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THE MIND IN TIME

Proust, Involuntary Memory, and the Adventure in Perception

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That one frequently encounters the unforeseeable in life is a commonplace. The realization that we experience the unforeseeable within ourselves, as or more frequently than its outward counterpart, was, until Marcel Proust, less widely recognized and remained too little investigated. And those unforeseeable experiences within ourselves most often are a result of the past re-emerging and re-positioning itself in the present – it is in a sense the mind moving across time, from the past into the present but also, if somewhat counterintuitively and in a different way, from the present into the past. But once one sees precisely what it was that Proust brought into view, it seems all too like a case of something central to the mind’s experience having been hidden in plain sight. And similarly, once one sees this, one can then see why Proust’s work represents a contribution of great significance to philosophy. So one might ask: (1) What is so powerfully important to human self-understanding concerning the unforeseeable contents of the mind to which Proust drew the permanent attention of the entire literary world? (I will offer an answer by extracting what I take to be seven central themes of Proust’s project.) (2) How might we make what he articulated, across long and masterful volumes of a life’s magnum opus, more conceptually precise, or understand it more richly, by bringing it into contact with philosophy? (I will offer an answer by looking into the writings of a philosopher not usually associated with Proust, the American pragmatist George Herbert Mead along with some closely related thoughts of who is often linked to Proust, Henri Bergson.) (3) What was it that kept this feature of human experience submerged in such a way that its actual ubiquity was obscured? (Here, I will offer an answer with a brief suggestion concerning the conceptually blinding dominance of what Wittgenstein called a philosophical picture.)

“The shifting gusts of memory” and Romantic Despair of a Philosophic Kind

One central theme is put into play almost immediately: in Swann’s Way, the narrator, in describing his early experience as a fledgling writer of attempting to capture in language what he has seen – in this case the bell towers of churches he saw while riding in a coach along a twisting road, he now realizes that, in that earlier and younger writing, he described the outward objects of perception in a manner that is physically impossible. That is, he described them as though they first appear, then disappear, and finally reappear in a different place or position, constantly changing relations to other objects in the visual field. This is
unquestionably physically impossible, but it is not mentally impossible – indeed that way of speaking (even if a violation of what we know externally) captures the experience. And so a primary theme is sounded: what may be an accurate description of the mind’s perceptual experience may not only be significantly different from, but may indeed be incompatible with, a description of the external world that occasions, or is the object of, that perception. Or to put the theme another way: the criterion of the truth or accuracy of the description of the mind’s experience is not transferred inwardly from the outside world – the verbal portrayal of a mind’s perceptual content does not (necessarily) answer to that.2

Having referred to “the shifting and confused gusts of memory” that “never lasted for more than a few seconds” (p.6; SW, 8; I 7), the narrator shows in detail what it is to recollect with the mind moving or swirling through time (in this case his early experience of going to bed, the awaited and comforting pleasure of receiving his goodnight kiss from his mother, details of his bedrooms, and details of the then-present relatives). Here, we see a second theme put into play. The famous case – indeed long a cliché concerning Proust’s work – of the madeleine is often taken as Proust’s leading example of how an artifact associated with earlier experience can suddenly and dramatically restore memory. It is that – but it is also much more than that. Just before the description of the Madeleine experience (pp. 34–6; SW, 52–3; I 44–5), Proust, responding to an imaginary questioner of the tale of his youth that he is presently recounting, wrote this passage:

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

(p. 33; SW, 50–1; I 43)

This makes clear that Proust is not fundamentally interested in just any memory: it is not facts as recalled by an exercise of will of a kind that generates images – that is, mental photographs of the appearance of the external world – because these preserve nothing of the past itself. And this kind of memory need not be solely constituted of visual images. “pictures” is the word used in one translation but “information” in another, and it could also be “facts”, so the memory can be linguistic, verbal, or in a broad sense informational. But in either case, what he calls intellectual memory, or willed or volitional memory, is not, and cannot be, fundamental to his project. Involuntary memory is. We can pull memory up from the depths or out of the recesses (to use spatial metaphors for the mind), but that is not in and of itself an adventure; we would not call it that because it is too predictable. An outward adventure is full of the unforeseeable; an inward one displays the same defining characteristic. A walk along a very well-known path that we take daily is not an adventure; the word would be puzzlingly misused in that case (thinking through where we would and would not use a word is often the fullest way of comprehending its meaning). But going into an unknown forest for days, even going into an unknown city for days, or going anywhere with a person we are only getting to know for days – those are adventures, cases in which the word is called for and at home. It is thus in (a) unpredictably emergent memories, where (b) those memories are of phenomenological experience and not merely of either the physical appearance or the verbal description of the outside world, that Proust is interested. What he calls here “the reality” – meaning the external world as we take it to be objectively described and pictured – is for him
“all dead”, precisely because that kind of memory, that conception of the experience of memory, leaves out the distinctiveness, the contour, the inflections, of one’s sensibility in its creative and kaleidoscopic ever-changing interaction with the world. His focus is not the world, but the mind’s perception of the world, not externally verified “photographic” memories or linguistic “transcriptions” or direct descriptions of the world, but rather the vicissitudes of consciousness as it experiences, and fluidly restructures, that world. And so Proust writes:

“Beyond the reach of the intellect” means it is not a matter of volition, not the reward of any decision to remember (where the memory is of the kind he is philosophically investigating and capturing in literary form). But the important and most revealing part of this passage is in parentheses: it is not a memory of the object unto itself; it is a memory of experience, a memory of experience in that moment occasioned by the object. It is the “sensation which that material object” stimulates, a sensation we discover upon encountering the object where the past experience is interwoven into the mind that we are now. It is not, nor could it be for Proust, a simple mono-dimensional recovery of the past or a re-enactment of the past. Rather, it is a remembrance inflected by the relevant content of the intervening years and the sensibility as we have cultivated it right up to this present point. In that respect, rather than a mind recalling photograph-like images of earlier visual or ocular data, or a mind recalling words said and words heard, or a mind recalling any broad information as mentioned above, it is a mind moving through time, taking the present self into the past while bringing the past self into the present. This theme is encapsulated in the narrator’s description of his drinking the tea with the madeleine: with the second and third sips, the mnemonic strength weakens, and he realized, “It is time to stop; the potion is losing its magic. It is plain that the object of my quest, the truth, lies not in the cup but in myself” (p. 34; SW, 53; I 45). That is, the focus, the kind of knowledge being sought here, is inwardly phenomenological, not outwardly ontological. And so, with the first two themes now interweaving, the truth will be a matter of truth-to-mind rather than truth-to-object.

