

Jeffrey Johnson

**CREATIVE
DEVELOPMENT IN
MARCEL PROUST'S
*A LA RECHERCHE
DU TEMPS PERDU***



*Currents in Comparative
Romance Languages and Literatures*

This book focuses on creative development and empowerment in Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. It demonstrates Proust's proof of the Romantic notion that art originates in the self of the artist. Approached as a bildungsroman, the psychological aspects of this development in Marcel, the principal character, are considered in terms of the stimulus/response mechanism in living organisms. It verifies Proust's argument that time in the body, including all that one experiences unconsciously, is present within us whether it is accessible to memory or not.

Through involuntary memories and inspiration at the end of the novel, Marcel finds the means to write the book he has long wished to write. Inspiration provides a link between Marcel, the novel's protagonist, and Proust, its author. This volume balances its analysis of Marcel's creative development and empowerment through inspiration with Proust's experiences in May 1909, when he realized that the concept of the fourth dimension would serve as the unifying thread for his novel. Modernity is viewed as a crucial influence in the transformation of society that Proust's novel chronicles. This study posits an allegorical reading of the novel in the relationship of the birth of the modern citizen to the making of an artist in an era of doubt.

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Languages and Literatures*

Tamara Alvarez-Detrell and Michael G. Paulson
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To the memory of my father

“Par quel miracle l’homme consent-il à faire ce qu’il fait sur cette terre, lui qui doit mourir?” François-René de Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d’outre tombe* (Paris: Quarto Gallimard, 1997), livre xiii, chapitre 8, p. 784.

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Preface

Creative idealism underlies the Romantic precept concerning the origin of the artwork. This precept states that the source of the artwork is in the self of the artist. In *A la recherche du temps perdu*, a complex work of philosophical fiction, Marcel Proust tested the basis for this claim. He did so in the face of early twentieth-century skepticism of the precept's validity and relevance. And he did so in light of then contemporary understanding of the workings of the mind offered by psychology and neurology.

Romantic suppositions concerning individuality, human potentiality, and the artist were based on perceptions of how feelings develop in human beings and how they are expressed in the work of the artist. These suppositions answered questions for the Romantics as to what art is and who is the artist. Dovetailing with individualism's intellectual liberation of the individual in the early nineteenth century, the result was the joint celebration of spiritual independence, the uniqueness of the artist, and emotive qualities of the self. *Feeling, sensibility*, and genius became catchwords of the era in which the solipsism of Chateaubriand's character René was a model for the young who sought to emulate him. But like Icarus, who soared on false wings and crashed, this emphasis on the artist, the individual, and the self eventually collapsed. Ennui, alienation, and anomie—the depressive counterparts to individualism's empowerment and to Romantic ecstasy—surfaced in the aftermath. Realist views of life were hard. As we will see in chapter 3, efforts to increase production in the nineteenth century were dependent on technological innovation and increasing rates of worker productivity. Science abetted this drive by showing the functioning of the body to be reflexive and human behavior to be largely repetitive and habitual. The conclusion to be drawn was that human reactions are predictable within a range of possible outcomes. In other words, uniqueness as a florescence of individual spirit, while flattering, was larger imaginary.

Modernity as a cultural era which developed out of the Enlightenment can be seen as the crucible into which were thrown romantic, scientific, and industrial projections of what the individual was; could do; and/or could be, as if to see what would happen. What happened was a modern citizen appeared. We will discuss modernity as a set of cultural values and forces more fully, and define this modern citizen, in chapter 3. In *Farewell to an Idea* art historian T. J. Clark brackets the historical era of Modernity between the French Revolution and the opening of the Berlin Wall (1789-1989),¹ a time period of exactly two hundred years which he defines in sociopolitical terms that reflect the changes that occurred in

the make-up of national ruling structures in the West during the period. References to modernity in the present text adhere to Clark's ideological definition of modernity which is Marxist. We follow the course and impact of modernity in France up to the First World War. In doing so we will see how Proust's novel of the making of an artist in the early years of the twentieth century replicates the appearance of this modern citizen who came into being after a century of flux and change that saw the breakdown or rejection of such external referents as God and place.

