be naturally or initially homosexual. There is also the possibility of interpreting this change in sexuality as a process of transforming desires, from the object to the models. In this respect sexuality can be seen as an example of how imitating a model is capable of transforming sexual desires, indicating that sexual life is not such a stable, biological phenomenon as usually conceived. Proust, being perhaps one of the least pre-conceived thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, reveals a much more fleeting image of erotic life than is usual, as erotic desires seem largely to be determined by others.

All the characters in *In Search of Lost Time*, except Marcel's grandmother, reveal, to various degrees, an obsession towards the other. The characters who present their individuality and eclecticism with the greatest fervour reveal, in the process of the novel, a morbid consciousness of others: Legrandin, the despiser of snobs, is totally absorbed by people from the aristocracy, the arrogant Baron du Charlus is totally fixated on boys and men from the working class, Swann becomes possessed by Odette through the imitation of art.[58] Marcel himself goes through successive stages of deep fascination for Swann, the writer Bergotte, the actress La Berma, Gilberte and Albertine. Even Marcel's father, behind his bourgeois ideals, reveals mimetic fascination for the diplomat M. Norpois. Thus, Proust tries to show how the characters are driven by imitative desire towards their respective mediators. These different configurations of mimesis reveal a varying degree of intensity and domination over the subject. Marcel's father is not possessed by Norpois; this imitation is more external than, for example, Marcel's desire for Albertine, which becomes absolutely self-effacing. However, Norpois' few positive words on literature are capable about changing Marcel's father's view of Marcel becoming an author.[59] In Proust's novel there is little room for any autonomous desire. Even Marcel's mother who, to a lesser degree, has fallen prey to metaphysical desire, lives through the life of her husband, avoiding peering too deeply into his mistakes and weaknesses; and when her mother dies, her behaviour is shown to become more and more identical to that of her mother. Desire towards others is the engine, the driving force behind how people act. In deep contrast to romantic descriptions, Proustian characters are totally driven by their mimetic whims, their dependence on others, turning desires into degrading acts. Girard's metaphor of the weather vane is an excellent metaphor for how desire works in Proust's characters.

> *The wind turns the weather vane but the weather vane does not change; it would be changed if it stopped turning. Proust's characters turn in the wind of their desires. (Deceit, Desire and the Novel, 238.)*

According to Girard, their changes are due to changing data in the original mediator or to a change of mediator.[60] The weather vane metaphor is also a symbol of cerebral change. The characters, exposed to desire, do not change in any authentic way; they only become victims of their different desires. The weather vane remains the same; it just changes direction. The wind is, in this image, a metaphor for desire, which changes the direction of the characters through the help of desiring models. Living through a model is, in Proust's universe, less a way of changing personality than of degrading existing personality, and the change will inevitably mean a change for the worse.

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[58] *In Search of Lost Time*, vol 1, 268-270
[59] *In Search of Lost Time*, vol 2, 11.
[60] *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 238.

Proust's Uncertainty as Regards Desire

Desires, according to Proust, make people unhappy and empty inside. But there are also some passages where, in my opinion, it is not clear as to where Proust stands as regards the effects of desire. There is, for example, the way Proust interprets how other people make us suffer. Proust claims that a person who makes us suffer can function as a divinity, and the thought of this divinity tends to provide the individual with a certain consolation in his or her suffering.

Every individual who makes us suffer can be attached by us to a divinity of which he or she is a mere fragmentary reflexion, the lowest step in the ascent that leads to it, a divinity or an Idea which, if we turn to contemplate it, immediately gives us joy instead of the pain we were feeling before - indeed the whole art of living is to make use of the individuals through whom we suffer as a step enabling us to draw nearer to the divine form which they reflect and thus joyously to people our life with divinities. (In Search of Lost Time, vol 6, 258.)