A third theme concerns the intricacy of the relation between the present self and the remembered self, and the way that the knowledge of that intricate relation then permeates and complicates present experience. The narrator, in remembering his young self waiting in special anticipation for the mother’s bedtime kiss, for the gentle sonic texture of the mother’s voice and that voice’s softly reassuring words, and for the security and comfort of her physical presence and embrace, now as a grown man realizes that the boy, his earlier self, was at the same time, as a kind of phenomenological underlayment, nervous, or somewhat agitated before his mother came (because for the boy the predictability of the world could change and she might not come – as indeed happens when guests are present), but then with this in mind the narrator now also realizes (and here is this third theme) that his boy-self was also somewhat nervous and agitated for a separate reason, which is that the boy somehow realized that this particular experience cannot happen, just as it is, ever again (p. 33; SW, 50–1; I 43). So the narrator realizes, through imaginative time-crossing interaction with his re-emergent boy-self, that a sense of impending loss was always contained within fulfillment. And so
again with that in mind, the narrator, the adult, realizes within this recollection that all of life has been like that – as William James claimed as part of his pragmatism, experience is *strictly speaking* unrepeatable. (Of course, we have experiences that we call repetitions – but that covers over the differentiating fact that even if it were otherwise identical – which in practice it would not be – the second is recognizable *as a repetition*, which of course the first is not. The “identical” experience is thus not indistinguishably identical.) The narrator, with correlated memories flooding in as a result of the memory of the mother’s kiss, realizes that (a) he is the adult successor of that boy and so in a sense carries that boy within him, (b) he has had a lifetime of resonant, but not strictly repeated, experience, with the sense of non-repeatability running throughout, (c) even as a boy his nervousness outlasting the kiss showed that he instinctually knew that the precise experience could never be relived or regained, and (d) that his past (this is essential to the third theme) is both always with him, and yet that its memory will always be inextricably interwoven with, and inflected by, who he is now. And so he realizes that the boy’s nervousness, a special admixture of “terror and joy”, was philosophically justified. For the boy and for the man, desire satisfied is at that same moment forever lost. It is for this reason that love becomes a topic of extraordinary psychological complexity for the narrator, just as it is for Charles Swann.4

And so a fourth theme emerges: love as investigated by Proust-as-philosopher is complicated – but for him for a special reason that follows from the first three themes. Swann experiences a magnetic attraction to Odette, which grows to what is for him love, growing, in turn, to obsession, and finally to phases of frenetic and manic desperate physical action (e.g. searching frantically around Paris for her after he arrives late at a gathering and misses his anticipated seeing of her) fueled by desperate thought and emotion (e.g. where his psychic state unfolds from attraction to infatuation to a tortured condition in which the layered complexity of his mental world concerning her vastly outweighs what is actually taking place). So precisely what, then, is the special reason?

Early in his interactions with Odette, Swann happens to hear a sonata with a phrase that lodged in his mind at an earlier point in life. His “madeleine” experience is thus musical rather than gustatory/olfactory, but with another more important difference: the experience reaches for him into the future, not into the past. So his mind senses, upon hearing the phrase in her presence, the possibility of a romanticized future with her that resituates the musical phrase from his past into an imagined future. Or: the narrator’s mind, with the madeleine, moved the past into the present. Triggered by a musical phrase from the past, Swann’s mind moves the present into the future.5 And he then sees what is for him a perception-determining resemblance between Odette and a figure in a Botticelli painting, a reproduction of which he thereafter keeps near. This further and still more dangerously aestheticizes his perception of Odette, so that (and here is the special reason) for him the perception of the outer world is covered over by a projection onto it from his inner world – the result, predictably, yielding romantic ruin, with the section entitled “Swann in Love” concluding with the famous remark that he wasted years of his life on a woman who was not even his type. That realization comes, after all kinds of agonies of the romantic mind (including unforeseeable chance hearings of the melody that each time reignites the flame), only when Swann finally removes the aestheticized veil and sees her for who she is. But what, more exactly, was the power of that musical phrase for Swann, and what does this tell us about the cautionary tale Proust is telling here? Proust wrote:

> So Swann was not mistaken in believing that the phrase of the sonata did, really, exist. Human as it was from this point of view, it belonged, none the less, to an order of
supernatural creatures whom we have never seen, but whom, in spite of that, we recog-
nize and acclaim with rapture when some explorer of the unseen contrives to coax one
forth, to bring it down from that divine world to which he has access to shine for a brief
moment in the firmament of ours.

(p.269; SW, 417; I 345)

The musical phrase, for Swann, although as a manifestation existent down here, was actually
from another, higher, world, and it spoke to him of the transcendence of the commonplace.
In his mind, he positioned Odette in that other world – only to find out the hard way that she
was an embodied, flesh-and-blood person moving within our world. And so encapsulating
this theme, Proust has the narrator warn us about the ever-interesting danger of attempting
to coax an intransigent and multiform reality that defies any singly true description into
conforming to pre-established images of the mind. And along with this warning, he conveys
the sense that this danger, however much we understand and recognize it, is unavoidable.

In Within a Budding Grove, it is the narrator’s turn to experience (as he will again later) ro-
mantic despair of a philosophical kind: love can make us selectively attend to what lies before
us, to change in memory the inflection and thus the emotive significance of what was said,
and to not see what is there and to see what is not there. All that we have seen with Swann.
But here there is an augmentation of the theme: love’s pursuit in this case shows its power
to greatly magnify the force on the mind of chance or unforeseeable events. Here, one case
may stand for many: the narrator happens to see his love interest, Gilberte, out walking in a
familiar way with a young man. Shortly thereafter, he believes that he is lied to about it – he is
told that she is out walking with a friend, a young woman. Concluding immediately that she
has a new lover and this is being concealed from him to protect his feelings or preserve her
privacy, he sinks into swirls of despairing thoughts, suffering torments of rejection.6 He un-
dergoes all the difficulties of this chapter of his life, only to find out (volumes later) that what
he was told was true – she was walking with an actress-friend who was on that day dressed as
a man. The emotional content, the emotional and intellectual experience was real – but based
on a falsehood; in retrospect, he readily recognizes – not itself an uncommon or striking
realization – that the truth of the experience is not directly linked to, nor is its veracity mea-
sured by, the facts of the outside world. But what he does beyond this thought then recognize
more strikingly is that the important part of his life is his life as individually lived
so that the life experience based on falsehood is not for that reason rendered irrelevant or set aside into
a mental category of what one might call the untruly lived. Here again, Proust’s themes are
intertwining – but before moving to the fifth theme, there is one more aspect of the fourth to
bring into the discussion. Proust ingeniously discusses the significance of place, and of place-
names. Closing Part I of the section entitled “Place-Names: the Place”, he writes,

…just as a Sovereign would sooner see his son marry the daughter of a dethroned King
than that of a President still in office. That is to say, the two worlds take as fantastic a
view of one another as the inhabitants of a town situated at one end of Balbec Bay have
of the town at the other end: from Rivebelle you can just see Marcouville L’Orgueil-
leuse; but even that is deceptive, for you imagine that you are seen from Marcouville,
where, as a matter of fact, the splendours of Rivebelle are almost wholly invisible.

(p. 533; SW, 326; II 63–4)

His acute observations concerning our perception of place often serve as powerful metaphors
for our perception of each other: we can have a fully imagined yet wholly fantastical view
of the “other world” of another mind; we can imagine that we are seen, that we are visible, in ways we are not. And we can (to which I will return in Part 3) build a radically misled conception of the mind and its contents based on our perception of the external world and its contents.

