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PROUST, THE SUFFERING ARTIST

By

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Introduction

A myth has been propagated in popular culture that all artists suffer, and that their grief is the source of inspiration. The *artiste manqué* (suffering artist), or rather the concept that suffering greatly shapes artistic creation, has endured in the Western canon since antiquity. Jacob Burckhardt, a renowned 19th century historian, thought the Greeks—acclaimed for producing proto-Western art—were successful socially, artistically, and politically because of what he theorized to be the *agon* (162). This is the root of our modern word “agony.” Burckhardt reasons the Greeks had an internal agony they sought to mitigate by expression, evidenced in their initially frequent wars and later creative, competitive spectacles, such as Olympic Games that pitted individuals against each other. The *agon* is also delineated in the liberal arts (philosophy, government, art) that sought to express, understand, and aid the Greek’s condition. Vincent van Gogh is a further example of an artist whose work was purportedly the effect of his suffering: van Gogh’s decaying mental health produced paintings that supposedly reflected his grief. But was van Gogh’s work so artistically potent because of his depression? Could he have had a happy life, free from abnormal suffering, and still produced landscapes and portraits that awe? Or is the popular-culture myth that most artists suffer valid, and Burckhardt’s *agon* still underpins the artist’s reasons to create?

The term *artiste manqué* first bears scrutiny, since its translation into English from French is not exact. Translated from French, *artiste manqué* literally means “failed artist” and centers on unfulfilled expectations, implying a degree of suffering in not embodying what constitutes an artist. The term then becomes representative of a process of first having artistic expectations, endeavoring to fulfill them, failing, and suffering as a

result. The first three components help create and shape the resultant suffering, which ultimately becomes the most noticeable aspect of a suffering artist. And because of the fourth component of the process, it is understandable why most Anglophone criticism of the interrelationship between suffering and art uses *artiste manqué* to refer to the suffering artist. The meaning of *artiste manqué* then may either mean: 1) the whole process of becoming a failed artist, and 2) the resultant suffering of the artist that may define a failed artist. A more accurate French term that reflects the suffering artist would be *artiste souffrante*—literally translated as, “suffering artist.” Since most Anglophone literary criticism focusing on the suffering artist uses *artiste manqué*, and for the purposes of this paper, I will also use *artiste manqué*, where appropriate, to encompass the whole process of becoming as a suffering artist.

Literary critics argue against the popular myth and instead affirm certain artists suffer, but not all. So which artists suffer and how? In the journey of western literature, there has always been suffering and art. In ways, suffering most influences art; in others, art mitigates suffering. Then there are those artists who never suffer, those who always suffer, and those who suffer and their grief endangers their art, ultimately destroying it. When art is therapeutic, it can sometimes redeem the artist, and rightly so. In times of great anguish people regularly turn towards things that comfort and inspire, especially art, television shows, books, movies, music, etc.

Literary modernism is a strong contender for a period of literature in which numerous artists suffered, and, moreover, a period in which a whole society suffered. The early twentieth century exhibits some of the most salient examples of how suffering can affect humanity and how it responds: two great wars; inventions of industrialization (e.g.,

factories) that were meant to improve lives but sometimes hampered them; realizations about the duplicity and terror of governments and human capacity; and atrocities such as the Holocaust and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Because of the catastrophic events that shook the human conscience, new schools of thought in psychology emerged to cope with the societal post-war trauma: logotherapy and existential therapy.

Logotherapy, in particular, emerged from Viktor Frankl, a psychiatrist who searched for meaning under Nazi oppression despite the seeming bleakness of events. Seeking to reconcile the tragedy of select moments (such as sudden unemployment or losing a loved one), Frankl holds out for what he calls “tragic optimism”: man ultimately finds meaning through suffering and suffering can present an opportunity for realizing what needs to change (137-138). Frankl’s tragic optimism delineates part of the post-war *zeitgeist* that helped mold the contemporary popular-culture view that artists necessarily suffer, though Frankl himself does not think suffering is necessary or advisable if it may be avoided.

There is no shortage of modernist authors and poets who produced canonical works while enduring despair: Ernest Hemingway and his war injury and alcoholism; F. Scott Fitzgerald and his alcoholism and marital troubles; T. S. Eliot and his failed marriage—cited in a private letter by Eliot as a major source for “The Waste Land” (xvii, reported by his second wife Valerie Eliot); James Joyce and his painful eye ailment and financial impoverishment; and Marcel Proust with his sickly health, homosexuality during a time that denounced it, and separation anxiety from his Mother, who, after her death, left him grief, but also an impetus to write dedicatedly.

For the French-modernist writer, Proust’s version of suffering is the realization that his senses are deadened by habit. Proust sees habit as antithetical to art because it

suppresses creativity, though habit often provides solace by making everything familiar. Breaking from habit and the inevitable consequent suffering are instead necessary to create art since the artist must not allow his senses to remain deadened. Gaining a new perspective in order to create art is the byproduct of suffering are broadly understood, and distancing oneself from comfortable surroundings will most often create moments of anxiety and grief. These moments, when the artist has a new vantage point, can be useful tools to craft art because they objectify his condition. In his magnum opus *À la recherche du temps perdu* (translated *In Search of Lost Time*), there are artists who become artists because they suffer and turn to art (Marcel, Vinteuil, M. Swann), which can express and alleviate their pain, similar to a therapy. There are also artists who do not experience grief—such as Bergotte—and are respected as much as are suffering artists. Yet there are artists whose vocational title is suspect, as they do not produce works of merit, but instead only dabble in art and endure frustration, setbacks, and shortcomings (again, M. Swann).

Recherche (the shorthand I will be using for *À la recherche du temps perdu*) is one of the best modernist novels for examining the *artiste manqué* phenomenon in literature. It is a work deeply candid and reflective about suffering, art, love, maturing, memory, and finding one's Self. The seven-volume novel is best described as a *künstlerroman*, similar to a *bildungsroman* in that both are coming-of-age stories, yet the former presents an artist's growth to maturity. Marcel, the seldom named narrator protagonist, recounts his life through memory: his time spent as a child at the fictional town Combray, his life in Paris, his relationships with his family and friends, and his love affairs with women, such as Gilberte and Albertine.

At first he is captivated by the grandeur and elusiveness of high society, endeavoring to be accepted in the upper social circle to experience its illusory beauty. After seeing society as cruel and despicable, Marcel turns toward intimate relationships and individuality, and ultimately the most intimate relationship with art. *Recherche* is often said by uninitiated readers to be exceedingly long and overly-complex (the Modern Library edition totals the work at around 4,357 pages across seven volumes). In truth, it is. Sentences often continue for what seems a paragraph, paragraphs absorb whole pages, chapters are hundreds of pages, and the longest sentence ever written has been credited to Proust (Richard Howard, introduction to *Recherche*, ix). Yet amid these volumes of prose that border on the poetic and sometimes dizzy the reader with images, there is sincerity, intimacy, and beauty. Reading *Recherche* is not so much reading a novel of principal characters progressing along a plot that ends in a few hours; it is reading a lifetime.

Marcel Proust (July 10, 1871 – November 18, 1922) was born to an affluent and respected family. His father, Dr. Adrien Proust, was a physician celebrated for his work in epidemiology and a top ranking official in the French Health Administration. Marcel's mother, Jeanne Weil, primarily took the role of a French woman and wife by attending dinners, entertaining guests, being savvy in literature and music, and, above all, mothering young Marcel. A sickly child with asthma and generally weak stamina (fully observable when he was nine), Marcel spent much of his time indoors and in the company of his mother and grandmother. As William C. Carter writes of these relationships in his biography *Marcel Proust: A Life*:

His mother's influence was the most important in Marcel's life. Not only did he strive to be like her; nature had made him like her, at least in

outward appearance As Jeanne gazed lovingly at the child whose visage reflected hers, her Marcel, her little wolf, she must have been aware that he appeared remarkably unwolflike. The boy was frail and anxious, and burst easily into tears. How to make him able to stand on his own should something happen to her? . . . With his father often away or working when at home, Marcel's mother and grandmother Adèle Weil supervised his cultural education, exposing him to what they considered the best works in literature and music, spending many hours nurturing and feeding his insatiable curiosity. (23)

These relationships with his mother and grandmother showed young Marcel his future calling to art. Early in his artistic call, Proust translated, with the help of his English-speaking mother, his literary role model John Ruskin's book—*La Bible d'Amiens* (1904)—into French, and periodically wrote articles in *Le Figaro*. It was not until the death of his mother in 1905 that her concern about his self-sufficiency was answered: Proust turned seriously to literature.

His serious literary career started around 1908 with works such as *Jean Santeuil* (published posthumously in 1952), a prototype for his eventual magnum opus, and *Contre Saint-Beuve* (written from 1908-9), which served as an early exploration on various themes and artistic credos in *Recherche*. He began work on the first volume, *Swann's Way* (1913), in 1908, and the whole of his masterpiece absorbed the rest of his life until his death in 1922. Even as he cloistered himself in his cork-lined room and lay on his death bed, he continued editing drafts of his final volume, which needed to be finished posthumously by his brother, Robert.