That Proust wrote a book in the early twentieth century which took a largely discredited philosophical position and tested it and then went on to offer a proof for the Romantic tenet which places the source of art in the self of the artist may seem an unusual project today given the ever-increasing influence of empiricism in explaining the world as the nineteenth century progressed. It might seem unusual especially in light of early twentieth century understanding of the operations of consciousness. But it was just because Proust, as a writer *qua* artist, had an intuitive grasp of these operations that he was able to put this notion of origins to the test through a narrative of the making of an artist. He focused on time, memory, and experiencing. James Joyce and the Austrian author Robert Musil were treating similar themes with considerable intensity in their own work at about the same time while doing so through characters other than artists.

We should note that Proust came to this challenge slowly. He had not set out as a young man to take it up. Rather, over a lifetime of writing a set of themes related to issues of time, memory, experiencing, love, homosexuality, and the nature of creativity had cropped up repeatedly in the subject matter he had chosen to write about. Once the point was reached where Proust recognized these themes and issues as elements in a puzzle challenging him to solve it, his consciousness of them became a source of mental concentration. In 1908 Proust began working to resolve this puzzle through a novel he proposed to write. He did so, however, without having a clear-cut method of approach. The "puzzle" was still not sufficiently defined in his mind in 1908 for him to be able to approach it in so straightforward a fashion. After several months of work however, suddenly, as we will see, Proust saw his way through the thicket of these themes and issues and was able to write a novel of creative development and empowerment using these themes and issues as the parts of this problem which needed to be fitted into place in order to create an image of life at the time—and that would also serve as a proof of the Romantic precept concerning the origin of art in the self of the artist. In shaping his narrative,

Proust explored life as he found himself and others living it at the time. In consequence, *La Recherche* involved a huge amount of collateral thinking on issues pressing on the individual during the formative years of Proust's life, including those mentioned above.

A novel is eminently suited for testing a philosophical tenet. It is a difficult medium, however, through which to advance a clear-cut philosophy. Appetites, opportunities, and chance motivate characters in novels just as they do people in real life. This is why novels lend themselves to situational verification of philosophical points. For novels can explore these points through characters' actions and through their responses to the situations created by an author. But to draw philosophical conclusions based on an author's presentation of fictional situations in his book or books is not philosophy. And if the meaning one draws from a story one reads does not transcend the logic of it and actually impact the way one understands her or his own life then the term *philosophical novel* does not apply to what one is reading. Novels are discursive in the sense that they proceed from one topic, point of view, or situation to another. But the manner in which novels embody meaning is not discursive in the sense of being rationally and logically coherent. This is the reason some readers have problems when they expect discursive concision and a consanguinity of ideas in a novel that is purported to be philosophical in nature. Attempting to tease clear-cut outlooks on life from the actions and statements of characters, or from narratorial asides, or authorial comments inserted in the text can be frustrating. For characters, narrators, and even authors are participating in the events they are commenting on and thus lack the disinterestedness that opens the space for thoughtful speculation on the meaning of life.

Discussing a novel in terms of its philosophical content is easier if one singles out for study a central tenet that relates to essential qualities of human experiencing as these appear in a fictional work. In identifying creative idealism the present work has done this. The tenet is very deeply embedded in the actions of the story which centers on the principle character in the novel's progression through life. *Creative Development* accepts these conditions and accepts, also, that Proust's characters are largely unaware of what their actions say about them philosophically. Thus the present work approaches its elucidation of Proust's treatment of the Romantic precept of the origin of art through appreciating that *La Recherche*, as a philosophical novel, is a book about life. It finds in its hero's quest to become a writer an understanding of how the experiences of living human beings define who they are and how they manifest their potentiality. This discussion encompasses an allegorical reading of the novel which

relates creative empowerment to the appearance of the modern citizen in the early twentieth century. Proust's organizational program for his novel makes this allegorical reading possible. Ultimately, the creative idealism Proust enunciates through his hero's growth to creative empowerment transcends the novel. It resonates in the consciousness of his readers as truth.