We see a fifth theme by standing back and taking a broad view of the narrator’s engagements in love; this theme can be stated briefly. His early experience with Gilberte in all its initial complexity prefigures his later experience with Madame de Guermantes (in *The Guermantes Way*) with suffering of a more intellectual kind, which then together prefigure the extraordinarily wrought and then overwrought life-world with Albertine. So this theme, one that we see in seemingly countless ways throughout the entire work, is this: any factual description of the outward events of his relationships could seem full and accurate in and of themselves, but such descriptions would invariably fail to capture what is experientially fundamental to them, i.e. that the newer experience is seen in the light of the previous, or the new experience has an underlayment from his past that shapes it as it progresses. So the given experience of any single episode is never, nor could it be, only that – precisely because the individual mind of the experiencer is bringing to it echoes, reverberations, resonances, transparency-like overlays, structuring underlays, and sinews of psychologically time-traveling connections that, for that sensibility in that moment, make that experience what it is for him. Generic or context-transcending descriptions of events – to which Proust is philosophically allergic – while to a casual glance may seem sufficient, but in truth are blunt verbal instruments that bulldoze over the subtleties of the mind’s adventure. A number of authors have, rightfully, employed the analogy of the palimpsest for the mind of the narrator; it has writing, then over-writing, and then further over-writing over that. And so one important aspect of this theme that can too easily be elided: the experiences of the events are as has been suggested palimpsest-like, but also, the descriptions of those events both in the moment and after the fact are palimpsest-like as well, as they weave through a life, through a mind’s trajectory, connecting and inflecting as they will in their happenstance, non-volitional, emergent, and unforeseeable ways. Ever aware of the “modifications” that can be caused by a person’s recent experience, the narrator says:

In any case, whatever the modifications that had occurred at some recent time in her life, which might perhaps have explained why it was that she now readily accorded to my momentary and purely physical desire what at Balbec she had with horror refused to allow my love, another far more surprising manifested itself in Albertine that same evening as soon as her caresses had procured in me the satisfaction which she could not have failed to notice, which, indeed, I had been afraid might provoke in her the instinctive movement of revulsion and offended modesty which Gilberte had given at a corresponding moment behind the laurel shrubbery in the Champs-Elysees.

(p. 980; G, 422; II 661)

He is in the present but inflected by the past refusal of Albertine’s, which changes the present allowance of love, with the past re-emerging as a fear re-enlivened from the memory of the revulsion of Gilberte, so that this present moment is layered with the recent past and an earlier past with another – all making this moment what it actually is. Multiple descriptions of this mind in cross-temporal motion suggest themselves; no one seems definitive.

Sixth, there is a strong theme that, when it surfaces time and again, one realizes that one has at some level been aware of as it has been growing all along. Continuous, yet intermittently visible, is an investigation into what the narrator is as a human self, not intrinsically,
but rather as composed by the network of relations into which he enters. This comes out in his relations with his parents, with Swann, with the members of other families, and with many other acquaintances, but naturally most prominently with his love objects. What those investigations bring into sharp relief (and this is studied in beautiful, microscopic detail of a kind that literature at its best can afford and that philosophy rarely provides but frequently needs) is that his almost instinctive or animal desire to control the women he loves, most notably and extensively with Albertine, invariably yields a psycho-emotional circumstance in which he is almost completely controlled by that impossible desire.

The narrator judges (in *The Captive*) what he calls her “bad taste in music” (p. 384; *C*, 3; III 521), along the way nudging her, as he sees it, upward toward his taste, and he judges her phraseology as improving along a trajectory from her girlhood to the present, where his own mastery of language and his exact phrasing would be the ideal toward which she should aspire; there are many other attempts to shape her into his image of what she should be, some overt and some subtle. This is like Swann with Odette and the Botticelli, except that the narrator has created internally his own private “Botticelli” of the mind, his own image to which she should correspond (and so here again, the themes are layering over each other). But we see this grow, slowly and inexorably, into an obsession that has his mind, increasingly extending beyond his own control, speculating about what he increasingly senses as the iceberg concealed beneath the tip that he sees. “I, who was acquainted with many Albertines in one person, seemed now to see many more again, reposing by my side” (p. 427; *C*, 74; III 580).

And as this psychological condition advances, it is all too telling that he finds mental peace and comfort in watching her sleep: that is, when she is inert, when she is static, and when her mind is not manifesting itself in action, he has the fleeting illusion of her containment within his image of her. “Her sleep brought within my reach something as calm, as sensually delicious as those nights of full moon on the bay of Balbec…” (p. 426; *C*, 72; III 579). In the end, with his mind invaded by thoughts and increasingly deep suspicions and speculations about her having deceived him in all kinds of ways (affairs, brief trysts, dissimulations, misleading statements, outright lies, etc.) to the point of finding himself wholly unable to work (“…the grief that these memories were causing me…”, p. 483; *C*, 164; III 656–7), he resolves to break off entirely with Albertine – only to discover that while he was out contemplating and then solidifying in his mind his resolution to break it off, she was planning the same, and so while he was sleeping, she quietly packed her bag and left him. While she sleeps, he is at peace; while he sleeps, she flees the incarcerating power of his presence.

Again, the title of this book is *The Captive*, and there are two captives; the obvious one, Albertine, and the less obvious but more caged one, the narrator (it is true that in French the noun is feminine and so it in a primary sense refers to Albertine, but this should not cancel the doubled referent to the narrator). I will return to this in Part 2, but the sixth theme encapsulated is: we human beings are not hermetically sealed repositories of consciousness that we, wholly and autonomously, control. Rather, as the American pragmatists argued, we are relationally constituted beings with minds furnished with self-constitutive contents that come, at least in large part, from without, from the complex contexts of our interactions. Like us, for the narrator, the slightest chance encounters, chance discoveries, can exert sudden and unexpected great influence on the contents of our minds that we do not, and indeed cannot, anticipate. And the magnitude of their influence will also be determined, not by any external description of what they are unto themselves, but by the contextual intricacies of the mind that absorbs them. “How suddenly do the things that are probably the most insignificant assume an extraordinary value when a person whom we love…conceals them from us!” (p. 442; *C*, 99; III 601). And, as Freud wrote, we are not the masters of our own houses.
The narrator writes, “I was more of a master than I had supposed. More of a master, in other words more of a slave” (p. 488; C, 172; III 663).

The seventh theme, fundamental to everything so far discussed and to the philosophical considerations to follow, is perfectly encapsulated by Proust:

Life is perpetually weaving fresh threads which link one individual and one event to another, … these threads are crossed and recrossed, doubled and redoubled to thicken the web, so that between any slightest point of our past and all the others a rich network of memories gives us an almost infinite variety of communicating paths to choose from.

(Tr, 428; IV 607)

George Herbert Mead and the Unpredictable Past

The vision of the mind’s experience so incisively and beautifully examined by Proust is, as suggested briefly above, one that has remarkable affinities with the philosophical conception of the mind in time articulated by George Herbert Mead. A central figure in American pragmatist thought, and a colleague and inheritor of the work of C. S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, a phrase that became a slogan for Mead’s position was “the self is a social process”. That we will come to – but he was, and is increasingly once again, known for his philosophical conception of our engagement with the past. In his “The Present as the Locus of Reality”, he writes, “The pasts that we are involved in are both irrevocable and revocable” (p. 606). The irrevocability claim is intuitively immediately clear: we cannot go back into the past and change it; Proust, like everyone else in human history, cannot do that. But the revocability thesis? This is the “perpetually weaving fresh threads”. Mead writes (of our historical or any inquiry or reflection considering the past):

[O]ur research work is that of discovery, and we can only discover what is there whether we discover it or not. I think however that this last statement is in error, if it is supposed to imply that there is or has been a past which is independent of all presents, for there may be and beyond doubt is in any present with its own past a vast deal which we do not discover, and yet this which we do or do not discover will take on different meaning and be different in its structure as an event when viewed from some later standpoint.

(p. 609)

This is the sense in which the search for lost time proceeds. And here we see Mead strongly articulating in philosophy what we called Proust’s first theme above. There will not be a single, ultimate, context-transcending criterion for the accuracy of a description of a past event, be it action, interaction, thought, speech, or cognitive content of any kind. A singular and definitive past that is “independent of all presents” for Mead is a myth, just as it is shown to be in Proust. And so Mead continues:

Is there a similar error in the suggestion that it implies the absolutely correct, even if it never reaches it? I am referring to the “in-itself” correctness of an account of events, implied in a correction which a later historian makes. I think that the absolute correctness which lies back in the historian’s mind would be found to be the complete presentation of the given past, if all its implications were worked out.