The people who make us suffer may be interpreted in these lines as the models of desire and, in the process of internal mediation, the models are turned into a divinities. Usually in Proust's work, whenever rivalry is evoked, a desirous happiness appears, but it leads only to suffering and personal degradation. But Proust, or so it would seem from the point of view from the above text, also sees this process as something life-giving. Also Girard has interpreted this passage in a positive way.[61] Girard claims that in this passage Proust shows the meaning and value of suffering, and that suffering can loosen the bind towards the mediator.[62] [63] My view, however, is that this joy is a false joy, created by desiring other people in a degrading manner. It is, however, not completely clear as to whether suffering is caused by as well as relieved through desire. But in the context, the divinities that cause suffering seem to reflect the suffering Marcel has experienced through loving Gilberte and Albertine, thus giving the narrator the necessary insights into the way desire works. The dubiousness of this passage seems to describe both suffering through the model, and the freedom and joy when the sufferer is liberated from degrading desire. The problem in interpreting it as a text on desire consists in the absolute role the model appears to have regarding pleasure and pain. There is no alternative, no loop-hole, no escape from the model's sado-masochistic role, except the time-soothing effect of suffering, which reveals the true content, though not the destructive nature of desire as such. If we take this argument further, Proust clearly proclaims desire: our rival, he claims, is actually our benefactor, because a woman, for example, who previously excited in us a mere paltry physical desire, instantly, through rivalry, adds an immense value to they who rival.[64] Such reflection leads to a rather masochistic conclusion, by claiming that if the unhappiness that befalls us is without cruelty, it would also be without fruit.[65] I therefore draw the conclusion that interpreting the passage as a description of the model's cruelty, leading to something beneficial, *contradicts the laws and structures of desire*. Here, desiring through a destructive model is seen as something fruitful. This is clearly a heterodox understanding in relation to the main understanding of desire in *In Search of Lost Time*. On the other hand, both Proust and Girard seem to be in tune with, even push forward a certain Christian motif where experiencing hell is seen as pretext for salvation. Therefore, in both Girard's and Proust's reflections on desire, the motif of bad desires having, in the end, a good effect, may be seen to be present.

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[61] *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 80.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Girard seems to regard all kinds of suffering, if they lead to a revelation of, and liberation from, metaphysical desire, as something good.
[64] *In Search of Lost Time*, vol 6, 267.
[65] Ibid., 269.

Dying from Desire

For Proust, revealing desire is both the result of being in the grip of desire and escaping its devastating effects. When overcome by desire it is difficult to describe desire without being captivated by the laws of desire, which inevitably means a certain propagation of desire. But the devastating effects of desire would seem to be the reason why the characters in *In Search of Lost Time* become caricatures. Samuel Beckett saw the real effect of Proust's insights when he claimed that the essence of *In Search of Lost Time* reveals that 'wisdom does not consist in the satisfaction but in the ablation of desire.'[66] Both Beckett and Girard claim that in order for one's desires to be revealed, they must in some way die. Proust's insight into the realm of desire is the process of allowing one's own desires to die, in order to reach a truth concerning human beings. This death of desire marks the birth of *In Search of Lost Time*.[67]

Art Means Dying from Desire

The death of desire comes about through a process of suffering. And this suffering is transformed into art. It is not the suffering which makes the art, but the act of ridding oneself of desire, which implies the necessity of suffering, and which, paradoxically, opens the door to creativity, to past experiences and truth. The past that is captured, is a former desire relived on contact with a relic of the past. Thus, memory is no longer poisoned and dominated by desire.[68] Girard calls the kind of memory (Proustian memory), which is not driven by metaphysical or acquisitive desire, *affective memory*. Affective memory is something which is on a higher plane than memory in the usual sense, as it carries with it a condemnation of an original desire.[69] One of the great discoveries that Proust made through affective memory was, according to Girard, the double role of the mediator, which takes both evil and sacred forms.[70] The problem with memory tinged by desire is that it has become transfigured, neither being able to account for what really happened nor give a deeper description of the past.[71]