In order to understand what the life of Proust and the complexity and multitude of *Recherche* says about the interrelationship between suffering and creativity, a broad and critical study of existing literary criticism on the *artiste manqué* must first be conducted. Author J. E. Rivers in “Proust and the Aesthetic of Suffering” investigates this relationship and its components and declares, in the context of Proust and *Recherche*, “One can have an artistic vision and still not have the special combination of gifts that will make it possible to give that vision concrete form. Craft, as well as inspiration, is necessary; the intelligence, as well as the emotions must come into play” (124). The potential forms of necessary inspiration are ambiguous; suffering certainly is a candidate, yet the merits of suffering beg investigating. In his magnified looking glass, Rivers sees suffering “[leading] to the truth. It encourages introspective examination of our most deep-seated motives; and it causes us to scrutinize with passionate attention the lives and identities of those who make us suffer” (129); and of Marcel, Rivers understands that “[h]is life of suffering, [Marcel] realizes, has been a long and arduous apprenticeship for an artistic vocation” (129). As for this cause of suffering, there seems to be a religious undertone. Under the impression of Barbara Bucknall’s *The Religion of Art in Proust*, Rivers thinks art synonymously redeems the sufferer just as religion redeems the sinner: “The moments of greatest joy, the moments of self-transcendence, the moments when we are made to feel that death is perhaps not so greatly to be feared, are the moments in [*Recherche*] when we are in the presence of great art” (128). Art is something uplifting, but the implication is that art is never far away from suffering, as if it is a shadow. The light of art is partly responsible for the shadow of suffering, however, it cannot be ignored as redemptive and therapeutic. Can art sufficiently alleviate the pain of suffering?

Does suffering always require an artistic therapy to mend the pain, perhaps showing in the process the enduring spirit of the artist (131)?

The ways in which suffering manifests itself are worthy of investigation to better understand how an artist perceives suffering. In his essay *Proust*, Samuel Beckett regards Habit as what causes suffering. Beckett argues that because Habit deadens the senses, Boredom emerges, and the artist, realizing his senses are suppressed by realizing his boredom, subsequently seeks to agitate his state in order to create something original and expressive. This agitation is accomplished by breaking away from Boredom via suffering: “The pendulum oscillates between these two terms: Suffering – that opens a window on the real and is the main condition of the artistic experience, and Boredom – with its host of top-hatted and hygienic ministers, Boredom that must be considered as the most tolerable because the most durable of human evils” (16). Perhaps Beckett’s word choice in describing Boredom is as insightful as his rationalization, mainly “top-hatted” and “hygienic ministers,” since both are key symbols of society: the formality and degree of visible prestige by the top hat, and the systematic structure imposed on life by ministers. Society in Proust’s *Recherche* is at first an elusive clan of top-hatted aristocrats tantalizing and charming, but then a grim formalization of life into perennial ingratiating, attendance, subordination, and, above all, the deadening of the individual and the senses. Beckett additionally argues that artists fail to produce works of art if they become complacent and comfortable in Habit. The degree to which life can blossom is captured in Proust’s own words as Beckett quotes them: “ ‘If there were no such thing as Habit, Life would of necessity appear delicious to all those whom Death would threaten at every moment, that is to say, to all Mankind’ ” (17).

Examining *Recherche* under the influence of Beckett's pendulum swinging between suffering and boredom, society for Proust and his protagonist Marcel is not necessarily the grim and darkened maze that confines the artistic mind, but a maze the mind must first navigate before it can perceive suffering retrospectively, and then open its window on the real and create art. Marcel's navigation in *Recherche* can be seen in his fascination with high-society in the Guermantes Way and subsequent suffering caused by realizing his disillusionment, which leads him to the society of art. Beckett finds a different maze of suffering in Marcel's separation anxiety that he must overcome, placed in a greater terror of thinking that the "pain of separation will succeed indifference, that the privation will cease to be a privation when the alchemy of Habit has transformed the individual of suffering into a stranger for whom the motives of that suffering are an idle tale, when not only the objects of his suffering have vanished, but also that affection itself" (14). Beckett concludes suffering does not merely equip Marcel with an artistic mind: it is fundamental to his vocation as an artist because suffering heightens the senses and objectifies the real outside Boredom. Should Marcel have been comfortable and accepting of his mother's death, he might never had an impetus to create art.

Of this dichotomy between suffering and boredom, Françoise Leriche writes in her essay "Proust, an 'Art Nouveau' Writer?" that "there is not a single episode in the *Recherche* that does not illustrate the basic core of *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, which is the opposition between the social self and the deeper self, intelligence and intuition, appearance and true meaning" (207). This opposition is crucial to *Recherche*, mainly the latter portion, for the novel is a search for the life of the mind and what constitutes it—the self: first in society and then fleetingly from the darkness of society. While her essay is

not necessarily pertinent to the *artiste manqué*, it provides insight as to what the “deeper self” might be, whether it is found in art or a different form entirely.

Similarly to Beckett, Roger Shattuck views suffering and grief as “ultimately salutary” and providing a form of “spiritual knowledge” (139). Shattuck holds that suffering and grief turn Marcel inward and toward the past, and that suffering may trigger involuntary memory (one of the primary, if not *the* primary, components of Marcel’s art). However, suffering as a causal agent of involuntary memory is suspect. The causal relationship seems reversed, and instead suffering more often follows from involuntary memory (caused by chance). For example, Marcel’s chance remembrance of his mother in the opening of *Swann’s Way* leads him to remember the painful goodnight kiss scene, thus leaving that day as a black date in the calendar. Additionally, the tea-dunked madeleine memory that triggers the whole of *Recherche* is not painful, nor are many of Marcel’s other memories, though they mostly lead to moments of suffering. It is from these involuntary memories, in combination with the resultant suffering, that writing can arise to mitigate and cope with the suffering. Yet, in Shattuck’s view, suffering seems always categorized as detrimental, pegging the artists as fallen-angels rather than progressively transcending.

Julia Kristeva in *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* further investigates how suffering influences art from a semiotic perspective. Suffering as a deprivation of something (love or failed expectations) represents a set of symbols antithetical to what is desired, thereby causing a necessity to create or find symbols. To cope with this absence or undesired overt meaning, art can redeem:

Art seems to point to a few devices that bypass complacency and ... secure for the artist and the connoisseur a sublimatory hold over the lost Thing. First by means of prosody, the language beyond language that inserts into the sign the rhythm and alliterations of semiotic process. Also by means of the polyvalence of sign and symbol, which unsettles naming and, by building up a plurality of connotations around the sign, affords the subject a chance to imagine the nonmeaning, or the true meaning, of the Thing. (97)

This positions art as most useful to the depressed because it attaches meaning to suffering (as Kristeva more generally terms it “Thing”) by means of transcendence (i.e., prosody). Prosody—the rhythm, stress, and intonation of language often thought exclusive to poetry—is instead linguistic, focusing on the sounds of language and, in effect, the very art produced: poetry, essays, translations, stories, and novels. Language is fundamentally on which written art centers. “Language beyond language” means not only functioning as communicative language, but also functioning as a psychiatric talking-cure. Prosody empowers artists to overcome suffering in solitude, using a communicative talking-cure with themselves, rather than relying on others. Kristeva holds transcendence through art to be the “polyvalence of sign and symbol,” and understands art as symbols that can transfigure the symbols of suffering to be part of something not wholly insufferable: “Sublimation’s dynamics, by summoning up primary processes and idealization, weaves a *hypersign* around and with the depressive void” (99). Here, “sublimation” and “hypersign” collectively mean transfiguring what is undesirable into the desired. Just as art is indebted to suffering as the impetus that creates alternate meanings and

connotations out of symbols of grief, so too is grief indebted to art by being transformed into something with meaning. This co-constitutive relationship of transferring meaning from the imagination to the depressive void is what allows the ideal to exist, also creating meaning in the void: “This is a survival of idealization – the imaginary constitutes a miracle, but it is at the same time its shattering” (103). The ideal that was ephemeral in the imagination ceases to reside outside of reality and now exists corporeally, rooted in reality, because of grief. In the context of suffering and art, Kristeva imparts suffering as the primary impetus of artistic creation, rather than simply categorizing it as a necessary catalyst that orients the artist toward the ideal.

In a fashion similar to semiotic interpretation though steeped to a greater extent in philosophy, Gilles Deleuze, in *Proust and Signs*, posits *Recherche* to be a work of signs—artistic, worldly, erotic, etc. These signs are the “object of temporal apprenticeship” and they are those on which Proust’s work is based (4). Pursuant to the future of these signs, Proust’s *Recherche* and his character Marcel investigate (25). Regarding Marcel’s suffering in the novel while undergoing his artistic apprenticeship, Deleuze writes, “Necessarily then, he suffers disappointments: he ‘believed,’ he suffered under illusions [of his venture into society and not art]; the world vacillates in the course of apprenticeship” (25). For Deleuze, this “experience of signs” commands *Recherche* and their semiotic interpretation is a “converse of a production of signs themselves” (1). The interpretation of signs is a deconstruction of their original meaning (hence “converse of production”), yet, contrary to Deleuze, this creates new signs. Art is ultimately an assembly of signs, one that produces unique signs as well as interprets existing signs. This presents art in relation to suffering as a deconstruction or even a reconstruction of

suffering, further metamorphosing it as Kristeva argued. The disappointment (integral to suffering) also changes in form since it is not necessarily the loss of a worldly sign, but a failure to fulfill the expectation or form of an artistic sign. Viewing the entirety of *Recherche* from a semiotic vantage point allows a deeper understanding of central conflicts in the novel: between art and society, the self and society, and the self and art. It allows art to transcend simply being a therapy and become a means by which the Self is defined.