The bibliography for the present work includes a number of titles not usually found in academic texts devoted to literature. These works broaden the range of support for the positions promoted in it. They reflect the nonacademic route by which I came to undertake this study of Proust and his novel. It is the result of forty years of reading and thought on *La Recherche*. My initial encounter with the novel came at a point in my life when I had just completed a graduate program in Zoology. I have spent my adult life in creative practice while supporting myself through employment. One might ask if this experience with artistic practice and my many years of reading and thinking about *La Recherche* mean anything in addressing Proust's treatment of the issues identified above. The answer is: They can. If one accepts, on the one hand, that the practice of a skill offers insight into the accomplishments of those who practice that skill better, then experience in artistic practice can make it possible for someone to identify and grasp nuances of development and meaning in behaviors where others may not see them. By the same token, forty years of consideration does not, in itself, enable a person to comprehend embodied truths more successfully than someone less intimately associated with a text. What long experience does provide, however, is a set of ideas or values culled from and tested against a constant, in this case Proust's novel. The fact that these ideas and values have endured the trial of my daily experience of life, and that they still resonate and hold true for me, is verification of the truth originally discovered in these ideas and values.

No book comes into being without help from many people. Among those I wish to single out is my wife, Marcha Johnson. Marcha has been steadfast in her support of this project. She has buttressed me emotionally throughout the many years during which this project developed. With her innate fairness and the experience from her professional life she has offered balance and thoughtful comment to my responses to setbacks and frustration. Without her, it would not have been possible to write this book.

I would also like to thank Michael Finn, Proust scholar from Ryerson University in Toronto. Michael read an early draft of this text and offered the sort of unvarnished but constructive criticism that stimulated further drafts through which the writing has, hopefully, been refined. George Braziller, the publisher, has been a watchful presence as this work developed. Donald Stone of Queens

College of the City University of New York and Peking University, Beijing, China, has been steadfast in his support as well. My nearly twenty years of employment in the Bookshop of the Metropolitan Museum of Art has afforded me almost daily opportunities to draw sustenance from the museum's collections. I am grateful for my time at the Metropolitan. In addition to the benefit I have derived from being close to the museum's collections, the museum has afforded me the privilege of working with many profoundly talented and committed individuals whose collective effort to advance our understanding of art from all cultures and their individual dedication to recognizing and respecting the origins of the impulse to art in human beings has meant that I have found support and understanding for the positions I promote in the present work. The list of these individuals is long. I apologize to any of those I owe much whose names I may have unintentionally missed in compiling this list. These individuals include: Harold Holzer, Maxwell Hearn, Judith Smith, Donald LaRocca, Ken Sohner and the staff of the Watson Library, Margaret Chase, Margaret Donovan, Joan Mertens, Romano Peluso, Maryann Ainsworth, and not least, Mr. Benny Hansen. I conclude by extending my heartfelt gratitude to my editor, Julia Moore, who helped make this a better book through clarify my prose.

Abbreviations

References to *A la recherche du temps perdu* are double. The first citation is to the French text, in this case, the single volume Gallimard Quarto paperback edition of the novel (1999). The citations are prefaced with a “G” for Gallimard and then an abbreviation in parenthesis of the volume followed by page number. The volume abbreviations are as follows:

- (CS) – Du côté de chez Swann
- (JF) – À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs
- (CG) – Le Côté de Guermantes
- (SG) – Sodome et Gomorrhe
- (LP) – Le Prisonnière
- (AD) – Albertine disparue
- (TR) – Le Temps retrouvé

The second citation in the series is to the six volume paperback edition of *In Search of Lost Time*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin revised by D. J. Enright, and published by the Modern Library 1998. The citation is prefaced with an “SLT” for *In Search of Lost Time*. It is followed by a roman numeral in parenthesis for the volume number (I-VI), followed by a page number.