Affective Memory and Christian Conversion

The experience caused by affective memory may seem different from the Christian understanding of dying from desire, especially as Proust seldom refers to redeeming life and time in any Christian sense. Girard, in analysing the process of dying from desire, claims that Proust underwent the same process as a Christian conversion.[72] He does not claim that Proust actually became a Christian. The claim refers rather to the process of dying from desire and regaining new life. In this respect, Proust, according to Girard, depicts the same process as a Christian conversion. '*Proust espouses the Christian structure of redemption more perfectly*

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[66] Beckett. *Proust* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1931), 7.
[67] In memory there is no possessive desire. (See *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 34.) This death is really a death towards life, as it opens the doors to the past. Such a structure is also present in *Jean Santeuil*. But despite such remembrance or recollection of the past in *Jean Santeuil* it is, nevertheless, a recollection of the past through desire. In order to write *In Search of Lost Time,* Proust had to abandon his self-legitimizing approach to life. Once he had lost the illusion of autonomous desire, Proust became capable of giving a precise account of his past, a past where desire is presented as a borrowed desire, a desire based upon the desire of the other. In memory there is not any possessive desire, but an ending of desire, a return to calm and joy.
[68] *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 80.
[69] Ibid, 81.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid.
[72] This claim is first made in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* and is further elaborated in *Things Hidden* under the title 'Proust's Conversion', 393-398.

than the carefully planned efforts of many conscientous Christian artists,' he claims.[73] This process of dying from desire is not something which is completely unconscious in the text of *In Search of Lost Time* as the process of time regained is an allusion to John 12.24, where the seed must fall into the earth in order to bear fruit.[74] The process of ridding oneself of desire has been interpreted, by some critics, as a Buddhist understanding of desire. The Proustian understanding of dying from desire indeed has an affinity with Buddhism, when we consider such motifs as the act of becoming dead to the world, living as a recluse and concentrating on the inner world.[75] Harold Bloom goes as far as to say that Proust mediates Eastern thought with Western.[76] In my view, one can find in *In Search of Lost Time* both a Buddhist and a Christian approach to revealing the illusions of the world.[77]

From a novelist's point of view there is no knowledge, in the act of creating, of being before or ahead of desire. An understanding of desire can only be reached by retrospection, and by becoming dead to its influences. Also, the critic is dependent on a similar development in order to understand desire. Being open to one's own biographical past seems to be a must both for novelists and critics.[78] This symmetry between novelist and critic as regards understanding desire springs from similar biographical sources: desire cannot be given a true structural description without experience of the paradoxical character of desire. An understanding of desire is in its essentially something depicted from personal experience, of reflecting on why our beginnings never know our ends. This does not mean that one cannot speak of desires other than one's own desires. It means that depicting desire without profound experiences of how it evolves in one's own life, means projecting desires onto everyone else in order to escape the truth about one's own desires.