Stephen G. Brown, mainly interpreting *Recherche* in a Rankian light, expands the body of criticism on the *artiste manqué* by articulating the “need to escape neurotic suffering, to eternalize the self, to replace what has been lost – all inform the creative impulse ...” (177). Suffering functions as an impetus that spurs the artist toward creation, and art can function as what mitigates the wound of the artist. Its creation taking place in the contested and undefined space between the Self and the Other, art can immortalize the individual, transcending and preserving parts of the Ideal as well as part of (for Marcel) the reader’s life (185). By immortalizing the Self and its Ideal, both can remain intact and unmarked. Brown additionally argues that the creative self begotten by ideal art can be a tyrannical force that oppresses the self, which strives to be free of its subservience (207-208). The artist tries to flee from this tyranny by shifting the genre of art produced or his viewpoint of it. The artist, for example, reflects upon his art so he will not be completely absorbed by it, or changes professions to a scientist and scientifically analyzes his art (209-210). This relationship is akin to a vicious circle: Art can save and give rise to the individual, but also oppress it under the terms of its Faustian bargain. There are artists in society who seemingly never suffer ill-effects from art, and there are

artists who see suffering as integral and a definitive component of the Self, regardless of any ill-effects. Certainly, imposing expectations on one's art can create difficulty and even result in grief, but how does this grief or any other sorrow inform the art?

It is useful to turn towards Otto Rank, whose perspective underpins Stephen G. Brown's, in order to understand better the question of how art may oppress. In *Art and Artist: Creative Urge and Personality Development*, Rank explores the ideological roots of artistry and how the societal ideology affects the artist: The artist rebels against the current ideology of art and society by creating his own art, which in turn becomes a new, personal ideology of art (368). Yet his new ideology of art can subsequently mirror the old ideology and oppress the artist: "[The artist] becomes the representative of an ideology, and at first his individuality vanishes, until, later, at the height of his achievement, he strives once more to liberate his personality, now a mature personality, from the bonds of an ideology which he has himself accepted and helped to form" (371-372). Art and ideology created the artist and matured him—at the cost of his individuality—but now the artist pursues individuality by escaping what he created. By turning away from art and towards a different vocation, the artist again frees himself as an individual from the collective ideology, his ideology. The sporadic change in vocation might be seen in artists, such as Shakespeare who primarily wrote plays but may have felt their tyranny and wrote sonnets as a therapy. Rank's views are innovative not only for examining how the artist's art can oppress, and subsequently how the artist can escape, but especially for examining that the artist's ideology is first rooted in the collective and tied to the old ideology of art.

A contemporary of Proust, James Joyce's work is also examined under the light of the *artiste manqué*. In "A Poor Trait of the Artless," Morris Beja textually analyzes the characters Stephen Daedalus and Leopold Bloom throughout *Portrait, Ulysses*, and *Finnegan's Wake*, and how, out of their initial reluctance or incompetence to create art, they emerge as artists. Only in the context of Joyce's work, Beja seeks to find artists who suffer, rather than examining the relationship between art and suffering or what constitutes either art or suffering. The benchmark Beja uses to discern if a character is an artist is only if the expectation of producing art is fulfilled, implicitly ignoring what constitutes art and instead arbitrarily imposing subjective standards. Beja ultimately concludes the artist is seen as an *artiste manqué* often through initial prospect, that is, the suffering and failed artists are assumed to become artists: "It is arguable, for that matter, that genius and truly exceptional artistry can be most powerfully evoked, in a work of fiction, only in prospect. The depiction of the great sensitive artist in full maturity can easily be unconvincing. There are exceptions, but often the character involved is so eccentric as to border on parody" (102). Thus, for Morris, the suffering or failed artist fulfills himself as an artist under the assumption that he will be an artist, not in the reality of his mediocre art or struggle to be an artist. Not much is proffered in the way of discerning between artists who are influenced by suffering and those who succeed in becoming artists without suffering (leaving a high probability of misinterpreting who is an artist), but it elucidates a key enigma on what makes an artist. Perhaps the persistence seen in failed artists, leading observers to ultimately cast them as artists, is enough to suggest artists are those who constantly pursue the creation of art, regardless of the merit in what is produced.

Rachel Brenner examines Mordecai Richler's work in the context of Jewish Canada, investigating how Richler used the anti-Semitism in Quebec and the episodes of dismay that afflicted his Jewish community as sources for his art. Much of this conflict between art and suffering is seen in Richler's protagonists: "Richler's protagonists-artists wish to use their art as a weapon to explode both Jewish and Gentile systems which adhere to the concept of the weak Jew, and to replace the stereotype with the image of the heroic Jew" (46). Brenner's observations delineate art as a supplanting and altering force, able to deconstruct an established system or sign and then reconstruct, using the same components, a system that is redemptive, empowering, or, in Richler's context, socially potent. Brenner argues Richler's protagonists fulfill the *artiste manqué* archetype because "the dream of Jewish potency highlights the dreamer's impotence"; these artists-protagonists are unable to successfully craft art that fulfills its imposed obligation or replace the stereotype of the weak Jew (48).

Examining *Lord Jim* by Joseph Conrad, Eric Hatch contributes to the discussion by finding that art distances the artist from suffering, similar to Deleuze and Kristeva. Focusing on the main characters of Jim and Marlow as portraits of the *artiste manqué*, Hatch sees Jim turning toward himself instead of art as the ideal, while Marlow approaches the ideal through symbols, "which provides a buffer zone between the civilized self and the Intolerable, then to make those symbols available to others [i.e., expression]" (266). This buffer zone presents the relationship to be one of distance, art circumventing suffering and creating a way to ignore suffering, essentially to be blind to suffering. Art then doesn't necessarily become a treatment. By expressing symbols, the *artiste manqué* creates ideals by which they survive, and therein art nonetheless redeems

because it relieves artists of their suffering. The question remains, however, about works of art steeped in and perhaps indebted to sorrow. Art's function might be distancing in *Lord Jim*, but it seems that generally art is more often influenced by and connected to suffering than isolated from it.

The existing literature on the *artiste manqué* is under-theorized at best, and though there are volumes of criticism on art and on suffering, there is little on the relationship that delineates how either can engender, endanger, or inform each other. In relation to how suffering is integral to the Self, it appears there is first a need for a crisis of the Self or an awakening that provokes the Self before it may be formed. The suffering endured by a becoming-artist is what provokes and shapes the artist's craft. By disrupting one's unchecked, ideal reality, the Self is able to manifest through media, whether it be art, scholarship, love, etc. How that medium redeems the artist, immortalizes him, or provides a therapy or a way of overcoming his suffering, is still an area in theory that needs further investigation. Proust's work provides fertile ground for the investigation of these questions.

Part I: Swann's Way

During his childhood, the young Marcel produces clear signs of his artistry, the first of which occurs in the opening section of the first volume, the "Overture." While the aged Marcel introspectively examines his foundational childhood in Combray, he realizes and reflects upon the phenomenon of recollection and expounds upon the thematic driving force and artistic credo behind his art, art that becomes *Recherche* itself later in the narrative:

I feel that there is much to be said for the Celtic belief that the souls of those whom we have lost are held captive in some inferior being, in an animal, in a plant, in some inanimate object, and thus effectively lost to us until the day (which to many never comes) when we happen to pass by the tree or to obtain possession of the object which forms their prison and as soon as we have recognised them the spell is broken. Delivered by us, they have overcome death and return to share our life.

And so it is with our own past. It is a labour in vain to attempt to recapture it: all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) of which we have no inkling. (*Swann's Way* 59-60)

Notable in both paragraphs is the narrator's emphasis of inanimate, material objects. Both instances are underpinned by an essence inhabiting the material realm, in the first instance, a soul metaphorically representing memories, and in the second, a sensation. This, however, does not indicate that Marcel's material objects are mimetic and contain a

recapturable past, but rather the past stains these objects through time. Moreover, the nature of the past for the narrator is an ineffable, nuanced, original sensation that does not reside in material objects. This sensation, embedded in art, allows the artist to “overcome death” and return what is represented in art to his life, or for the narrator, return himself to the past.