References to *Contre Sainte-Beuve* are also double. Again, the first citation is to the French text.

CSB *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954)

CSB II *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, in *Marcel Proust: On Art and Literature*, 1896-1919, trans. Silvia Townsend Warner (New York: Carroll &* Graaf, Inc. 2nd edition, 1997)

CSB III *Contre Sainte-Beuve: précédé de Pastiches et mélanges et suivi de Essais et articles* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1971)

Introduction | *Un moment décisif*¹

At the conclusion of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Marcel, the principal character in the novel, becomes a writer when he conceives the book he had long sought to write. Readers generally assume it will be masterfully written. We assume this in spite of Marcel's limited experience as a writer. We having been taken in by the sleight of hand Proust incorporated into the opening pages of this first-person narrative. Succumbing to the ruse, readers assume the book we are reading is the book Marcel will write.

In 1913 a similar magico/mythical assumption attended the appearance of *Du côté de chez Swann*, the first of seven volumes composing *La Recherche* to be published.² In the minds of many, Proust was considered an overnight sensation with the publication of *Du côté de chez Swann*. This belief survived in early biographies whose authors saw the novel as autobiographical. It was not until the manuscripts discovered by Bernard de Fallois in the early 1950s which showed that Proust had been writing almost continuously during periods for which there had been no evidence of work that a more realistic picture of creative development emerged. For de Fallois' findings showed that *La Recherche* was a result of the trials and errors that come from practicing a craft and from learning from failure. One of the ironies of Proust's novel is that the lessons learned through practicing a craft form no part of the trial and error which accompanies what we will see in chapter 4 to have been Marcel's multiple apprenticeships. Through these apprenticeships Marcel achieved: intellectual growth; an understanding of artistic consciousness and semiotics; and the ability to open the window wide on sensory congruencies in déjà vu. These achievements enabled Marcel to embody the Romantic ideal of the artist without having written hardly a word.

The present text is a study of creative development and empowerment to the point of inception of great works of art. The creation of great works of art was the only art-making of interest to Proust in *La Recherche*. This is corroborated by the fictional works of art Proust discusses in some depth in the novel. The actress Berma's portrayal of *Phaedra*³, the heroine of Racine's play, Phèdre, the painter Elstir's *Carquethuit Harbor*,⁴ and the composer Vinteuil's Septet are presented as masterpieces of their kind.⁵ In describing them, Proust emphasizes the direct expression each projects of an essential quality of the artist's individual experiencing, the source of which, shaped by sensibility, is the self.⁶ This quality in their work is achieved through a process of approach, contact, and conduction to the artist's consciousness of some part of the deeply interior truth of experience they carry within them. Such truth is synthesized by the self from the life they

have lived. It is communicated through their art.

In Proust's novel, Marcel's artistic development leads him to the commencement of what will supposedly be a great work of art. A study of this process in *La Recherche* allows for complementary accounts to be given of both the hero's and the author's creative development. In the present work, Marcel's development and empowerment will be referenced to Proust's development and empowerment. The period leading to Proust's creative empowerment will be followed in the sequence of linked stories, essays, and critiques Proust wrote between the fall of 1908 and the spring of 1909 that are known collectively today as *Contre Sainte-Beuve*. Pairings accounts of hero and author during the period in which they become creatively empowered (for Marcel, this occurs in *Le Temps retrouvé* in the scene in the Prince de Guermantes' library which is followed by the *bal des têtes* scene; for Proust himself, the period noted above led Proust to inspiration in May, 1909 [see below]), together with the novel's narration of Marcel's childhood, provides a nearly cradle-to-grave narrative of the growth of an artist in as much as there are references in the novel to Marcel as a very young boy. Mastery, or readers' assumption of mastery in Marcel, is the final stage in a narrative of the growth of an artist. Imagination enlivens mastery. Ill health impinges on it; death ends it. Berma, the writer Bergotte, and Vinteuil—archetypal masters of their respective arts in *La Recherche*—all die in the novel. And, of course, though this study does not reach so far, Proust died with corrections of *Albertine disparue*, the next to last volume of the novel, close at hand ready to be inserted into his text.⁷