(p. 609)
If all its implications were worked out. Precisely. And that, as Proust has shown over the span of more than two thousand pages, is never-ending; there is no ultimate working-out. This was his point in the seventh theme (to which I will return shortly), just as it is Mead’s point here.

The second theme concerned the paucity of content of a volitional memory; as we saw, this could be photographic memory or a mental snapshot of how the world externally looked at a given moment, or a verbal memory of anything from a passing remark to a full description of a complex state of affairs, or information of a descriptive kind that may or may not have been said or written at the time. That, for Proust, was a “dead” past, precisely because the complex network of implications is not capturable within volitional memories, the truth of which answers only to a frozen time-slice of the external world. Yet, again, we intuitively cling to the idea that the past, as a simply incontrovertible fact, is unto itself permanently settled. This intuition, and within its frame indeed incontrovertible, is easily misunderstood. Proust shows it; Mead says it. He does so by reference to his central concept of the emergent—a sudden life change that carries power and significance well beyond what one could presently assess; a sudden wholly unexpected meeting with a heretofore long-lost person of great significance to us where who we are now is deeply informed by who we were then; the sudden encounter of an artist with a painting of his that with massive power reawakens, disturbingly, a slice of his past; a reader stumbling onto a poem that uncannily captures a psychologically submerged experience; and a thousand other things where in all cases the psychic time-travel moves in both directions, i.e. from the emergent past into the present and from the present into a now-reconsidered past. And then both of these directions (past-into-present and present-into-past) seem to together reach into the future with strongly sensed but as-yet unspecified implications or trajectories. Mead writes:

It would probably be stated that the irrevocability of the past is located in such a metaphysical order, and that this is the point which I wish to discuss. The historian does not doubt that something has happened. He is in doubt as to what has happened. He also proceeds upon the assumption that if he could have all the facts or data, he could determine what it was that happened. That is, his idea of irrevocability attaches, as I have already stated, to the “what” that has happened as well as to the passing of the event. But if there is emergence, the reflection of this into the past at once takes place. There is a new past, for from every new rise the landscape that stretches behind us becomes a different landscape. The analogy is faulty, because the heights are there, and the aspects of the landscapes which they reveal are also there and could be reconstructed from the present of the wayfarer if he had all the implications of his present before him; whereas the emergent is not there in advance, and by definition could not be brought within even the fullest presentation of the present.

So it is what Mead calls the emergent that is non-volitional, unexpected, reorienting, changeable, revocable, amenable, and fluid. The third theme concerned the intricacy of the relation between the present self and the remembered self. And that led into a discussion of the boy’s fear that the pleasure of the mother’s bedtime kiss might not happen again; the narrator, with the memory of the boy within him, philosophically realizes that not only it might not, but indeed that it could not, happen again (again, for reasons that William James adumbrated concerning the non-repeatability of experience). Mead just above said, “the emergent is not there in advance”; the emergent is of its moment, of the present that itself is both passing into the past and yet reaching forward with sinews for future implications,
resonance, and newly connected significance. The narrator realizes the boy’s sense of loss, of the unrepeatability of the mother’s bedtime kiss, and the way that the boy’s fearful sense carried forward-directed implications across the time of his life from bedtime then to the present reflective moment. And he now recognizes another if directly related fear that the boy sensed but could not articulate — it foreshadowed his mother’s ageing and her ultimate worldly transience.

Our fourth theme, exemplified in Swann discovering that Odette was not the transcendent embodiment of his mental image, not his Botticelli, not his musical phrase made corporeal (and so ultimately not his type), concerned the way that our attention can be selective, and the way our interest in a person can, blindingly, be in the finding of an external realization of a pre-established interior image. Similarly, if with some differences, the narrator’s pain and jealousy at seeing Gilberte with what he took to be another man and then being lied to about it was corrected not of course by going back into the past, not by comparing his perception with an original fact of a past moment, but by (in his case much later) learning that he was not lied to, that the “man” was indeed a woman, and that while the pain and jealousy he suffered were real, the circumstances motivating it were not. This revised, realigned, and restructured both his past and its reach into his future. Swann and the narrator learned, revised, reconnected, and restructured exactly as Mead describes it here:

We certainly cannot go back to such a past and test our conjectures by actually inspecting its events in their happening. We test our conjectures about the past by the conditioning directions of the present and by later happenings in the future which must be of a certain sort if the past we have conceived was there. The force of irrevocability then is found in the extension of the necessity with which what has just happened conditions what is emerging in the future. What is more than this belongs to a metaphysical picture that takes no interest in the pasts which arise behind us.

(p. 613)

Their pasts change, the pasts which arise behind them connect the dots of experience differently, and that change reaches through the present and into the future.

The fifth theme, that factual descriptions of outward events can seem full and accurate unto themselves (but only misleadingly so), because they systematically leave out the “palimpsest” dimension of experience for any individual, appears and reappears throughout Proust’s grand project. And Mead writes:

Given an emergent event, its relations to antecedent processes become conditions or causes. Such a situation is a present. It marks out and in a sense selects what has made its peculiarity possible. It creates with its uniqueness a past and a future. As soon as we view it, it becomes a history and a prophecy. Its own temporal diameter varies with the extent of the event.

(p. 616)

This is not easy to parse, but it goes to the core of the philosophical articulation of Proust’s vision. This intricate passage’s individual elements are as follows:

a an emergent event is one that clearly possesses significance because of its power to connect to previous experiences and color them, shade them, cast them in a new light, deepen their meaning, lift a hypothesis about them to knowledge about them, correct
a false belief about them, and engender insight about a previously undetected pattern of action or experience;

b the web of relations of that emergent event to the past reveal themselves to be either the preconditions for the present event (so that we now see, through those relations, how they served as the present event’s condition of possibility), or, more directly, the cause or causes of the present event (so that we now see the present emergent event as the effect of a causal chain);

c counterintuitively, the present as we experience it is not a given, but is rather a matter of recognizing the relational reach across time in both directions of the emergent event (so that what we call the present actually has varying durations and differently sensed temporal reach);

d by marking out and selecting what is and is not relevant to it, the event focuses its own power and defines its own special particularity;

e in creating its own past and future, it positions itself across time, so that the movement of the mind in perceiving it, in first sensing and then assessing its significance, is temporally extended in both directions, with its perceived relations coming from the past, going into the past, coming from an expected future, and going into the future;

f our attention to these constitutive relations of the emergent event – the relations that make it what it is, both create our history for us and project a future for us not in an objectively external way but rather in a manner unique to our sensibility;

g so with all these elements working together, what Mead calls the temporal diameter of the event will vary according to its magnitude as determined by the preceding six elements.

All of this, taken together, is what “the palimpsest dimension” means, and it articulates what is left out by seemingly full but actually deeply incomplete externally factual descriptions of life’s significant events.

The sixth theme concerned the supplanting of a long-entrenched conception of human selfhood – a private mind or consciousness with full, transparent, and immediate access to its own contents – with a very different conception, one of a relationally composed mind. We saw Mead’s slogan (“the self is a social process”), and among the foundational pragmatists it was he who most fully developed this conception. His conception is that we, as minds, are not separate observers of an independent world apart from us, but rather that we are indissolubly in it, becoming who we are through our interaction with it. If the former conception were true, the fundamental question of epistemology would be how it is that a hermetically sealed mind can gain knowledge of something (the world) metaphysically separate from it. With the latter, the question concerns rather the nature of our self-composing and world-composing interaction with it, as we are embedded in it. Here, Mead sees a deep parallel between our construction or composition of the past and the construction or composition of our self – and if there is a most fundamental Proustian relation, this is it. Mead writes:

When we elaborate the history of a tree whose wood is found in the chairs in which we sit, all the way from the diatom to the oak but lately felled, this history revolves about the constant re-interpretation of facts that are continually arising; nor are these novel facts to be found simply in the impact of changing human experiences upon a world that is there. For… human experiences are as much a part of this world as are any of its other characteristics, and the world is a different world because of these experiences.