In what is famously termed the “petites madeleines” scene, Marcel tastes a tea-dunked madeleine—not coincidentally at the behest of his mother—and remembers when he first tasted a tea-dunked madeleine as a child with his Aunt Léonie. The narrator, on the cusp of realizing the memory, states:

It is plain that the truth I am seeking lies not in the cup but in myself I put down the cup and examine my own mind. It alone can discover the truth. But how? What an abyss of uncertainty, whenever the mind feels overtaken by itself; when it, the seeker, is at the same time the dark region through which it must go seeking and where all its equipment will avail it nothing. Seek? More than that: *create*. It is face to face with something which does not yet exist, which it alone can make actual, which it alone can bring into the light of day. (61, my emphasis)

The truth is individual in nature, not found in others or society, but “myself,” and more specifically this truth is only discoverable with the mind. This passage additionally delineates Marcel’s artistic process: the artist first searches in himself for the truth, and then creates art out of himself, giving existence to and immortalizing the ideal. For the narrator especially, art and truth are one. “Truth” can be further understood as “ideal” (which I will use throughout to refer to key images and persona of the ideal, such as

Mamma), as Marcel broadly *seeks* the ideal in memory according to the structure of *Recherche*, and subsequently *creates* art from the search; the search is his art.

While the “petites madeleines” scene unravels the location of truth and where and how art is conceived, the scene in which Marcel reads in the garden details the emotional and personal nature art possesses—literature in particular—and the totalizing effect literature has on the Self in recognizing sorrow:

And once the novelist has brought us to this state, in which, as in all purely mental states, every emotion is multiplied ten-fold, into which his book comes to disturb us as might a dream, but a dream more lucid and more abiding than those which come to us in sleep, why then, for the space of an hour he sets free within us all the joys and sorrows in the world, a few of which only we should have to spend years of our actual life in getting to know, and the most intense of which would never be revealed to us because the slow course of their development prevents us from perceiving them. It is the same in life; the heart changes, and it is our worst sorrow; but we know it only through reading, through our imagination: in reality its alteration, like that of certain natural phenomena, is so gradual that, even if we are able to distinguish, successively, each of its different states, we are still spared the actual sensation of change. (117)

As Marcel previously stated, the nature of art is in the sensation it can provoke (or remind), again he emphasizes the “sensation of change.” Yet in this passage, he expounds upon art’s potential to mitigate his sorrow. It is the novelist who is able to mitigate the

worst sorrow of a changing heart, as well as transcend the sensation of time passing. Reading itself heightens the emotional state—both the conscious and unconscious—doubly freeing joys and sorrows. By seeking through reading the most intense and profound emotions and revelations made invisible by time, the narrator objectifies and perceives changes to his Self. His subsequent example of his heart changing in the form of his worst sorrow gives greater insight into the nature of his worst fears, that is, Mamma hating him and being separate from her.

Focusing on the relationships between Marcel, his mother, and the madeleine in his perceptive book *Writing and Fantasy in Proust: La Place de la madeleine*, Serge Doubrovsky interprets the madeleine and Mamma as both archetypal and singular. The madeleine substitutes Mamma. He further states that the madeleine episode structurally “serves as a model for the whole of *Recherche*, to the extent that (borrowing Deleuze’s schema) it is the totality of the book that presents itself (a) as deciphering, (b) as an apprenticeship of signs” (2). In Margaret E. Gray’s interpretation of Doubrovsky’s work, she asserts “to write is to read in the place of the mother, usurping her mastery of language: appropriating that language as his own” (140). For Marcel, to recapture the essence of the madeleine that spawns the whole of *Recherche* is to recapture Mamma, to immortalize both her and her substitute.

For the narrator who grew up in Combray desiring his mother’s goodnight-kiss and chastising whomever impeded it (M. Swann), his mother represents the ideal and the sacred, and she is the root of *Recherche*, its themes, and his desire to be an artist. He describes her in the context of art, associating Geneviève de Brabant and her misfortunes with his mother (11). Her kiss gives the narrator “peace and serenity” and serves as the

most poignant reminder for Marcel of her beauty and grace (15). The genesis of their interaction and his subsequent devotion to art begins in the goodnight-kiss scene. Before the goodnight-kiss scene, in which his separation anxiety becomes evident, art was merely an extension of Mamma (the ideal) who first cultivated it in Marcel, but after he feels that he profaned Mamma by entreating a kiss and upsetting her, he holds onto art as a life-line and a way to redeem his profanation.

The bedroom, the center of the narrator's "melancholy and anxious thoughts" (8), becomes steeped in despair while he waits for Mamma to ascend the stairs and kiss him goodnight: "Once in my room I had to stop every loophole, to close the shutters, to dig my own grave as I turned down the bed-clothes, to wrap myself in the shroud of my nightshirt" (37). But on this night that is to remain a "black date in the calendar," Marcel, "stirred to revolt," begins his vocation as an artist by writing to Mamma, begging her to come up (37). Here is the catalytic moment in which the narrator's unchecked, ideal reality of always having his mother's love is disrupted. Marcel no longer remains solely an admirer of art, an admiration cultivated by his mother and grandmother, but is forced to become what he uses to describe M. Swann: a "dilettante," a dabbler in the arts. Stephen G. Brown notes that "writing consummates Marcel's profane desire for the mother Writing is a surrogate for possession insofar as it fixates the maternal gaze upon the abstracted self" (31). Driven to writing by his poignant suffering, he attempts to appeal to his constructed image of his mother as ideal art by creating his own art and offering it to her.

Françoise's response that "there is no answer" devastates him, causing him painful anxiety because he realizes he risked angering Mamma. From a psychoanalytical

perspective, his anxiety extends beyond his fear of failing as a son to his anxiety of failing as an artist. He feels he sinned against his mother by offering inadequate art, simultaneously sinning against art, by breaking his image as a budding young artist in her eyes and ostracizing himself from her graces. His anxiety overwhelms him and only the stamp of peace and serenity, her kiss, can calm him. Marcel decides to see her at all costs, even the most severe of profaning the sacred, by waiting for her to walk-by and verbally begging for another kiss.

This plan, however, goes awry. His father, who reproaches overly sentimental behavior and catering to the narrator's incessant desire for his mother's affection, discovers him in the act of begging. This night he becomes his savior and allows Mamma to remain with Marcel for the night. Howard Moss expounds upon the significance of her staying the night: "Through this submission on his mother's part, Marcel unconsciously learns that suffering is a way of being loved, that love, once freely given, can be demanded. By being willful, he has, paradoxically, been *allowed* to suffer paralysis of the will" (22). The only way, however, to subside the narrator's guilt over forcing his mother to stay the night with him is by her reading books that his grandmother bought him (*Swann's Way* 52-53). Art, again, mitigates his sorrow, as it temporarily mitigated his sorrow when he wrote to Mamma.

During the night that is to remain a "black date in the calendar," his mother reads to him *François le Champi*, and, thus, Marcel's artistic ideology is born, art as redemption from profanation. He defines the alluring elements of Sand's writing:

The narrative devices designed to arouse curiosity or melt to pity, certain modes of expression which disturb or sadden the reader, and which with a

little experience, he may recognize as common to a great many novels, seemed to me—for whom a new book was not one of a number of similar objects but, as it were, a unique person, absolutely self-contained—simply an intoxicating distillation of the peculiar essence of *François le Champi*. (55-56)

Since his early childhood, Marcel attempts to emulate George Sand in constructing his narrative. He attempts to arouse curiosity, imbue his prose with pathos, and imbue the sensation and essence of his life—both of which he finds integral to art. As Stephen G. Brown remarks about the narrator's self-training as an artist and artistic progression, his tutelage begins with *François le Champi*, continues “by close identification with a recognized master (Bergotte),” and involves forming “an individualized aesthetic ideology, formed not only by his study of literature, but his study of drama, music, painting, and architecture (as personified in Berma, Vinteuil, Elistir, and a Ruskinian Venice)” (184). Paul de Man further states “the moment that marks the passage from ‘life’ to writing corresponds to an act of reading that separates from the undifferentiated mass of facts and events, the distinctive elements susceptible of entering into the composition of a text” (117). While Marcel indeed undergoes self-training—which is most significant in his development as an artist—this does not imply only that his self-training effected his art. Instead, the origin of the ideal is also the origin of his apprenticeship to art under the tutelage from the ideal.

Reading not only constitutes his artistic apprenticeship, but also provides a means of recapturing what is lost. Paul de Man succinctly explicates the dual effects of reading in his article, “Reading (Proust)”: “The text asserts the possibility of recuperating, by an

act of reading, all that the inner contemplation had discarded, the opposites of all the virtues necessary to its well-being: the *warmth* of the sun, its *light*, and even the *activity* that the restful immobility seemed to have definitively eliminated” (119).

Retroactively and from his aged perspective, the narrator is able to contemplate his apprenticeship as an artist to his mother and her apprenticeship to her mother:

And so, when she read aloud the prose of George Sand, prose which is everywhere redolent of that generosity and moral distinction which Mamma had learned from my grandmother to place above all other qualities in life, and which I was not to teach her until much later to refrain from placing above all other qualities in literature ... (57)

Marcel perceives his development as an artist, evidenced by his ascension to superiority as an artist over his grandmother and mother, teaching his mother not to place “generosity and moral distinction” over all qualities in literature. The archetypal dyad of the student surpassing the master is fulfilled. *Recherche*, which must constantly be kept in mind as the narrator’s ultimate art, follows no artistic credo other than his own; it is not itself a pastiche of his mother or grandmother. It forgoes placing those qualities above all else and places moral indecency, artistic decadency, and immorality, and the suffering associated with them on an equal level of importance as catalysts of the creative urge, especially demonstrated by Swann’s relationship with Odette and Marcel’s relationship with Albertine.