Our study begins with Marcel. Throughout the novel readers see Marcel respond to experiences that appeal to the senses. His interest in these experiences is further stimulated by imaginative possibility. These incidents are readers' introduction to how artists experience the world. Artists work by transposing experience and thought into art. In chapters 6, 7, and the epilogue we will turn to a discussion of Proust's creative empowerment. These chapters come after our discussion in chapters 4 and 5 of Marcel's experiences in *Le Temps retrouvé*. We will see that Marcel's creative development and empowerment provides a model supporting the Romantic precept of the origin of art in the self of the artist. While efficacious in elucidating the empirical basis for this precept, the process Proust outlines is largely a theoretical construct. This is one reason for comparing Marcel's development to Proust's own experience. For Proust's experience draws his fictional representation back to real life. The sequence of events in Proust's development is consistent with actual practice. The sequence provides insight into the birth of the novel as a dynamic process of skill and thought in

which Proust recognized in the dimension of Time, when he encountered it, the unifying concept for his work. This approach to the making of an artist—studying a fictional character side by side with the character’s creator—gives readers a more complete picture of artistic development and empowerment than a study of either Marcel or Proust alone could offer. The following premises provide the foundation for the present work:

1. creative idealism is the philosophical tenet underlying the novel;
2. the search for lost time is a search for spiritual unity with the self which Proust resolves through the dimension of Time, as does Marcel;
3. Marcel’s lack of spiritual unity is the cause of the problem-of-self he struggles with until his moment of inspiration at the end of the novel;
4. there are elements in Proust’s experience as a writer infused in the internal logic of the novel that carries over into the external reality of the reader as truths of human experience, and
5. the concept of the fourth dimension is the metaphoric vehicle which provided Proust the element he needed to visualize a foundation for his writing in the dimension of Time. (The fourth dimension is discussed at length in chapter 7.)

A study of Proust and his novel along these lines is not standard. Even so, topics addressed in this study are not new to Proust literature. Many have been treated elsewhere. The neurological validity of involuntary memory, discussed in chapters 2 and 5, was established by Jonah Lehrer.⁸ Modernity and Romanticism—forces of change in the nineteenth century—have been discussed frequently in relation to the novel. They are given significant coverage in chapters 3, 4, and 5. Inspiration has come up regularly over the years in discussions of Proust’s commencement of *La Recherche*. A review of this literature is presented at the end of this introduction. Genius is the subject of chapter 6. It has been written on extensively as a phenomenon of rare human achievement. But genius as a signifier for a rigorous exercise of creative thought and psychological positioning—the approach, contact, and conduction to consciousness of a truth of experience—has not been treated as a component in Proust’s empowerment. Finally, one cannot detach the inadequacy, stress, and exhilaration felt in frequenting “psychic territory most people would rather avoid” in the process of becoming and being an artist.⁹ Nor can one detach from practice the limits confronted in trying to achieve expressive authority in an artwork through the obduracy of the medium in which one works. Like twisting the barrel of a kalei-

doscope, the epilogue reconfigures the subjects discussed in the book. It offers a picture of the artist as a human being for whom art-making is the defining quality of his or her life, a life in which doubt is a psychological nemesis stilled only by the intermittent control the artist is able to exercise over her or his experience through the making of the artwork.