(p. 618)
Small things that were (or would ordinarily have been) insignificant for the narrator sud-

denly, unexpectedly, and unforeseeably emerge and loom large, changing his relation to
Albertine, changing his understanding of the past, changing his conception of possible
futures, and – taken together – changing him. He elaborates his own history throughout
the seven volumes, with that history revolving around constant re-interpretations of facts
that are continually arising. And his experiences are not at aspectatorial distance from a
world that is there; they are part of it, and the world is different because of them. (It is true
that we will see him at the close of the book longing for a self above time, and so a com-
pleted and unchanging self in possession of all of its history in a state of what one might
call experiential simultaneity – but in describing this longed-for state of self-completion,
he intimates that this description is taking place, after all, in time and surrounded by ex-
perience he is trying, impossibly, to shut out. He realizes that he may try to shield himself
from the changing flux of the world, but the cognition within him about that attempt does
not stop.)

Of the seven themes, as intimated above, it is the first and the seventh that are most closely
connected. Proust’s words, themselves now rewoven with this section’s discussion of Mead
and the significance-enhancing and meaning-enriching relations they now hold, were:

Life is perpetually weaving fresh threads which link one individual and one event to
another, … these threads are crossed and recrossed, doubled and redoubled to thicken
the web, so that between any slightest point of our past and all the others a rich network
of memories gives us an almost infinite variety of communicating paths to choose from.
(Watt, p. 102; TR, 428; IV 607)

Mead wrote that what his reflection on the past and on the temporally and relationally ex-
panded conception of the present mean is

that we should have an inconceivable richness offered to our analysis in the approach to
any problem arising in experience.
(p. 617)

Proust, perhaps more than any other literary author, has shown what “inconceivable rich-
ness” means.

But Mead also, as a brief mention along his way, writes, “Or take Bergson’s conception
of all our memories…” (p. 617). What was it he had in mind about the work of an author
frequently connected to Proust? What did he say about “all our memories”, and why is that
important to the philosophical understanding of Proust on the nature of the mind, on the
workings of consciousness?

**Henri Bergson, Time, and Proust’s Portrayal of Temporally
Moveable Consciousness**

In *Matter and Memory*,¹⁰ Henri Bergson presents a restructuring of a common conception (for
him a deeply rooted misconception) of the relation between perception and memory. The
picture or model to which he is opposed (although its influence and its variations continue
to the present day) is that of British empiricism: sensory perception is an immediate and
forceful impression on the senses, and memory, by contrast of quantity but not of kind, is a
less forceful version of the same. For Bergson, this makes two interesting mistakes. The first
is that it drastically oversimplifies perception; rather than being an isolated sense impression wholly contained within its moment, as Proust shows, it itself already is interlaced with memory content, with layers—some explicit, some less so (to which I will return shortly)—of recognition and association that are anything but simple. The second is that memory is also drastically oversimplified and made to seem precisely like the photographic-snapshot model, or like the exactly remembered word or phrase on a tape-recorder model, or like a fixed piece of information we recollect when needed: Proust’s project exposes all of these as models that systematically exclude virtually everything of humane interest. (A camera does not perceive in the way we do; nor do we, at an analytically bottom level, visually perceive like it; the same is true of sound recorders for auditory perception and of any information-delivery device.) One way of encapsulating Bergson’s vision of the presence of memory in perception is to say that it is not additive: it is not a matter of any bounded sensation of the moment having added to it as a supplementary constituent part a similarly bounded memory image. And, less obviously but equally importantly, for Bergson nor can what this model identifies as the essential or primary (he opposes this too) part of perception be purified (also a mistaken model) by subtracting the memory content. Any such bifurcated schema would fail to accommodate the truer and richer phenomenological facts of the case—with, again, Proust presenting them at the length they require. And on this point: Bergson does not exactly say, but his work certainly shows, that philosophy has too often presumed a possibility that is itself for him yet another mistake: that is, the possibility of providing a single-phrase essentialistic account of memory. (Knowledge is...justified true belief. Art is...a mirror held up to reality. Memory is...). On inspection, philosophy discovered neither of those succinct definitions of knowledge or artwork, and Bergson was writing at a time when it was appropriate to say that it was time to make the parallel discovery about phrase-length definitions of memory. And he virtually suggested that the time was right to expansively show what it is rather than to try to say, on the model of succinct definitions, what it is. And of course it was Proust, answering this philosophical call in literature, who did precisely that. (Bergson published Matter and Memory in 1896, with the widely disseminated 5th edition in 1908; Proust read Bergson’s book in 1909 and published his seven volumes between 1913 and 1927. But one should not overstate the relation between the two as a relation of direct and immediate influence of Bergson on Proust: Proust had already given a central place to memory, recollection, and the mind’s movement through them in his previous writings on aesthetics by 1895, so the relation is more one of fellow travelers with a profound affinity.) Bergson writes:

Our perceptions are undoubtedly interlaced with memories, and inversely, a memory ... only becomes actual by borrowing the body of some perception into which it slips. These two acts, perception and recollection, always interpenetrate each other, are always exchanging something of their substance as by a process of endosmosis (p. 72; endosmosis is the passage through a membrane from a region of lower to a region of higher concentration).

The memory, “borrowing the body” of a perception, inhabits the present; the narrator, enjoying the kisses of a lover, thinks (somewhat disturbingly) in that moment of his childhood love of his mother’s bedtime kisses. In experiencing his increasingly mentally pressured obsession with the infidelities of Albertine, he thinks (“exchanging something of their substance”) of Swann’s love affair deteriorating step-by-step on its road to ruin. Bergson also writes:
We assert, at the outset, that if there be memory, that is, the survival of past images, these images must constantly mingle with our perception of the present, and may even take its place. For if they have survived it is with a view of utility; at every moment they complete our present experience, enriching it with experience already acquired; and as the latter is ever increasing, it must end by covering up and submerging the former.

(p. 70)

And may even take its place; covering up and submerging the former. Along the troubled path of his romance with Albertine, the narrator at first loves her, then loves her with occasionally intruding doubts, then strives to overcome his fears about her with focused attention, then fails to do so, then lives in a half-romance/half-insecure state, then has brief episodes or small islands of trouble free love in a sea of anxiety. Finally, with the full set of past-accumulated images, fears, anxieties, broken hopes and aspirations, and attendant inability to see her as a person through that veil of suffering, he resolves to leave her. Love’s place has been taken, covered and submerged.

But what Bergson is discussing further ties Proust and Mead together. The emergent event moves across time, creating a present whole out of the inseparable materials of past and future. Mead writes:

[O]ur past psychical life is there: it survives … with all the detail of its events localized in time. Always inhibited by the practical and useful consciousness of the present moment, that is to say, by the sensorimotor equilibrium of a nervous system connecting perception with action, this memory merely awaits the occurrence of a rift between the actual impression and its corresponding movement to slip in its images.

