

Embosoming and rejecting the tension of existence: Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost time*

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Abstract

The story begins with his childhood, Proust's narrator Marcel searches for what he calls time that has been lost; he finally regains that lost time in the final volume as a middle-aged man when he experiences a life-altering epiphany. Vivid memories of his life flood through him and he embraces his long-deferred vocation as an artist. What it means to Marcel to lose and regain time is an enticing mystery at the heart of Proust's work, and the power and beauty of Proust's excited descriptions of the moments in which Marcel "regains" time underscore the importance of the theme of temps perdu and temps retrouvé. Charles Embry has insightfully demonstrated the ways that Eric Voegelin's approach to literature, and in particular Voegelin's accounts of participation, the in-between (metaxy), remembrance, and the primary experience of the cosmos, can fruitfully guide a reading of Proust's account of time lost and regained. The "blessed impressions" refer to those pivotal moments, such as Marcel's tasting of the madeleine dipped in tea or his stumbling upon uneven paving stones, which flood him with involuntary and overwhelmingly vivid memories. Embry's reading of Proust in light of Voegelin is compelling, and this paper makes an attempt to approach Embry as a guide.

Keywords: time, lost, epiphany, remembrance, regain

Introduction

Embry is far from suggesting that either the character Marcel, or the reader, could have fruitfully skipped these social divertissements and gone directly to the epiphany of volume 6. But how do the long stretches of the novel in which Marcel is not experiencing epiphanic "blessed impressions" contribute to a Voegelinian reading of the meaning of the symbols of time lost and regained? In particular, I wonder how the parts of the novel that I found most disquieting to read—those that chronicle Marcel's intense, controlling jealousy toward Albertine and his continual mendacity toward

her—can be integrated into a Voegelinian reading of the novel. Marcel’s obsessive love affair with Albertine might be seen only as an unimportant distraction from his life’s calling as a novelist.

In his essay, “On Henry James’s *Turn of the Screw*,” Voegelin writes of novelists such as Piranesi and Kafka who symbolize the loss of the open cosmos as “the prison without hope. . . . The man who contracts himself to a Self can be so much aware of the open world outside that he symbolizes his own state as incarceration. He is not afflicted with blindness for the open cosmos, but deforms its reality while being conscious of deforming it” (CW 12, p. 163). Such a refusal to participate in the openness of existence is seen, Voegelin argues, in Nietzsche’s “refusal to participate in the reality of the divinely ordered cosmos, his refusal to open himself to Grace. . . .”

In these passages, Voegelin stresses that the openness to the fullness of experience is not a possession but an activity, and that it can too easily be lost through a refusal of grace, a deformation or contraction of reality, so that consciousness becomes a prison rather than a state of freedom. While Voegelin does not mention Proust here along with Kafka and Piranesi, it is easy to see that Marcel’s relationship with Albertine constitutes a literary “prison without hope” that contrasts with the openness of the final epiphany in Volume 6. The image of Albertine as a captive in Volume 5 conveys the way that

Marcel has imprisoned both Albertine and himself through a misinterpretation of the meaning of the invitation to love another person. He has chosen, in Voegelin’s terms, *libido dominandi* over charity, anxiety over faith, despair over hope.

To make this point more fully, let us turn to a key passage in *SLT* Volume 4 (Part 2, Chapter 4). At this point in the novel as a whole, Marcel has taken the reader through a series of relationships dominated by jealous longing. These include Marcel’s childhood longing for his mother’s goodnight kiss, which she sometimes failed to give him in order to remain with dinner guests, Swann’s obsessive love for Odette, Saint-Loup’s love of Rachel, Baron de Charlus’s love of Morel, and Marcel’s love of Gilberte Swann. For Marcel, the thought that Albertine loves others, and especially the thought that she has women lovers, brings back these previous longings.

“It was Trieste, it was that unknown world in which I could feel that Albertine took a delight, in which were her memories, her friendships, her childhood loves, that exhaled that hostile, inexplicable atmosphere, like the atmosphere that used to float up to my bedroom at Combray, from the dining-room in which I could hear, talking and laughing with strangers amid the clatter of knives and forks, Mamma who would not be coming upstairs to say good-night to me; like the atmosphere that, for Swann, had filled the houses to which Odette went at night in search of inconceivable joys” (SLT, vol. 4, p. 710)

Note that this passage shows that for Marcel, when one is in love with someone, one longs to be a participant in all of the beloved's experiences; one is jealous of those "inconceivable joys," those enjoyable experiences and memories that the beloved has enjoyed but from which the lover has been excluded. This longing, I believe, is a form of the *eros* that draws one beyond oneself and that reflects an ultimate longing for the transcendent. But the way that Marcel appropriates this *eros* is through a set of serious missteps in his spiritual journey.