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[73] Girard (Ed). *Proust. A Collection of Critical Essays* (Prentice-Hall, Inc, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1962), 11.
[74] *In Search of Lost Time*, vol 6, 446.
[75] Proust as a recluse. See George D. Painter. *Marcel Proust* (London: Penguin Books, 1983), 448-681 and Ronald Hayman. *Proust* (London: Heineman, 1990), 325-496.
[76] Harold Bloom. 'Proust: The True Persuasion of Sexual Jealousy' in *The Western Canon* (New York San Diego London: Harcourt Brace & Company) 412.
[77] But, at the same time, this process did not, in the life of Proust, implicate much change as regards to religious commitment or world view, actually it is difficult to depict any change of religious ideas in Proust's official life. This fall from desire is actually something one may find in many great religions - even in certain aspects of humanistic thought.
[78] Interpreting desire will always be dependent on attitude and biography. The rather dogmatic scepticism of the second half of the twentieth century towards regarding biographical fact as useful in understanding works of art, can be seen as a desire to obliterate mimesis in literary interpretation. Instead, mimesis is substituted by ideas, which can be seen as anti-mimetic strategy in order to hide the effects of desire. Preoccupation with ideas can be seen, in certain instances, as a way of turning desire into the decisive factor by hiding or omitting its presence. Certain methods of interpretation can be seen as hostility towards using biographical facts and therefore blocking insights into mimetic and/or interdividual desire. Both the New Criticism and Structuralism have been relatively dismissive of using biography to understand literary texts, while Deconstructionism, even if it does not have such a dogmatic dismissal of biography, does not seem keen to use biography as a means to understand novelistic works. There seems, on the whole, to have been a clear anti-mimetic tendency in nineteenth and twentieth century humanistic thought. In this respect getting to grips with desire and how it works has mostly been confined to areas outside science, even to areas outside art and literature. From this point of view Freud's attempt to locate desire, for example in *Zur Einführung des Narzissmus,* must be regarded as a major breakthrough in humanistic science. The fallacy, however, in biographical analysis is its tendency to establish a naive correspondence between life and art, a tendency which can easily lead to interpreting Proust as identical with both the narrator and the main character (Marcel). This, however, is not only due to a simplistic projection of life into art, but also to the very, very thin veil Proust creates between himself and Marcel. From the perspective of biographical symmetry, it is both possible and legitimate to read *In Search of Lost Time* as a fictionalized autobiography. This symmetry is the fruit of Proust's imitative reconstruction of his past.

Girard's interpretation of Proust's work, both in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* and *Things Hidden* draws heavily on biographical sources, indicating that Proust underwent a Christian process of dying from desire, and that this personal development enabled him to describe such a process in his characters. But biographical knowledge of Proust's life does not confirm any radical shift in his attitude, either on religious or moral matters. There does seem, however, to be a certain change taking place in Proust, especially after his mother's death in 1905, an incident which probably enhanced his guilt and remorse.[79] But it would be stretching things too far to conclude that Proust underwent a Christian conversion. Even if there are certain indications that Proust gave up his earlier role of snob and *vaniteux*,[80] he never underwent any formal religious conversion. And those who wish to find a change of behaviour will surely be repulsed by incidents in the latter part of Proust's life where his snobbery triggered outrageous acts of aggression, leading even to fights and duels.[81] I therefore refute the claim that the biographical material of Proust's life, either in itself or combined with his work, could make one conclude that Proust became a Christian.

However, the process of *falling from desire* can be located in various texts. Describing a process of *falling from desire* could be seen as far more fundamental than any change in ideas or life-styles. A similar structure to Christian conversion is clearly present in Proust's work. Also present is a description of dying from the nastiness of the world. What is not present is any affirmative reference to a Christian belief. But although Proust does not refer to any renewal based on a belief in Christ, his descriptions of falling from desire certainly indicate some kind of renewal. A Christian understanding of dying from desires would mean that desires were transformed through an imitation of Christ. Proust does not positively link this dying from desire to the process of imitating Christ, even if the allusion to John 12.24 refers to Christ's death and resurrection.[82] This is, however, in the context, more a simile than a symbol. Neither does Christ nor a belief in Christ have any revealing or driving force in the development of any of Proust's characters, not even in the experience of regained time. But such a meticulous description of dying and renewal in *In Search of Lost Time*, would, at the same time, from a commonsensical point of view, be unthinkable if it had had nothing to do with Proust's own suffering which had led to his dying from snobbish and self-legitimizing desires.

Resurrection

[79] There is especially one incident in Proust's life in which Girard sees the most profound significance of his maturing towards genius: his mother's death. Girard refers to the article "The Filial Sentiments of a Parricide" published in Le Figaro in 1907 as evidence of Proust's fall from desire (see *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 300-303) an article published 16 months after his mother's death, indicating a new dimension of remorse and guilt, where the role of snob and vaniteux seems to be substituted by real compassion.

[80] Proust did, however, become, from 1910 and onwards, more of a reclusive. But his lifestyle still consisted of a life among the aristocracy, with exclusive outings, including frequent dining at the Ritz. See (among other Proust-biographies) George D. Painter. *Marcel Proust* (London: Penguin Books, 1983), and Ronald Hayman. *Proust*. (London: Heineman, 1990).