His ascension over his mother and grandmother is further evidenced by including love scenes, which his mother skipped when reading aloud to him, in *Recherche*, and in his pastiche of *François le Champi*. His initial mimicry of his mother and grandmother,

his early artistic masters, and subsequent mimicry of George Sand, signify Marcel's apprenticeship to literature. Michael R. Finn asserts that "artistic individuality begins with imitation, and that oral and literary pastiches served quite literally as the trampoline for Marcel Proust's launching as a writer" (98, qtd. in Brown 182). Margaret E. Gray underscores the significance of this reading scene in a Hegelian dialectic, asserting the "narrator's interest in literature seems thus to be awakened precisely by that part of Sand's text that is silenced or repressed; the reading scene simultaneously represses and raises, or idealizes literature in an 'Aufhebung' a negating and yet a conservation through transformation" (141). This paradox of the *Aufhebung*, negating, conserving, and transforming, is best understood as "repression and idealization." By skipping the love scenes of *François le Champi*, his mother represses Marcel from possessing her—both as an ideal and (from a psychoanalytical viewpoint) an Oedipal love—but transforms the essence of her idealness into something malleable that he can reclaim through art. She becomes less of a physical fixation represented by her goodnight-kiss and transforms into a medium of "peace and serenity," an ideal that can calm him and assuage his separation anxiety.

There are several secondary scenes analogous to the goodnight-kiss scene of profaning the ideal, in particular, the Montjouvain scene. Marcel, walking along the Méséglise Way, spies Mlle Vinteuil and her lover indulging in Sapphic practices, notably in front of the late M. Vinteuil's picture. M. Vinteuil, a friend of the narrator's family, composed "the little phrase," a sublime moment in his sonata that becomes Swann's and Odette's "national anthem of love" (308). The narrator, too, knows of M. Vinteuil, but notably through connection to his mother (223). Marcel, still bereaved at his mother's

absence, transfigures part of her idealness onto M. Vinteuil and his work, later respecting and adoring “the little phrase.” Though at the time of this scene M. Vinteuil is dead, he is still present in the room *via* his picture, which Mlle Vinteuil and her lover intentionally leave to observe their actions and later profane by threatening to spit on it (230). M. Vinteuil and his life, furthermore, function as an “objective correlative” for the suffering artist, since he composed his music painfully from the torture of his daughter’s misbehavior. The narrator, traumatized by their actions as he was traumatized by entreating a second kiss from Mamma, reflects upon their sadism and implicitly distinguishes their actions from his: “A sadist of her kind is an *artist in evil*, which a wholly wicked person could not be, for in that case the evil would not have been external, it would have seemed quite natural to her ...” (231, my emphasis). The phrase “artist in evil” that he uses to distinguish Mlle Vinteuil from others problematizes his own artistic status. He seeks to understand her actions in terms of his own experiences when he profaned his personal ideal, as Mlle Vinteuil profaned hers. Instead of separating himself from her, the narrator mirrors her: “It was not evil that gave her the idea of pleasure, that seemed to her attractive; it was pleasure, rather, that seemed evil. And as, each time she indulged in it, it was accompanied by evil thoughts ...” (232). From a psychoanalytical perspective, this is the same mindset Marcel adopts concerning the goodnight-kiss scene. Immediately after he revels in his mother’s kiss, his mind focuses on her displeasure if he asks for another, and immediately after he wins over his mother by her staying the night with him, he has a nervous breakdown and ceases to enjoy its pleasure.

Because Marcel feels he profaned the sacredness of his mother and subsequently endeavors for redemption, he initially attempts to fill the void of her idealness before

finding salvation in art. To use Kristeva's terms, he is in a "depressive void" and seeking a "hypersign" in lieu of Mamma (99). He holds onto art because it was his connection to his mother and he struggles to be an artist, attempting to sublimate anything around him—even himself as an artist—to again live under her graces. Seeking a figure who will not decay or be upset with him (as he feared with his mother), Marcel imposes maternal and ideal signs onto Mme de Guermantes. Enthralled by aristocratic connotations that imbue her with a sense of transcending time and being incapable of decay (resolving his fear of the ideal withering away), he first attributes to her the idealness of churches and their tapestries (241). The narrator further combines the magic lantern motif of artistic imagination from his room in Combray with the artistic allusion his mother first possessed of resembling Geneviève de Brabant (242). The narrator, in effect, *creates* Mme de Guermantes into the ideal through dreams and imagination; he sublimates her as a hypersign to fill the space of the depressive void his mother left after the goodnight-kiss scene: "I used to dream that Mme de Guermantes, taking a sudden capricious fancy to me, invited me there, that all day long, she stood fishing for trout by my side. And when evening came, *holding my hand in hers* ... she would make me tell her, too, all about the poems that I intended to compose" (243, my emphasis). Mme de Guermantes becomes Marcel's figure of affection and his muse, supplanting Mamma as the ideal. Yet despite the apparent success at having found a replacement ideal, the narrator elucidates that the duchess ultimately cannot replace his mother. His dreams of the duchess that serve as artistic inspiration and desire instead force the narrator to realize his artistic inadequacy:

And these dreams reminded me that, since I wished some day to become a writer, it was high time to decide what sort of books I was going to write.

But as soon as I asked myself the question, and tried to discover some subject to which I could impart a philosophical significance of infinite value, my mind would stop like a clock, my consciousness would be faced with a blank, I would feel either that I was wholly devoid of talent or that perhaps some malady of the brain was hindering its development. (243-244)

His wonderment of whether he is artistically impotent or afflicted by a malady is a speculation underscored by his sorrow. The narrator, however, is neither artistically impotent nor ill, but merely lacking a muse who can stimulate his artistry. These speculations lead the narrator to self-doubt, fear he has no talent, realize the futility of life, and finally reject literature (245). It is no coincidence, however, that two paragraphs after he severs his artistic tie to Mamma, thereby severing all connections to his mother *qua* ideal, he sees Mme de Guermantes. Now that he is completely lacking an ideal figure, the narrator conveniently finds (or rather “seeks”) a replacement. Upon seeing her and comparing the image he constructed of her from the tapestry, stained-glass window, and Dr. Percepied’s description, he is only disappointed:

“So that’s Mme de Guermantes—that’s all she is!” were the words underlying the attentive and astonished expression with which I gazed upon this image which, naturally enough, bore no resemblance to those that had so often ... appeared in my dreams ... an image which was not of the same nature, ... but was so real that everything, down to the fiery little spot at the corner of her nose, attested to her subjection to the laws of life, as, ... betray the physical presence of a living actress, whereas we were

uncertain, till then, whether we were not looking merely at a projection from a lantern. (247)

Marcel realizes the ordinary and natural appearance of the duchess, that she is not a divine muse but rather a disappointment to his imagination. Yet the narrator does not accept her as not-ideal. He instead transfigures her into the ideal by imposing signs of art and the ideal onto her: first declaring her a descendant of Geneviève de Brabant (a prototypical artistic sign of his mother), then referring to her hierarchical superiority to justify an ideal nature, and finally attributing to her the ability to transcend time through the juxtaposition of her in the church “above the tombs of her dead ancestors” (248-249). The narrator additionally describes her affectionately, stating her gaze “caressed” him, as well as maternally, “sitting like a mother who affects not to notice the mischievous impudence and the indiscreet advances of her children ...” (248). Mme de Guermantes additionally supplants Mamma as an artistic muse, inspiring Marcel’s artistic urges. Psychoanalytically, however, he desires a maternal figure who will incessantly love him, ignore his misbehavior, and assuage his separation-anxiety. Driven by the suffering of an absent ideal and refusing to allow his depressive void to continue, Marcel accepts Mme de Guermantes and immediately falls in love with her (250).

Upon possessing a newly constructed muse—Mme de Guermantes—he is forced by her non-artistic nature to reflect upon his artistic inadequacy:

How often, after that day, in the course of my walks along the Guermantes way, and with what an intensified melancholy, did I reflect on my lack of qualification for a literary career, and abandon all hope of ever becoming a famous author. The regrets that I felt for this, as I lingered behind to muse

awhile on my own, made me suffer so acutely that, in order to banish them, my mind of its own accord, by a sort of inhibition in the face of pain, ceased entirely to think of verse-making, of fiction, of the poetic future on which my lack of talent precluded me from counting. Then, quite independently of all these literary preoccupations and in no way connected with them, suddenly a roof, a gleam of sunlight on a stone, the smell of a path would make me stop still, to enjoy the special pleasure that each of them gave me, and also because they appeared to be concealing, beyond what my eyes could see, something which they invited me to come and take but which despite all my efforts I have never managed to discover

I would try to recapture them by closing my eyes. (251-252)

His self-imposed cloister of electing a societal figure to replace Mamma ceases to function immediately when he experiences the “Proustian effect” (remembering events through sensation) bestowed upon him by his aunt Léonie and later his mother. Amid his grief, the scent of the path reinvigorates his artistic musings, and he quickly turns to uncovering “what lay beneath them,” characteristic of his artistic credo (252). Mme de Guermantes then becomes a false muse, a muse Marcel intended to follow away from art. But his call to and foundation in art is too great to leave behind.