At the end of Volume 4, Marcel has been seeing Albertine romantically but has decided to break up with her. By chance, he learns that Albertine has had a long and close friendship with a woman, Mlle Vinteuil, whom he knows to have women lovers. Marcel had previously suspected that Albertine had women lovers, but he had suppressed these suspicions. When he learns of her friendship with Mlle Vinteuil, "an image stirred in my heart, an image which I had kept in reserve for so many years that even if I had been able to guess, when I stored it up long ago, that it had a noxious power, I should have supposed that in the course of time it had entirely lost it; preserved alive in the depths of my being..." (SLT, Vol. 4, p. 702). This is the image of Mlle Vinteuil and her lover, whom he had surreptitiously observed together years ago. Marcel's newfound belief that Albertine is lesbian causes him to give up the idea of breaking up with her. The thought of Albertine's spending time with attractive women fills him with horror and he feels compelled to prevent it. Marcel believes that his jealousy of Albertine is the primary cause of his renewed love for her: "But if something brings about a violent change in the position of that soul in relation to us, shows us that it is in love with others and not with us, then by the beating of our shattered heart we feel that it is not a few feet away from us but within us that the beloved creature was" (SLT, Volume 4, pp. 719-20). Instead of breaking off the relationship, he embarks on a campaign to deceive and manipulate Albertine into moving with him to Paris and moving into his apartment. In Volume 5, Marcel chronicles the months that Albertine spends as virtually his prisoner in Paris. Before she finally leaves him, he indulges in elaborate schemes to control her thoughts, feelings, and actions, which he wishes were directed only toward himself.

Marcel's response to the discovery that Albertine loves women is thus to intensify his love affair with her and to seek to exercise utter control over her thoughts and feelings, to the extent of loving her most when she is unconscious and inert, unable to resist his desires. Marcel makes the choice to construct a prison in which to keep his lover captive. In this, he overlooks other choices he may have had, the most obvious being to break off with Albertine as he had intended to do. Within the world of this novel, there do not seem to be other choices when it comes to love relationships, for all the central characters seem to experience romantic love as a choice between controlling one's partner and ending the relationship. However, as I will argue below, Marcel's choice in the conclusion of Volume 6 to liberate his written work to the vagaries of fate represents a third choice, that of releasing the loved one while maintaining a loving relationship.

In accepting and submitting to suffering and embracing his task as an artist, Marcel explicitly gives up the desire to control and dominate the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others, which earlier led him to make of his Paris apartment a prison for both Albertine and himself and to treat Albertine as an inert object. Instead, he explicitly accepts the idea that his suffering serves a greater purpose and even embraces the fact that his books, with their portrayals of those he has loved, will take on a life of their own and will be transformed in the minds of his future readers. "Saddening... was the

thought that my love, to which I had clung so tenaciously, would in my book be so detached from any individual that different readers would apply it, even in detail, to what they had felt for other women” (SLT, Volume 6, p. 309).

Recall Voegelin’s cryptic comment that Proust’s lost and regained time are “times which correspond to the loss and rediscovery of self, the action of rediscovery through a monumental literary work of remembrance being the atonement for the loss of time through personal guilt—very similar to cosmological rituals of restoring order that has been lost through lapse of time.” Whatever Voegelin had in mind by referring to “atonement” and “personal guilt,” it is possible to see Marcel’s final release of control over his writing as a kind of atonement for the fierce control that he exercised over Albertine and that he wished to exercise over his other loved ones. This the third option for one who loves another person—neither to break off relationship nor to exercise domination over the beloved, but to continue to love him or her while relinquishing control. This is the option that preserves a tension between possession and indifference, by loving another person passionately while preserving a kind of spiritual detachment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have tried to show that Marcel’s love of Albertine, far from being only a distraction from his spiritual search, is motivated by the same longing for meaning that leads him to try to regain “lost time” and that culminates in his embracing his identity as an artist. The moment at which his jealousy toward Albertine is born is described in terms strikingly similar to the language he uses to describe his artistic epiphany, leading us to recognize that these two moments are parallel and that his responses to them represent opposite existential choices. Marcel’s embracing of his intense, controlling impulses toward Albertine constitutes, in Voegelin’s terms, a closing of the self and a resistance to, even a deformation of, the fullness of experience represented by the symbol of time regained, a fullness to which Marcel ultimately opens himself when he takes up his artistic vocation and when he gives up control of his writings, and his loves, to the vagaries of the future. In telling the story of Marcel’s imprisonment of Albertine, Proust portrays the modern imprisonment of the self, and it is for this spiritual self-imprisonment that Marcel atones in the conclusion of *In Search of Lost Time*.

References:

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