[81] In 1913 Proust offered to fight a duel with Jacques Copeau, because he did not let him publish excerpts of *In Search of Lost Time* in NRF. See Hayman. *Proust*, 366.

[82] *In Search of Lost Time*, vol 6, 446.

With regard to the structure of *In Search of Lost Time* as a whole, Proust actually goes further than merely creating a simile for Christian death and resurrection. There is also the suggestion of a life after death. Despite an agnostic spirit of doubt, there is some hope that the small seeds of meaning, of ethical responses and calling may indicate a transcendence and may even be a sign of a greater resurrection. This is illustrated in a longer reflection on life after death.

> *Dead forever? Who can say? Neither spiritualism nor religion have proved the soul survives death, but everything happens in our life as if we came into it with an onus of obligations contracted in a previous life; nothing in the conditions of life on this earth made us believe ourselves required to do good, to be considerate, or even polite, or to make the atheistic artist believe he was obliged to make twenty fresh starts on a piece of work that may excite admiration which will be of little importance to his body when worms are eating it (...) All these obligations which do not have their sanction in our present life seem to belong to a different world, founded on goodness, scrupulousness, sacrifice, a world entirely different from this one, which we leave to be born on this earth, before perhaps going back to live again under those unknown laws which we have been obeying because we were carrying their doctrines in us without knowing who inplanted them, those laws to which all profound intellectual work approximates and which are invisible only – if at all – to fools. So the idea Bergotte was not dead for ever is not improbable. (In Search of Lost Time of Things Past, vol. 3, 180-185.)*

Such a text could hardly have been written by an author who was not considering a religious answer to life, despite the fact that it does not refer to any religion in particular. Thus, Proust's understanding of his own creation cannot be seen as something alien to a Christian understanding of resurrection, and therefore this creation, although not directly Christian, seems to be born of the same spiritual knowledge that which we might call the fruits of Christian love.

Time Regained

In Search of Lost Time can be seen as a product of time regained, as involuntary memories seem to be the incitement for writing the novel. Before involuntary memory, the only thing Marcel remembers of the Combray of his childhood is the bedroom scene where he waits for his mother's goodnight kiss.[83] But preoccupation with involuntary memory was in fact something that Proust had also tried to incorporate into *Jean Santeuil*. In *Jean Santeuil* there is a description of involuntary memory evoked by the sound of a bell.[84] There is also a chapter entitled 'Impressions Regained,' where certain smells bring back memories from the past, liberating the narrator from the present.[85] These texts in *Jean Santeuil*, however, are not in any way decisive as motivation for the writing of the novel, or, in revealing any hidden truth about his past. They are more like less significant reflections on time, evoking the past in the present.

Beckett lays great emphasis on involuntary memory (in *In Search of Lost Time*) as a decisive experience necessary for becoming an artist. But he does not interpret these involuntary experiences as a part of the liberation from desire.[86] Beckett regards involuntary memory from a more solipsistic point of view, enabling Proust to fulfil his talent as an artist and, at the same time, follow his calling. According to Beckett, Proust was a romantic in that he saw his

[83] Shattuck. *Proust's Way* (N.Y., London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), 39-40.
[84] *Jean Santeuil*, 44.
[85] Ibid., 406-410.
[86] Beckett. *Proust,* 51-59.

project as a calling.[87] Time regained is not deliberately seen, by the author, as liberation from desire. And Beckett is probably right in regarding Proust something of a romantic in his emphasis on affection (instead of intelligence), ideas (instead of concepts) and inspiration.[88] Beckett does not, however, seem to see any kind of anti-romanticism in the way Proust reveals the universality of desire and, like Dante, shows the futility of that same desire,[89] revealing the baseness behind those people who, from a romantic point of view, are endowed with an aura of exclusivity and distinction.