As Marcel leaves the Guermantes Way, the way of the false ideal and muse that reminded him of his inadequacy, he observes the twin steeples of Martinville. Inspired by these steeples and wanting to “store away in my mind those shifting, sunlit planes,” synonymous with preserving something in art, the narrator captures them in prose (254-257). Marcel further likens the steeples to a “pretty phrase,” a precursor to the “little

phrase” of the Vinteuil sonata, and thus idealizes them: “Without admitting to myself that what lay hidden behind the steeples of Martinville must be something analogous to a pretty phrase, sing it was in the form of words which gave me pleasure that it had appeared to me...” (255). He is enraptured by this writing experience, but quickly turns back toward thinking about the Duchesse de Guermantes.

It is worth noting in the passage how quickly the narrator turns toward artistic creation and musing after moments of suffering. He feels forlorn after separating himself from the ideal of his mother, and subsequently creates a new ideal out of Mme de Guermantes; he pities himself and grieves for feeling artistically impotent while walking along the Guermantes way, and subsequently tries to recapture memories and uncover their essence pursuant to his artistic credo; weighed-down under the burden of his artistic searching, he sees opportunity in the twin steeples of Martinville and writes about them. Rather than being cathartic or motivating, suffering is clearly demonstrated as catalytic for Marcel. Gilles Deleuze unfolds and examines the layers of Marcel’s oscillation between disappointment and subsequent exaltation:

Disappointment is a fundamental moment of the search or of apprenticeship: in each realm of signs, we are disappointed when the object does not give us the secret we were expecting On each line of apprenticeship, the hero undergoes an analogous experience, at various moments: *for the disappointment of the object, he attempts to find a subjective compensation* (33).

The narrator constantly oscillates between suffering and creation, as the two are inextricably linked for him. This interrelationship is the driving force behind the entirety

of *Recherche*. The seemingly pastoral landscapes and quaint experiences of the narrator's childhood tragically inform the development of his creative urge, inscribing and associating trauma with artistic desire in his psyche. He seeks to recapture the profaned ideal he saw in Mamma as a child through memory and art, thereby reliving the associated pain. "To suffer" becomes "to create."

Part II: The Art of Albertine

After the narrator turns away from his initial enthrallment with society as the ideal because of its illusions, its falsity, and its collective sadism, the fifth volume, *The Captive*, portrays Marcel as a frustrated, suffering artist in love. The narrative quickly focuses on Marcel's infatuation with his mistress, Albertine, a promiscuous and suspected lesbian whom he persuades to live with him in Paris—where he attempts to cultivate her and prevent her from any wrongdoings. Their relationship, more akin to captor-captive, oscillates between love and contempt for each other, while Marcel meticulously maintains surveillance on her every action, trying to discern that Albertine does not love him and is having liaisons with women. Yet Marcel's relationship to his mistress does not center on sexuality, but instead on *creating* Albertine into something ideal and beautiful as an artist creates his art.

While Marcel isolates himself in his Parisian apartment, he takes in Albertine in an attempt to recapture through her the artistic ideal he once saw in Mamma. The reason Marcel chooses Albertine derives from his experience at Montjouvain. There, he first saw Sapphic desire embodied and profane the idealness because of the association of Vinteuil's life and music with his mother. The young Marcel, who spied upon Mlle Vinteuil and the suspected Albertine as they indulged in lesbianism, associated their

practice with causing M. Vinteuil to suffer and continued to associate it with the same grief he experienced during the goodnight-kiss scene. Thus, lesbianism, as well as homosexuality in the case of M. de Charlus and Jupien, is always regarded with contempt. Albertine then becomes an opportunity for Marcel to remedy his childhood memories of sorrow and a means to exert his creative force on a society he grew to despise, thereby reincarnating the ideal of his mother in his mistress.

Marcel initially uses signs of society—mainly objects acquired through money—to maintain Albertine’s residence in his Parisian apartment. With marriage as the ultimate prospect for their relationship, Marcel continues to assure her of newfound wealth. She hesitates to accept his generosity and the possibility of marriage, saying, “ ‘Oh no, it won’t,’ which meant: ‘I’m too poor.’ And so, while I continued to say: ‘Nothing could be less certain’ when speaking of plans for the future, for the present I did everything in my power to amuse her” (*The Captive* 12). “Everything in my power” extends to stylizing Albertine in Fortuny gowns that his childhood ideal of society, Mme de Guermantes, wore (32, 34, 39), food she desires (163), jewels she is able to buy because of his money and the ring he promises her in marriage (214), and even proposing a Rolls-Royce and Yacht (613). And, notably, they live among the aristocracy in Paris—the center of high society—where Mme de Guermantes is his landlady (30). The method to the narrator’s madness in using societal overtures indicates that he transfers the ideal nature he imposed upon Mme de Guermantes to his captive, Albertine.

Marcel also enforces artistic signs onto her by using eloquent language to express knowledge of the arts in an attempt to transfigure Albertine into art. This transfiguration is initially seen in his comparison of her appearance to a “work by Elistir or Bergotte”

and “seeing her in the perspective of imagination of art” (66). In this moment, moreover, Marcel feels a “momentary ardour for her,” in contrast to his usual jealousy and resentment, because she temporarily resembles those artistic ideals from his childhood. The strongest evidence is that Marcel often critically discusses literature with Albertine and gives her books until she also speaks the same way about the same subjects: “And then she answered me in words which showed me what a fund of intelligence and latent taste had suddenly developed in her ... due entirely to my influence She is my creation” (164). He recalls his childhood experiences and associations of the idealized Mamma and Mme de Guermantes in an attempt to blend art and society admittedly to create Albertine into an ideal, thereby remedying both his failed foray into society and profanation of Mamma. Albertine as his ideal is manifested as she adopts his speech, yet, while their mutual contempt progressively builds to a climax, he realizes she cannot be truly ideal: “Perhaps the future was not destined to be the same for Albertine as for myself. I had almost a presentiment of this when I saw her eagerness to employ in speech images so ‘bookish,’ which seemed to me to be *reserved for another, more sacred use, of which I was still in ignorance*” (164, my emphasis). Marcel is still in ignorance of this sacredness, best likened in his childhood to Mamma, because he later discovers it in art (made purely from his own artistic signs) after Albertine leaves.

Throughout *The Captive*, Albertine as the ideal parallels and approaches the childhood ideal of Mamma, yet cannot eclipse it because Albertine is associated with profaning art while Mamma is associated with creating and cultivating art. This mirroring is not accidental, but rather contrived by Marcel. Since Marcel feels he profaned the sacredness of his ideal Mamma—the childhood muse of art who read to him George Sand

and who knew M. Swann—he constantly searches for a substitute. Initially he turns toward society and tries to find the ideal in Mme de Guermantes, yet after his foray fails and he recuperates in Balbec, he turns toward Albertine as lover and muse who can take the place of Mamma. Albertine's inadequacy as the ideal is exhibited in the *mise-en-scène* of their Parisian apartment: “The partition that divided our two dressing-rooms (Albertine's, identical with my own, was a bathroom which Mamma, who had another at the opposite end of the flat, had never used ...)” (4). Marcel attempts to replace Mamma by having Albertine use her dressing room, only this effort is futile because Mamma did not use it so as not to wake her son. The most crucial moment of parallelism that concretizes Marcel's failed endeavor to replace Mamma is the second goodnight-kiss. Diverting from their habitual quiet evenings by confronting Albertine's duplicity, Marcel realizes he cannot replicate Mamma in Albertine:

It was no longer the peace of my mother's kiss at Combray that I felt when I was with Albertine on these evenings, but, on the contrary, the anguish of those on which my mother scarcely bade me good-night ... This anguish—not merely its transposition into love but this anguish itself ... now seemed once more to be extending to them all, to have become indivisible again as in my childhood, as though all my feelings, which trembled at the thought of my not being able to keep Albertine by my bedside, at once as a mistress, a sister, a daughter, and as a mother too ...

(140)

Marcel's unspoken endeavor of replacing Mamma with Albertine becomes evident, and again the same anguish is repeated. He further confides that his anguish is impossible to

appease via Albertine “as in the old days from my mother” (141), now realizing she is unable to supplant Mamma as the ideal.

Marcel’s endeavor of substituting Albertine for Mamma can be insightfully explained in Kristeva’s discussion on the *hypersign*. Because of his profanation of Mamma in the goodnight-kiss scene in *Swann’s Way* that results in a “depressive void” that totalizes his search for a substitute ideal, Marcel continually sublimates people around him to fill that void (such as Mme de Guermantes, Gilberte, and Albertine). He continually seeks for an incarnate artistic and maternal ideal that can replace Mamma. Only with Albertine in particular is the narrator able to sublimate her into a *hypersign* that intends to combine the ideals of high society he saw in Mme de Guermantes and the Verdun’s “little clan” with the artistry of Vinteuil, Bergotte, Elstir, M. Swann, his mother, and his grandmother. Marcel imposes artistic signs associated with his mother (goodnight kisses) and Mme de Guermantes (Fortuny gowns) onto Albertine to fill the depressive void Mamma’s absence created. The narrator, moreover, attempts to cultivate his mistress through loaning her books and tutoring her in his artistic ideology to imbue her with the same artistic prowess as Mamma, who cultivated Marcel’s artistic prowess. Yet this sublimation is not successful.