Proust dealt with creative development and empowerment lopsidedly in *La Recherche*. Common sense tells us art is a product of craft skills employed in the expression of ideas. The greatness of Berma's Phaedra, Elstir's *Carquethuit Harbor*, and Vinteuil's Septet was dependent on the technical mastery these artists employed to infuse their work with the ideas it expressed. As we noted earlier referring to Marcel's lack of practical experience, Proust marginalized practice in his presentation of creative development. Or, rather, he suppressed practice in order to focus readers' attention on a psychological explication of the Romantic precept of the origin of art in the artist. For this reason, too, Proust presents the struggle to achieve mastery in a medium as indicative of an underlying spiritual lack. Proust's separation of craft from spirit strengthens his promotion of the self as the origin of art in the artist. Promoting this thesis in the early twentieth century made becoming an artist a struggle against the centripetal forces of social and spiritual alienation in modernity that were pulling the individual away from the self while at the same time thrusting the individual into the anonymity that characterizes modern society. To become an artist under these circumstances one must counteract these forces of spiritual disintegration through attunement to the centrifugal forces of sensory stimulation and the qualities unique to one's emotional and intellectual response to experience. From self-knowing, the synthesis of thought and feeling become the means to artistic expression. Artistic expression is dependent on contact with the self. Proust is emphatic in *La Recherche* that contact with the self is essential to making art. For Proust, art is a medium through which truths of human experience are communicated to readers, viewers, or auditors of the work (hereafter identified solely as the viewer). This is the reason that craft or technique-based art is not considered art in Proust's program. For Proust to have considered technical accomplishment in his discussion of art-making would have muddled his argument. Proust underscores this point in the passage describing the young actress Rachel's performance before the duchesse de Guermantes' friends in the third volume of the novel, *Le Côté de Guermantes*. We see Rachel struggle to evoke feeling through costuming and the appropriation of gestures. Her performance, discussed in chapter 5, is a disaster. *La Recherche* thus sets up a two-tier system for gauging merit in art. Rachel seeks to entertain and give sensuous pleasure where

she can and that is the extent of what she has to offer. Great art, on the other hand, employs these qualities Rachel was working to acquire as the base from which to communicate truth. Communication of truth is the province of great art. It is borne from an impulse arising from the self.

Having spoken of the self so freely, we need to define it. Proust's contemporary, the American philosopher and psychologist William James's definition of the self appears in *The Principles of Psychology*. It will serve us in what follows. According to James the self is the active element in consciousness (all italics in this paraphrased statement originate with James's), a something which seems to *go out* to meet whatever qualities a person's feelings may possess or whatever content one's thought may include while these qualities and contents *come in* to be received by it. James elaborates further. He concludes that all humans single out from the rest of what we call ourselves some central principle we recognize as our self, of which the above is part of a fair general description.¹⁰ Each of us recognizes our own self as the authoritative and authenticating essence of who we are; it is the guarantor of our uniqueness as an individual.

For Proust, the years before 1909, the year he began *La Recherche*, were filled with writing. In addition to his published stories and articles and Ruskin translations there is the aborted novel he worked on from 1895 until 1899, *Jean Santeuil*. And there is *Contre Sainte-Beuve*. Among the many things *Jean Santeuil* reveals about Proust and his development as a writer is that in it Proust encountered and failed to surmount one of the major stumbling blocks the novel as a literary form poses to anyone attempting to write one: how to transcend the incidental and episodic nature of the events and experiences that make up the progression a novel chronicles. Or, to phrase it the other way round, how does one convey through a succession of distinct incidents and events the necessary relationship that exists between them and the single novelistic whole governing their presence in the story. This novelistic whole is missing from *Jean Santeuil*.

In *La Recherche*, Marcel's long-term well-being rests with his achieving a sense of psychological unity or duration as an antidote to the fragmented, discreet images that are all Marcel retains of his past in memory. Lack of a sense of unity with the self prevents Marcel from recognizing a connection between who he is in the present and each of the individual identities he has occupied in the past. For Proust, writing a novel in which he had so many things to say on so many different subjects required the strongest possible source of conceptual unity for all these topics to be contained in a novelistic whole. Finding or creating a unifying concept was essential, then, for his project to succeed. Proust's need for conceptual unity is replicated in Marcel's search for spiritual unity. The