Falling from desire

Falling from desire is, in my view, the key which suddenly opens the door which Marcel has being trying to open, but which, because of various kinds of drives, has remained closed. Marcel, in the final volume of *In Search of Lost Time*, is a witness to a certain breakdown, both in his own life and in the breakdown of French and European culture caused partly by World War I. The inside reports from the secret Parisian brothels, including Baron de Charlus' masochistic need to be flogged, indicate the worst and final stages of metaphysical desire. Baron de Charlus' masochism is depicted as a direct response to his sadistic behaviour in the salons, as an attempt to reach emotional equilibrium, but it is nothing more than a vacillation between one sort of violence and another.

After witnessing the breakdown of traditional values caused by the war and different kinds of individual desire, Marcel reaches a stage of resignation. His health falters and he enters a sanatorium outside Paris. The reader receives no information about what happens to Marcel during his years at the sanatorium, but we follow Marcel on his train journey back to Paris. In this part, Marcel is no longer the aesthete or the fashionable writer. He ponders over his lack of talent for literature.[90] The falsity of literature strikes him more painfully than ever. The joys of the mind, which Bergotte had claimed was the young Marcel's privilege, now seems a sterile lucidity.[91] Neither nature nor other people are capable any longer of providing him with inspiration.[92] Marcel has reached a stage where he considers himself to be worthless.[93] Proust describes Marcel in a state of fallen desires. Marcel has abandoned his aspirations to become a great author and great man of the world. He has witnessed, both individually and collectively, the most severe degradations, and the years at a sanatorium have not cured him,[94] only created a vacuum, an emptiness. This development, however, seems to be a necessary requirement in order to experience time regained. In the vein of a typical conversion, Marcel must first experience intense emptiness and despair in order for him to give up his worldly ambitions. But this void does not mark any renewal of life; it is only a *via negativa*, the preparation for time regained.

Despite this surrender of his worldly ambitions, he accepts an invitation from the Prince de Guermantes, an invitation he accepts without the frantic excitement of his youth. The reflections Marcel has in the aftermath of his experiencing numerous flashbacks of the past, caused by slipping on the cobbled street, wiping his mouth with a stiff napkin, finding a first

[87] Beckett. *Proust,* 61.
[88] Ibid., 61-62.
[89] In some ways one can see Beckett starting off from where Proust ended; from the point where desires have stripped the characters bare, and there is only baseness, weakness and conflict left (to write about).
[90] *In Search of Lost Time*, vol 6, 202.
[91] Ibid, 216.
[92] Ibid., 202.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid.

edition of George Sand's *Françoise le Champi* (in the Guermantes' library), are based primarily on art. These experiences, however, reveal truths about one's past, which had been 'smothered' because of vanity, passion, intellect and habit.[95] But true art is, as the narrator tells us, quite simply, our lives.[96] This true art, however, is not our biography as such. Nor is it any kind of crude realism about our lives. Proust almost becomes a secular mystic when he attempts to describe what time regained is about. Time regained is about exploring the unknown depths which lie unknown within us.[97] And in order to reveal such truth, one has to cancel out one's dearest illusions. These illusions are based on a superficial and illusory understanding of objectivity.[98] It is clear from these reflections that Proust clearly professes a very different view of art than that which is generally described as realism. He even, several times, dismisses realism,[99] although it certainly is not the realism of Flaubert and Dostoevsky that he dismisses. Proust's main critique of realism is that life in its essence is not anything like what it seems to be. When, however, he tries to reveal the illusion of this realism, it seems more like the illusion of romanticism.

> *(...) so that now, instead of soothing oneself for a hundredth time with the words: 'She was very sweet,' one would have to transpose the phrase so that it read: 'I experienced pleasure when I kissed her.' Certainly, what I had felt in my hours of love is what all men feel. One feels, yes, but what one feels is like a negative which shows only blackness until one has placed it near a special lamp and which must be looked at in reverse. So with one's feelings: until one has brought them within the range of the intellect one does not know what they represent. (In Search of Lost Time, vol 6, 255.)*

Although Proust's individualism and subjectivity have a certain romantic flavour, he dismisses both immediate feeling and appearance. Far from being a romantic the Proust of *In Search of Lost Time* seems to be in a process of revealing all sorts of illusions about himself and people in general which a romantic would cherish rather than reveal.