An underpinning reason why Albertine fails to supplant Mamma is best explained through Marcel’s understanding of his reality and semiotics: “if, on the other hand, her indoor gown was Chinese with red and yellow flames, I gazed at it as at a glowing sunset; these garments were not a casual decoration alterable at will, but a given, poetical reality like that of the weather, or the light peculiar to a certain hour of the day” (34). This indoor Chinese gown with which Marcel has clothed her should be understood as a sign

of society because it is the same type of gown Mme de Guermantes wears, a woman who represents the ideal of society. And as the narrator notes the unalterable nature of these garments, he logically implies they cannot transfigure into other signs. His gaze at the gown also bears critical investigation. This is the same gaze Marcel used as a child, gazing at an object that represented the ideal: Mamma, the churches in Combray, the lady in pink (Odette) when he visited his uncle, and the hawthorns and the pink flower hanging above Gilberte along the Guermantes Way that signified her as an ideal love. Moss situates the idealness of this flower as sacred: “Its pink exquisite version is found on the way to Swann’s house, and it is also a religious flower” (19-20). These childhood signs of the ideal, and more specifically of the artistic ideal, are evoked in the above passage. Marcel’s comparison of these garments to the ideal signs from nature and his childhood gives insight into what he idealizes: aspects of nature and established art—the “light peculiar to a certain hour” alludes to an Impressionistic ideology of Elstir the narrator admires—in which the individual artist is free from society and constraint. By mapping these signs of ideal art onto the gown (the sign of society), the narrator tries to transfigure signs, but fails because of their unalterable nature.

The relationship between the narrator and his captive creation, Albertine, extends beyond a stagnant, hierarchical master/pupil dyad free of subversion. Brown examines this dichotomy and elucidates the extent to which Albertine undermines Marcel’s artistic ambitions: “The desire she expresses to ‘destroy, pillar after pillar, those Venetian churches,’ is not only the seditious desire of the pupil to overthrow the master, but of the beloved to subvert the artist, with whom s/he must perpetually compete for attention” (“Desire on Ice” 49-50). Embedded in the “ices” passage from which Brown quotes are

signs of the artistic ideal Albertine, mainly her allusion to those “Venetian churches” the narrator longs to visit because his admiration of Bergotte’s aesthetics (modeled after Ruskin’s), but foregoes because of Albertine. Brown further expounds upon Albertine endangering Marcel’s artistry by examining the Marcelian tone and eloquence she emulates to secure her escape: “Her mastery of Marcel’s teachings enables her to overmaster his desire. Marcel’s desire is, thus, overmastered in the moment of its seeming mastery: when the Sapphic slave dwells within the master’s walls, speaks in the master’s tongue” (51). Albertine’s desire to escape, her façade of adopting Marcel’s language, and her implied rebellion in the form of mimicry and subversion justifies that he failed in creating Albertine as his art. Albertine is then not just a failed artistic creation, but a destructive force that endangers Marcel as an artist.

Despite the suffering the narrator endures because of Albertine’s destructive nature, their time together is necessary to Marcel’s artistic ambition. Brown states:

“The menace of Albertine’s mimicry also reinscribes the danger that the desired Other poses to the creative ego. To the artist, the beloved always poses a threat insofar as it threatens to totalize the self. Love activates the self’s tendency toward totalizing experiences, threatens to put the creative ego under erasure. These two selves (oriented toward life and art) exist in an unstable, oppositional tension that threatens the sacrifice of one to the other. The desired Other perceives the Self’s creative ego as its primary rival—and vice versa.” (52)

His captive and creation simultaneously problematizes his artistic potential while developing it by causing the artist to suffer. Although Marcel must endure Albertine as

she profanes and threatens his artistic signs (Venetian churches), it is endurance and suffering that, as Beckett states, “opens a window on the real and is the main condition of the artistic experience” (Beckett 16).

James F. Austin further comments that the master/pupil dyad delineated in the “ices” passage and Albertine’s pastiche of Marcel, stating, “The hypothesis that Albertine was influenced by the narrator and that the narrator then learned his style from her, and so indirectly from himself, is only convincing in the sense of Albertine’s being a preliminary work herself, an early emanation of the narrator” (Austin 59). While other hypotheses do not necessarily conclude Albertine as an *œuvre*, I agree with Austin’s argument that this dyad is made clear when Albertine is assumed to be a preliminary work. Austin additionally states, “And yet Albertine can still be considered his work, his *œuvre*, the meanings and functioning of which, like all works, once finished, no longer belong to the original author” (59). The implications of whether Albertine *qua* art is finished or not are far reaching, and may account for Marcel’s incessant jealousy. If a finished work of art no longer belongs to the artist, the narrator thus constantly monitors Albertine’s movements and interrogates her activities and background in an attempt to uncover a flaw he might mend and maintain his illusory control over something he cannot possess, any more than he could possess Mamma.

This omnipresent jealousy is a crucial component of Marcel’s suffering and essential to his development as an artist. This jealousy operates under the guise of him suspecting she is a lesbian, but can be stated more theoretically as finding a flaw in what he hopes to be ideal art. Should this jealousy be understood more theoretically, it may be further interpreted as analogous to the neurosis an artist has in perfecting his art and thus

better support Albertine as his creation. Harold Blooms psychoanalytically explicates and succinctly problematizes the nature of Marcel's jealousy for Albertine:

The aesthetic agon for immortality is an optical error, yet this is one of those errors about life that are necessary for life, as Nietzsche remarked, and is also one of those errors about art that is art. Proust has swerved away from Flaubert into a radical confession of error; the novel is creative envy, love is jealousy, jealousy is the terrible fear that there will not be enough space for oneself (including literary space), and that there never can be enough time for oneself, because death is the reality of one's life.

(15)

The narrator desires to preserve his illusory relationship with Albertine, facing the prospect that her absence will result in his failure to be an artist. Jealousy becomes a means of introspection and creation, as it forces the narrator to question his own futility and literary ambitions to resolve his suffering. As Marcel muses on Albertine and art, he states, "Grief enters into us and forces us, out of painful curiosity, to probe. Whence emerge truths which we feel that we have no right to keep hidden, so much so that a dying atheist who has discovered them ... will nevertheless devote his last hours on earth to an attempt to make them known" (*The Captive* 188). In accordance with Beckett's interpretation that grief is essential, Marcel's grief caused by jealousy forces him crucially to turn inward and contemplate himself as an artist, first in the context of Albertine, and then in the context his own art.

While Albertine and Marcel live together, his budding, serious attempts at becoming an artist are constantly pushed toward the periphery because of her influence

on him. His most evident endeavor is publishing an article in *Le Figaro*—the same publication in which his artistic parallel, M. Swann, is mentioned when he experiences sorrow because of his wife (SW 28-29). Despite Albertine’s insistence on him writing while she lives with him, he is ultimately unable to write during her stay (*The Captive* 95). He daily checks the paper for his article (151, 184), though it is always rejected while Albertine is alive and constantly pushing writing to the periphery. And yet when their relationship is near an end, Marcel feels inextricably close to her, the narrator goes as far as declaring himself “not a novelist” when discussing Dostoievsky with Albertine (510). When Albertine leaves the apartment for the day, however, Marcel contemplates art and his literary potential:

Taking advantage of the fact that I still was alone, and drawing the curtains together so that the sun should not prevent me from reading the notes, I sat down at the piano, open at random Vinteuil’s sonata which happened to be lying there, and began to play; seeing that Albertine’s arrival was still a matter of some time but was on the other hand certain, I had at once time to spare and peace of mind.... I was carried back upon the tide of sound to the days of Combray ... when I myself had longed to become an artist. In abandoning that ambition *de facto*, had I forfeited something real? Could life console me for the loss of art? Was there in art a more profound reality, in which our true personality finds an expression that is not afforded it by the activities of life? (204-205)

Since Marcel cannot exert any control over his artistic creation Albertine, he turns towards pure art as he gradually develops as an artist. Eloping with Albertine and no

longer writing may give evidence to his abandoning his initial artistic ambition, but is instead dubious because Albertine is his art. Why Marcel admits he abandoned art *de facto* may give further insight into Marcel's artistic development. He did not abandon art *de jure* and still longs to be an artist, justified by his subsequent speculation that there might be a more profound reality in art and implying there is not a reality profound enough in Albertine. The juxtaposition of Vinteuil's sonata next to Albertine's absence further elucidates her role in Marcel's literary development. As Marcel only contemplates pure art (Vinteuil's sonata) in her absence, Albertine is thus perceived as not-pure art, that is to say, lesser and societal art. While his creation is away, he is able to objectively view the failure of his effort, only to be reminded that he cannot rid himself of her.