(p. 113)

Memory of the kind being investigated here – by Proust, Mead, and Bergson – can be held at bay by the pressures of immediate practical circumstances. So memory awaits a “rift”, for Mead, an emergent moment, where that “actual impression” is mobilized (its “movement”) across time, with the mind experiencing a panoply that no simple additive model could begin to accurately capture. Complex, layered, intricate (and often beautiful) literary prose of a Proustian kind does. And “the number and complexity of these images will depend on the degree of tension adopted by the mind” (p. 126). That is, as we have seen in the experience of Swann and in the experience of the narrator, these can be small or large – and as Proust wrote, the most seemingly small detail can suddenly emerge and loom large when the temporal reach of its significance carries the mind with it, or when, as in the case of the narrator thinking about Albertine, it in its extreme manifestation entirely takes over the mind – subjecting the master to slavery.

However, the vast majority of cases in which we experience memory in perception of this kind are not like the narrator’s unpleasant experience in the final stage with Albertine. Rather, they are, as Proust has shown throughout his work, usually of a less mind-controlling and far more pleasant, interesting, and intellectually, autobiographically, and emotionally engaged kind. And that is the adventure of experience that Proust, Mead, and Bergson are portraying. Also, the narrator so often departs from the immediate circumstance into flights of interpretive fancy that one sees that the time-crossing reflection is pleasurable and deeply engrossing even if the subject of the reflection (e.g. Swann’s difficulty) is not the kind of human experience in which one would or should take pleasure.

Before moving forward to my third section, there are two remaining points to cover to understand what Mead had in mind concerning Bergson’s conception of memory. The
first concerns the model, or the analogy, we should employ in order to avoid the simplistic reductionism of the empirical model of sensation, memory, and their relation. A model that presents itself intuitively and that Bergson opposes is more fully elaborated than the simplest formulation of the empirical model, but it does or can follow from it. It is that (a) we have the sensation of the moment, (b) the sensation triggers ideas associated with them, (c) those ideas, now as central to the mind as the original sensation, trigger subsequent ideas associated, in turn, with them, and (d) those then do the same again, and frame by frame the mind moves farther from the sensation-perception that started the chain. It may seem natural to picture the workings of the relations between sensation and memory this way, but Bergson finds this instructively erroneous. He writes:

Attentive perception is often represented as a series of processes which make their way in single file; the object exciting sensations, the sensations causing ideas to start up before them, each idea setting in motion, one in front of the other, points more and more remote of the intellectual mass. Thus there is supposed to be a rectilinear progress, by which the mind goes further and further from the object, never to return to it.

(p. 126)

This more sophisticated model derives from the misleading empirical model because it still clings to the notion of the original snapshot that then has layered over it, in single file, subsequent snapshot-images drawn from other, mentally interconnected snapshots of experience. One can see at a glance, once this picture is articulated, that this is not what Proust has represented; it is not the way he has portrayed the movements of consciousness; and were we to impose this model on Proust’s countless cases, we would only both distort and simplify what we find therein – it would be a case of philosophy deforming and oversimplifying literature. Bergson blocks this with an analogy that, in Wittgenstein’s sense, changes our way of seeing. Bergson writes:

We maintain on the contrary, that reflective perception is a circuit, in which all the elements, including the perceived object itself, hold each other in a state of mutual tension as in an electric circuit, so that no disturbance starting from the object can stop on its way and remain in the depths of the mind: it must always find its way back to the object whence it proceeds.

(pp. 126–7)

No “disturbance” starting in the psychological field of the narrator even once stops on its way; in the circuit of his perceptual-intellectual consciousness, neither the perceptual nor the intellectual is isolable. Like ours.

The second point introduces one final aspect of Proust’s work that runs throughout his masterpiece and that was not among my seven selected themes above: the sense of subconscious content being summoned, by thought and by circumstance, to the surface. Bergson observes that a presumption – one that is on scrutiny unsupported – blocks reflection on the possibility of subconscious mental content. That presumption just is that for any mental content to exist, it must by definition be conscious.

[O]ur unwillingness to conceive unconscious psychical states is due, above all, to the fact that we hold consciousness to be the essential property of psychical states: so that a psychical state cannot, it seems, cease to be conscious without ceasing to exist.

(p. 181)
To break free of this presumption is for him to expand our conception of the mind (actually to break free of the mind’s limited conception of itself) so that it includes what he regards as plainly phenomenologically evident – that subconscious content is present, if inconspicuously so, and it becomes conspicuously present at the moment it is called to explicit consciousness by Mead’s emergent or suddenly significant thought-saturated perception or Proust’s formerly small but now large looming item of knowledge. Bergson summarizes his point: “[I]n the psychological domain, consciousness may not be the synonym of existence” (p. 181). This is of course either of great fellow-traveler affinity to Freud’s developing theories of the mind (Freud published *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* in 1904 and *Five Lectures on Psycho-analysis* in 1910, among other widely known works starting in the 1890s; Bergson mentions Freud’s *On Aphasia of 1891*) or it is Bergson’s explicit reliance on Freud’s work. So one way to psycho-philosophically characterize the adventure of experience (as shown by Proust perhaps more fully than anyone) is indeed in Freudian terms, where the content of the adventure is in part a matter of becoming aware of present, yet previously consciously absent, causally influential contents of the mind. But this established spatial or architectural metaphor for the mind and its content-moving activity (the two-way stairwell between the main floor and the basement) is not, I would add, the only way to describe what Proust shows. One could also put the matter linguistically, where the descriptions of objects, events, people, interactions, conversations, solitary reflections, and so forth are what is explicitly stated, with each such statement residing within what one might call an atmosphere of implications, a surrounding network of implication-awakened associations, themes, and ways of speaking that would otherwise lie dormant. And anyone moving within language will sense, to greater or lesser degrees depending on the circumstance, these possible supplemental ways of speaking, ways of describing, ways of explaining, ways of further reflecting, that we often call hidden or subconscious thoughts, but that are actually resident within the implication-content of our language. Proust, in his phenomenal mastery of language with all its beauty, its power, and its capacity for generating insight clearly on display, supports both ways of modeling the mind’s capacity for reflective discovery, the one broadly psychological and the other broadly linguistic.

Be that as it may, Bergson replaced the classic empirical conception of experience as a sensory snapshot, of the relation between sensation and memory as one of a difference of quantity rather than quality (e.g. Hume’s difference of force and vivacity as the difference between his impressions and ideas), of the additive model and the model of one associated image (of a visual-snapshot kind) coming up in single file one after the other in an orderly fashion, and a misleading analytical model in which the clearly divisible constituent parts of memory-awakening perception can be categorized with neat boundaries, all with his summarizing concept of *duration*, “of which the flow is continuous and in which we pass insensibly from one state to another: a continuity which is really lived” (p. 243). That is the mind’s continuous flow, passing without borders from one state to another, that we “really live”. It is what Mead had in mind, and it is what Proust gave us as the reflective mirror in which we could, in all our complexity, see ourselves.