Is *Time Regained* Religiously Motivated?

Proust in 'Time Regained' seems to profess a religious experience without referring to a God. If Proust was not such a firm disbeliever in human goodness, freedom and rationality, his project could be related to a noble humanism. But the religion proclaimed in *In Search of Lost Time* is rather one of art or literature. Because art is capable of revealing the life within a life, it is the nearest Proust comes to discovering truth. This is, however, not art and literature as such; it is the art and literature which is able to reveal the man within man, or the inner man. This kind of art is also capable of revealing the hidden message of existence. If this had simply been art as such, Proust would probably have been just another artist, claiming that his *métier* is far more important and far superior to everybody else's. And, indeed, at times Proust himself does express this kind of arrogant, narrow-minded and self-legitimizing attitude, scorning people devoid of artistic emotions,[100] especially art-lovers who themselves are incapable of expressing art.[101] There is a tendency in *In Search of Lost Time* to divinize art and, by so doing, to glorify the artist as someone aloof from the rest of human-kind, following a sacred calling. This regained belief in art is also a part of time regained,[102] a part which clearly tends towards turning art into a new kind of religion.

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[95] Ibid., 254.
[96] Ibid., 253.
[97] Ibid., 255.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid., 236 ff.
[100] Ibid., 253.
[101] Ibid., 250.
[102] Ibid., 235-255.

It is difficult, however, to see certain parts of 'Time Regained' as having been written from a humble and religiously motivated perspective. In fact there is a marked egoistical tendency in 'Time Regained'. The at one moment, humble narrator is easily transformed, at another into a rather narcissistic and hybrid narrator. In the scenes following a succession of involuntary experiences, the narrator begins to describe the people gathered at the Guermantes party as if he had entered a zoo. The deconstruction of the characters is not only a description of the transformation of desire, portraying the individuals more like animals than human beings; it also contains rather horrible descriptions of physical decay. If we were to strip Proust's excellence of language of its content, it might sound like a youth who despises old and ugly people. Proust's descriptions, which, on the one hand, present a marvellous climax of desires run wild, also constitute Proust's rather shallow and primitive revenge over the people he has gradually come to despise.

Conclusions

Proust seems to vacillate between seeing art as a secular religion in itself and, in more limited terms, as a medium that leads towards truth. Although Proust clearly does not divinize art *in toto*, he never refers to art as subordinated to religious truth. Religion in 'Time Regained' is the ability to depict one's life exactly as it is, in all its depths. And in order to do this one must let one's self die. The latter notion is clearly religious in nature. The conclusion of *Jean Santeuil* reveals no conclusion with regard to the main character. Instead, the conclusion is directed towards Jean's parents. Jean's father, who has been typically overambitious, becomes in old age, as he approaches death, a milder, less ambitious person, exceedingly loving and gentle towards his wife.[103] Madame Santeuil, who in her younger years, judged people very severely, especially women who broke the moral etiquette, turns into a more tolerant and forgiving person.[104] Jean's parents represent the downfall of desire, a stage which Jean himself has not reached. Proust, in *Jean Santeuil*, clearly sees the wisdom of allowing desires to die, but is neither ready for that process himself, nor capable of allowing this knowledge to become an 'organic' structure in the novel. The young Proust seems to be too honest a writer to attempt to introduce any fake conclusion to Jean's life. But the novel's conclusion, represented through Jean's parents, is more symbolic than organic. Although the novel ends inconclusively as regards Jean himself, his parents embody the spiritual fruit of compassion and humility.