While living with Albertine and suffering because of her, Marcel incessantly understands his situation and life through artistic terms. Listening to the street sounds of the aristocratic quarter, he hears *Boris*, Moussorgsky, Maeterlinck, and Debussy (148). When gazing lovingly upon Albertine as she sleeps, he compares her hair to "moonlit trees, lank and pale, which one sees standing erect and stiff in the backgrounds of Elsiter's Raphaelesque picture" (86). Again, in an effort to piece his life together with artistic terms, and inadvertently imposing artistic signs onto his relationship, Marcel parallels his life with his mistress to a tale in the *Arabian Nights* (187) and later his suspicions of Albertine and her duplicity to *Gulliver's Travels* (233). His comparisons extend beyond Albertine to perceiving the Baron de Charlus as a "Grand Inquisitor painted by El Greco" (272) and the other women he had loved as no more than "slight and timid essays" (336). And, crucially, when the narrator confronts Albertine and confirms his suspicions, he compares the moment to watching "a tongue of flame seize

and devour in an instant a novel which I had spent millions of minutes in writing” (472). At every moment Marcel thinks of art, and yet is tormented by his own art that is Albertine. These allusions to art, however, should not only be interpreted as the narrator’s need as an artist to understand everything through art, but especially as a means to mitigate his grief caused by Albertine.

Once Albertine leaves and Marcel can grieve and reflect upon his time with his mistress, he is able to finally develop as an artist *par excellence*. Her death in particular is the point at which her influence comes to fruition and Marcel undergoes a totalizing experience that frees the self. Whereas the narrator chose a similar life of captivity to maintain surveillance over his mistress and devote his imagination and artistic talent to deduce her lies and cultivate her artistically, he now can focus on his art, his individuality, and strive to become an artist. The subsiding of his shock and grief at Albertine’s death coincides with the publication of his article in *Le Figaro*, previously pushed to the periphery. He can finally call himself an artist (766). It is not mere coincidence that the narrator becomes an artist *de facto* when Albertine is dead. Not only are his artistic abilities freed by her departure and subsequent death, but the period of grieving is transformative and rekindles his artistic ambitions.

Her death allows Marcel to free himself and turn inward, subsequently allowing him to confront his suspicions and recreate himself. The moment the narrator learns of her death, he grieves about his profound suffering because of her absence (642) and implicitly contrasts her to Mamma, further concretizing that the narrator sought his mother’s idealness in Albertine: “I drew my hand over them, as Mamma had caressed me at the time of my grandmother’s death ...” (642-643). After reading Albertine’s letters in

response to his own, the narrator further remarks about the artistic endeavor that underpinned his relationship with his mistress: “When I had succeeded in bearing the grief of losing this Albertine, I must begin again with another, with a hundred others” (645). His suffering over her acted as a catalyst to develop himself as an artist through introspection, while her death was necessary in order for the narrator to perceive and objectify his creative impulse. For a narrator who creates his art chiefly out of his memories—as *Recherche* itself indicates—his introspection, greatly caused by suffering, serves as a means to practice and develop his artistic skills. As Marcel reflects upon Albertine, he states,

That room in which we used to dine had never seemed to me attractive ...
Now, the curtains, the chairs, the books, had ceased to be a matter of
indifference to me. Art is not alone in imparting charm and mystery to the
most insignificant things; *pain is endowed with the same power to bring
them into intimate relation with ourselves.* (666, my emphasis)

The suffering Marcel endured with his mistress afforded him the same insight as the tutelage under an artist. Whereas the artist instructs on aesthetics and the examination of the insignificant and quotidian through a magnifying glass or magic lantern, Albertine’s pain analogously instructs Marcel to be an artist. Marcel continually objectifies those around him as ideal to assuage his separation anxiety.

Conclusion

In an obscured response to the 1922 summer edition of *L’Intransigeant*, a few months before Marcel Proust died, he responded to a question that asked various celebrities what they think the effects of an impending cataclysm would have on people and what they

would do in their final hours. Proust was among the last to respond to this inquiry, asserting in his characteristic style and elegance what should be interpreted as a metaphor for the interrelationship between suffering and art:

I think that life would suddenly seem wonderful to us if we were threatened to die as you say. Just think of how many projects, travels, love affairs, studies, it – our life – hides from us, made invisible by our laziness which, certain of a future, delays them incessantly.

But let all this threaten to become impossible for ever, how beautiful it would become again! Ah! if only the cataclysm doesn't happen this time, we won't miss visiting the new galleries of the Louvre, throwing ourselves at the feet of Miss X, making a trip to India.

The cataclysm doesn't happen, we don't do any of it, because we find ourselves back in the heart of normal life, where negligence deadens desire. And yet we shouldn't have needed the cataclysm to love life today. It would have been enough to think that we are humans, and that death may come this evening. (qtd. in Botton 1-6)

For Proust and his alter-ego Marcel, the masterworks of art and the geniuses who created them are rendered meaningless unless there is some catalyst to remind ourselves of their significance. Preserved indifferent by habit to the sacred and ideal, the artist Marcel struggles through suffering and self-torment to recapture what he has profaned. This recapturing is not strictly associated with what was ideal, but can extend to creating a new ideal.

After Marcel angers Mamma by entreating a second kiss past his bedtime, causing him to have a nervous breakdown while she reads to him *François le Champi*, he finds a substitutive ideal in Mme de Guermantes and later in Albertine. He, in turn, *creates* them as new ideals, as synonymous with one another—only there is theoretically no substitute for what is ideal and perfect. Suffering, then, drives the artist to create, and in Marcel’s situation, recreate. To again use Kristeva’s terminology, Marcel’s mother leaves him a depressive void that problematizes his artistic individuality; he subsequent must use a “hypersign” (in the forms of Mme de Guermantes and Albertine) to sublimate this void. Suffering necessitates a mitigation, and for the artist, his only means of finding respite and refuge is through art. Without suffering, the artist, and especially Marcel, could not function as an artist.

With regards to the *artiste manqué* or the *artiste souffrante* phenomenon as it relates to Marcel, suffering defines and is causally linked with his art. Suffering precedes and causes every moment of artistic creation. His anguish for seeing Mamma again on the “black date in the calendar” precedes him writing for the first time in the form of a message; his sorrow caused by the lack of an ideal and his disappointment over Mme de Guermantes’s appearance precedes him idealizing her; and the death of Albertine and his resultant suffering precedes the publication of his article.

The dyad between suffering and art is further analogous to the Hegelian Self/Other dialectic. The Suffering/Art dyad can be understood as an *Aufhebung*: the narrator’s suffering represses and transforms his art, and every fit of melancholy leaves an indelible scar—the gravest of which is the maternal trauma. Both suffering and art

resolve each other: suffering problematizes the narrator's Self, while art mitigates his grief and totalizes him as an artist.

The question then arises if Marcel never suffered (or minutely suffered), would he ever have become an artist? He showed early artistic signs because of his apprenticeship to his mother and grandmother, as well as his heightened perception indicative of prodigal artistic talent, but without the trauma endured during the goodnight-kiss scene, Marcel would have remained a "dilletante." Jacob Burkhardt's theory of the *agon* additionally underpins the narrator's development as an artist: he constantly struggles with himself in an effort to express and understand his grief. Marcel, the narrator, is merely attempting to reclaim the idealness of Mamma in art—his only lifeline to her—but he has no other choice, lest his "depressive void" consume him. This causal link of suffering necessitating creative urges is further delineated in Proust's own life. Only after his mother died and left him bereaved and depressed could he have begun work on *Recherche* in 1909 (Kilmartin, xxv).

Proust himself wrote insightfully about the interrelationship between the artist and suffering. In an essay about Alphonse Daudet, titled "Portrait of a Writer," Proust admires and deifies the suffering M. Daudet, and inscribes his illness as augmenting his artistic prowess: "I saw this beautiful sick man, whom sickness made yet more beautiful, this poet, in whose proximity suffering became poetry as iron melts and flows in the furnace..." (300). M. Daudet, who suffered dismally toward the end of his life when Proust knew him, embodied the *artiste souffrante* who continued to live as an artist, not simply in spite of his suffering, but whose suffering occasioned him to create art. He put to use his love of life "better than how many of us did" and continued "to think, and

compose, and dictate, and write, as ardent for truth and beauty and bravery as a young man” (300). Suffering transfigured M. Daudet into a “work of art” that “exalts us with the whole meaning of pain, and beauty, and omnipotent will and spirit” (301).

As Proust perceives suffering to make M. Daudet a more beautiful artistic figure, he also perceives suffering to necessitate expression of the creative urge as a means of preservation: “In the same way, when the creature of the mysterious laws—or poetry—feels strong enough, it pants to escape from the decaying man who this night may perish ... it aims at escaping from the man in the shape of his works” (“The Artist in Contemplation” 310). This relationship between art and artist is not one of strict subservience or occasional pleasure, but rather it is a means to transcend and to immortalize the ideal of both the artist and the art. The artist, faced with the sorrow of mortality and the possible futility of life thus problematizes his own existence and necessitates art as the solution. Art can mitigate his sorrow and impress a sentiment of transcending the finite and time. While the Greeks created prototypical Western art to immortalize themselves and resolve their *agon*, Marcel analogously searches to recapture and immortalize the ideal of his mother through art as a result of his childhood trauma.

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