“Perpetually weaving fresh threads”

My third governing question was to ask: if what Proust puts on display is actually a marvelously full-scaled presentation of the human mind’s experience of living in perceptual, reflective, psychological, and linguistic life, why did it, why does it, seem like a discovery, like a revelation, like a great disclosure in the realm of human self-understanding? Walter Benjamin, in his short essay “On the Image of Proust”, writes:
In the 1800s there was an inn by the name of ‘Au Temps Perdu’ at Grenoble; I do not know whether it still exists. In Proust, too, we are guests who enter through a door underneath a suspended sign that sways in the breeze, a door behind which eternity and rapture await us (p. 125)

The eternity of which he speaks is not, I think, the theologian’s eternity; it is, rather, the eternity of ever-expanding descriptions, ever-expanding reflective associations, ever-new insight-generating mental content either brought to consciousness in Freudian terms or brought to consciousness by moving ever further into the unbounded language in which we live. That is Proustian eternity (or perhaps better, infinity.) But then what about the mind’s crossing of time, of what we too easily take to be the hard temporal boundaries of the mind’s experience? Benjamin continues:

The eternity which Proust opens to view is intertwined time, not boundless time. His true interest is in the passage of time in its most real – that is, intertwined – form, and this passage nowhere holds sway more openly than in remembrance within and aging without. To follow the counterpoint of aging and remembering means to penetrate to the heart of Proust’s world, to the universe of intertwining. (p. 126)

That distinction – remembrance within, aging without – is precisely the distinction between the physical laws of the external world and the very different psychological “laws” of the internal world that we saw at the beginning of the first section, where facts concerning the external do not invariably serve as the criteria for the truth or veracity of the internal. As we saw there, Proust’s world is indeed a “universe of intertwining” – and that world is one in which involuntary memory, unforeseeable memory, unplanned memory, and unthought connections are everywhere, and so again: it is why the word “adventure” fits. Benjamin further clarifies the point:

[A]nyone who wishes to surrender knowingly to the innermost sway of this work must place himself in a special stratum – the bottommost – of this involuntary remembrance, a stratum in which the materials of memory no longer appear singly, as images, but tell us about a whole, amorphously and formlessly, indefinitely and weightily, in the same way the weight of the fishing net tells a fisherman about his catch. Smell – this is the sense of weight experienced by someone who casts his nets into the sea of the temps perdu. And his sentences are the entire muscular activity of the intelligible body; they contain the whole enormous effort to raise the catch. (p. 128)

Like Bergson, neither the materials of memory nor our sentences appear singly; the mind’s web of expanding experience tells us, “weightedly”, of emergent content. Benjamin’s sensory metaphor for our intellectual sensing of content only now emerging, only now being recalled, only now finding its way into what we explicitly state, is olfactory; the sense of weight, in our language, the sense of proximate not yet explicit content to investigate, is the intimation for us of a “catch”. And the sentences – the language – of Proust do this heavy-pulling work. Again, like us in our language.

And so finally, I come to a suggestion about why we can so easily philosophically veil something that, once seen, is so evident in mental life. Wittgenstein showed, across the
broad span of his investigations, how easy it is to fall under the spell of what he called a “picture”, a conceptual model – often but not always of a pictorial or graphic kind – that both contracts the scope of our vision of what actually lies before us and pre-determines what we expect, and will or will not accept, as an answer to a given question or quandary. Words such as think, perceive, know, learn, understand, want, hope, wish, decide, resolve, imagine, interpret, remember, and so forth are mental verbs. And verbs are, of course, action-words – we learn from early school that what one does is indicated by the verb in any sentence. And then, perhaps later than school, in philosophical thinking about language, it is all too easy to initially grasp and then cling to the notion – the picture – that the meaning of a word is the object to which it refers, its referent. With those elements in place, it then naturally seems that remembrance is a variant of “to remember”, and that is a mental verb the referent of which is the mental action. And with that assembled picture in place, the very notion of involuntary memory seems either like an oxymoron or, at best, a strange and rare case that lies on the distant periphery of the concept of memory. As Wittgenstein said, the subject under discussion is thus reduced, made to appear always smaller and often simpler and more unitary than it is in life, or as Bergson said, as actually “lived”. The picture leads us to select what Wittgenstein called a “one-sided diet” of examples, and so in thinking of memory and its role in the mind we think first of intentional or volitionally controlled action and then select accordingly. With all that in place, the personal adventure of involuntary memory is hidden.

Proust expansively covered the themes we saw in the first section, which included: (1) What may be an accurate description of the mind’s perceptual experience may not only be significantly different from, but may indeed be incompatible with, a description of the external world that occasions, or is the object of, that perception. (2) What he calls intellectual memory, or willed or volitional memory, is not fundamental to his project; involuntary memory, of the far less predictable and emergent kind, is, and his focus is not the world, but the mind’s perception of the world. (3) The intricacy of the relation between the present self and the remembered self, and the way that the knowledge of that intricate relation then permeates, inflects, enriches, and thus complicates rather than simplifies the description of, present experience, requires linguistically microscopic detail to accurately capture. (4) Proust has the narrator deliver a warning about the ever-interesting danger of attempting to coax an intransigent and multiform reality that defies any singly true description into conforming to pre-established images of the mind. (5) Any factual descriptions of the outward events may seem full and accurate in and of themselves, but such descriptions would invariably fail to capture what is experientially fundamental to them, i.e. that a newer experience is seen in the light of a previous, or the new experience has an underlayerment from the past that shapes it as it progresses; thus, the given experience of any single episode is never only that, precisely because the individual mind of the experiencer is bringing to it echoes, reverberations, resonances, transparency-like overlays, structuring underlayments, and sinews of psychologically time-traveling connections that, for that sensibility in that moment, make that experience what it is for that person. (6) We human beings are not hermetically sealed repositories of consciousness that we, wholly and autonomously, control. Rather, as the American pragmatists argued, we are relationally constituted beings with minds furnished with self-constitutive contents that come, at least in large part, from without, from the complex contexts of our interactions. Like us, for the narrator, the slightest chance encounters, chance discoveries, can exert sudden and unexpected great influence on the contents of our minds that we do not, and indeed cannot, anticipate (hence “adventure”). (7) And to now see Proust’s words one final time but now in light of everything since we last saw them:
Life is perpetually weaving fresh threads which link one individual and one event to another, … these threads are crossed and recrossed, doubled and redoubled to thicken the web, so that between any slightest point of our past and all the others a rich network of memories gives us an almost infinite variety of communicating paths to choose from.

Yet, there remains one final issue, briefly mentioned above. At the end of Proust’s great achievement, there surfaces from the depths of his text a conception of selfhood for which we are in a sense unprepared: it is a conception of a self outside of time, a self that has amassed everything considered above in a lifetime of experience but that then stabilizes, fixes in place, all memory content, seeing all temporal placements as parts of one grand whole. It is a picture of a self that has earned a place above the world of flux, above the world of interminable ever-new interweaving. He describes this as a “notion of Time evaporated, of years past but not separated from us” (p. 1138; TR, 449; IV 623). And he describes the experience that led him to this conception: he hears the garden bells that the child listened for, the bells that meant “Mama would presently come upstairs” to deliver the goodnight kiss, and he says – as if truly moving across time – “unmistakably I heard these very sounds, situated though they were in a remote past” (p. 1139; TR, 449; IV 623). But he signals to us that this is not truly real, not truly a time-traveling experience, not truly a godlike view of himself across his internal history or the self seen by itself sub specie aeternitatis. For he writes that he had to block his ears to the conversations around him to hear the bells, and “it was into my own depths that I had to re-descend” (p. 1139; TR, 450; IV 624). That is, he is actually inextricably in the present of those surrounding conversations, and it is his inward powerful imagination that is bringing him the auditory image of the long-ago bells in his mind’s ear. This final glimpse of a self above time is a picture of a self very much like another myth – that of the fully interpreted work of literature. There is no such thing, precisely because every work can always be brought into another juxtaposition anew, always brought into a new dialogue with another work, past, present, or future, and so, in Wittgenstein’s phrase, have new aspects dawn. So this picture of temporally transcendent selfhood does briefly emerge in his final pages – but it is a picture of a self not of this world, and one can argue that this picture of a finished self, a fully settled self, a self interpretively closed and in full possession of all it contains within, is an impossible dream – an impossible dream shown to be that by everything Proust has revealed across the vast expanse of the volumes of work leading up to this point. Proust closes his book with a dream of fully interpreted selfhood, a final stasis, in order to show that there is no such thing – that any such self is a dream and not of this world. We, like Proust, are in this one. What he does then say is that he now realizes that he has all his life carried his past with him (“the whole of that past which I was not aware that I carried about within me”, p. 1139; TR, 450; IV 624), and that the mind unendingly recovers it, selects from it, edits together excerpts from it, re-contextualizes it, and forever newly feels its influence and measures its impact. And he observes that the mind moves with lightning speed through the vastness of the accrued time of a life in a way that the body cannot begin to do through space. We can think that we might look down on that vastness of experience, of memory, from a transcendent station of stasis above it, but re-descending into our own depths will always be yet another experience – precisely like his moment of bringing the remote past into the present via his exceptionally vivid sonic memory image – that further augments his continually expanding past. Consciousness, as Proust if anyone has taught us, stays in motion, and among its defining features is that it doesn’t stop. And if one senses an elegiac mood in these final pages, what one is detecting is Proust’s sense – perhaps a universal sense, whether articulated or not – that the contents of this consciousness, this mind in its
time, this inner library of memory, is unique in all the world and will never be replicated again. And when the body that carries that consciousness ceases to exist, it too will perish. Yet against this darkening sense of ultimate loss, we, as the narrator in the last few pages indicates, have writing – the offloading and preservation of that unique library into a book that will survive us, speak for us in absentia. The narrator’s concern – that concern serving as a kind of literary memento mori – is whether he has the time remaining to write such a preservation of consciousness. We are not told that the massive book we are just finishing is that grand project. But of course, it is. And so it is in those final sentences that Proust and his narrator finally converge, finally become one, and they do so in the name of saving, in words, that unique cognitive identity.