From an ideological or rhetorical viewpoint, however, one could claim that *Jean Santeuil* concludes by shifting sides according to desire. But, in one sense, it is the easiest way out, as the conclusion is no conclusion as regards the main story. It somewhat resembles a *deus ex machina* ending in that salvation is represented by someone outside the main story, a conclusion which does not restructure or shed light on the previous drama. The conclusion, however, implies opting out of snobbery. But this also means opting out of the society drama that possesses Jean's life. And by breaking away from the main drama, the two last chapters clearly mark something new, both in tone and content. Despite his closing the novel with the introduction of a new, gentler and less snobbish attitude, *Proust has not revealed the mimetic possessiveness driving the main characters*. From such a perspective the novel and its conclusion might be considered to be a failure.

[103] *Jean Santeuil*, 723-731.
[104] Ibid., 732-744

The conclusion of *In Search of Lost Time* reveals the truth both about the persons whom young Marcel has desired so desperately and about Marcel himself. The truth means unravelling the aura of godlikeness and discovering the true mediocrity of each divinity. This is only possible if the other is no longer seen through the deceptive glances of desire. Odette, due, both to Marcel's fall from desire and to the modifying effects of her lifelong desire to succeed in society, has begun to look like a doll, a drunkard, a small child, a sterilized rose,[105] indicating an almost total loss of humanity. The Princess de Guermantes has absolutely nothing in common with the lady who had initially cast her spell on Marcel. This of course, is partly due to the fact that Madame Verdurin has become the new Duchess de Guermantes. But the spell has been broken by the transformation of desire. The transcendence of the duchesses and dukes have not come about because middle-class people like Gilberte Swann and Madame Verdurin have infiltrated the aristocracy by their marriages; it has changed as a result of the shifting of desire.

Democratization through Desire

The life of the Duchess de Guermantes, which at one stage in Marcel's life was considered to be a paradise which he could never enter, has become, at the end of the novel, the very ordinary life of a very ordinary woman.[106] Madame de Guermantes' position in society, from being the unquestionable top during the *fin de siècle*, is now, following World War I, considerably reduced. High society has changed dramatically. The effects of desire, assuming all kinds of new forms, have turned aristocrats into bores, and social climbers from the middle classes into socialites. The democratization of the salons, Proust shows, has very little or nothing to do with any zest for righteousness or political equality. It is the work of desire.

The democratization of desire brings about a rather pathetic veneration for artists (to which Proust also clings) and turns Madame de Guermantes into a good friend of the actress Rachel who, at the beginning of the novel, was considered to be just as much a prostitute as an actress. And the Duke de Guermantes, who has been chasing young women throughout his entire life, ends up becoming a frantic and jealous lover of a senile and loveless Odette.

Time and Desire

The end of the novel focuses on the merciless workings of desire. Desire has transformed everyone and everything. It recalls a tempered version of Michelangelo's *The Last Judgement*. Everyone is, if not outwardly, then inwardly, suffering from the delusions caused by desire. Desire has emptied everyone, made them suffer and die inwardly, and then left them devoid of any attraction. The only thing left capable of making them desirous and attractive, is snobbery, the last resort of desire. But desire has changed: the desire for titles is not, in post-war Paris, the main desire, while a new set of people are taking on the role of models to be desired.[107] Desire has swept mercilessly over the fashionable pre-war set of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, gradually ruining their lives, leaving them full of desires but rather crippled as to their ability to arouse desire. This is the conclusion, taking the form of an inverted Nirvana.

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[105] *In Search of Lost Time*, vol 6, 321-325.
[106] Ibid., 399.
[107] There is something carnevalesque about the final social gathering at the Guermantes as the aristocrats who before have been considered as the elite, are now losing prestige, while people from the lower classes like Bloch and Rachel, are now the people who are ascending towards the top of the hierarchy. The rather ironic way Proust describes this tendency of destabilising power, reveals a slight conservative strike in Proust's personality.

Time has not provoked any liberation or personal peace, only loss. Only for Marcel is the fall of desire a gain. It clarifies his true, desirous past and gives him a new outlook, paving the way, and bringing him the final inspiration to depict the true story of his life.

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