Looking back then, in considering the philosophical work of Mead and Bergson, along with a small hint of the methodological snares about which Wittgenstein warns us, we saw that each of the seven themes above holds direct significance for our philosophical methodology in approaching the topic of memory, and particularly the way in which memory moves through and within time, as one component of a philosophy of mind: that itself is an incontrovertibly powerful case of philosophy in literature. And as a massive case study of the ways in which memory works in our lives as it negotiates movement across the span of a life’s time, the achievement of Proust is without peer. But Proust’s project is not containable within that definition, not within that description of the experience of reading him. The experience of reading Proust replicates in the mind of the reader what his volumes show – we as readers make connections, we encounter emergent sudden recognitions with the economy of importance changing accordingly, we find new articulations of content we initially only sensed. With our imaginations moving inside the great expanse of his book, we relive, each in our own way, the mental life he describes.

Notes

1 In this chapter, English quotations from In Search of Lost Time are taken from Remembrance of Things Past, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff (New York: Random House, 1961). Citations give the page number to this edition, followed by the corresponding references for the Vintage and Pléiade editions.

2 We know that Proust had a lively interest in the writings of Nietzsche, and he may have appropriated a broad conception of Nietzschean perspectivism or the fundamental idea that there will not be one, single, perspective-free description of an experience that serves as the criterion for all other descriptions (so that, on that misleading model, the closer one is to that one master-description, the truer one is, and the farther from it correspondingly less true). Similarly, many have made interesting comparisons to the early cubism of Braque and Picasso, and they are right in terms of affinity – but the way Proust develops this theme across the span of the volumes is, one should say, all Proust.


4 For a fascinating discussion of Proust’s own amorous adventures and, as the author says, misadventures, as they interconnect with the descriptions and analyses of love that the narrator provides, see William C. Carter, Proust in Love (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). This book captures well the way in which Proust’s personal relationships and intimate experiences are articulated ever more finely and deeply in his writing, and then how that writing, those articulations, live on to inflect his own subsequent experience.

5 For an engrossing and original discussion of Swann’s experience with this musical theme, but as interwoven with the autobiographical experience of the author as a composer and pianist (where
that experience is constantly informed and inflected by reading Proust), see James Holden, *In Search of Vinteuil: Music, Literature, and a Self Regained* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2010). The book shows a good deal about the role that memory (of a thoroughly Proustian kind) plays in musical experience.

6 For an insightful study of the central role of emotion, its articulation, its re-articulations, and its influence on subsequent perception and on the constitution of personhood (particularly in connection with both separation anxiety in love relationships and narrative identity), see Inge Crosman Wimmers, *Proust and Emotion: The Importance of Affect in A la recherche du temps perdu* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003). Also, Martin Hagglund offers an insightful set of unobvious connections concerning time and memory in their connections with the unavoidable threat of loss in love, in *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012):

My argument, then, is that the experience of involuntary memory leads Marcel to pursue chronolibidinal aesthetics. For a chronolibidinal aesthetics, the point is not to redeem the condition of temporality but, on the contrary, to mobilize it as the source of pathos. Indeed, there would be no pathos without the drama of temporal finitude that exposes every libidinal investment to the possibility of loss. The key to generating aesthetic pathos is therefore to intensify the sense of the passage of time.

7 In an extraordinarily interesting and intricate study of time in literature, Mark Currie, in *About Time: Narrative, Fiction, and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), accurately calls what I am discussing here Proust’s “double time”. He writes

One of the reasons that the whodunit acts as a kind of typological model for much fiction beyond the genre of the whodunit is that its description seems to work very well for any narrative which involves an interplay between narrated time and the time of the narrative, where the time of the narrative functions as the site of self-conscious reflection both on past events and on the nature of writing about them. This is, after all, the double time of Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*.... The idea that moving forwards in time involves a backwards narration is more than just a novelististic structure, and might be thought of, with Proust, as the shape of time itself.

So one way to characterize what I am discussing here as the inflection of the past on present (adventurous) perception is, with Currie, to say that backward narration flowing in and through the present is the language of a perceiving mind that, in this way, traverses time (or is not containable within any momentary present). One notable case of a narrating author employing the concept of a palimpsest is in Gore Vidal’s autobiography (obviously in its title but more importantly in its underlying authorial approach to self-description): *Palimpsest: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1995).

8 This passage, from the revised translation, is reproduced in Adam Watt, *The Cambridge Introduction to Marcel Proust* (Cambridge: 2011), p. 102. A note about this volume: when I turned to work on this paper, I realized that I had not read Proust in some years and I thought I might scan a short review-book to refresh my memory and find my way back in. As it happened, Watt’s book is not one that can be scanned; it is packed with insight and, although I have not taken anything (apart from this revised quotation) from it directly, it has been of tremendous help. It is a far greater contribution than its presentation as a series-style introduction might suggest.


11 By “layered”, I mean of course that the experience of perception cannot be isolated (apart from a phenomenologically misleading bifurcating analysis) from the content of reflection. Malcolm Bowie rightly calls Proust’s work “a portrait of a single, intensely perceptive and reflective mind” (Malcolm Bowie, *Freud, Proust, and Lacan: Theory as Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 52; my point is that Proust showed philosophically that the mental words “perceptive” and “reflective” do not name two isolable categories.
On this point, see the beautiful closing of Adam Watt’s biography of Proust:

Toward the close of *Time Regained* Proust’s narrator speaks of how an artist’s commitment to his work might be thought of as ‘an egotism which could be put to work for the benefit of other people (*Time Regained*, 436). Proust’s work had taken his health, ruined his eyesight. Robert leaned forward and gently closed his brother’s eyes. Marcel would see no more, but the work he had created by dint of his single-mindedness would be ‘a kind of optical instrument’ for generations of curious minds, enabling each reader to discern what, without this book, he would perhaps never have perceived in himself;

(*Time Regained*, 273)
