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## Waves Upon the Sea: Accident and In Search of Lost Time

Ethan Hosta  
Bard College, eh2342@bard.edu

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Waves Upon the Sea: Accident and *In Search of Lost Time*

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by

Ethan Hosta

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Table of Contents

Accident and *In Search of Lost Time*  
Work Cited

p. 2  
p. 37

It is a common notion that, contained within the pages of *In Search of Lost Time*, and its numerous volumes is the “Lost Time” itself. To borrow from Deleuze, “Lost Time is not simply “time past”; it is also time wasted, lost track of.” (Proust and Signs 3). To read *In Search of Lost Time* as one would eat Françoise’s stewed beef, that is, only for the morsels of revelation, or the moments where time is regained.

This explanation, while useful, still leaves the reader in want of a clearer picture of what differentiates this text from others. Obviously, both time and critics have made the differentiation between the writing of Proust against his contemporaries, but is it not that all art, other than perhaps the abstract, aims, in a sense, to capture an experience lost to time? We hold it self evident that art is a valid, if not the only, way to capture time lost. One could then argue that the story is one of the creation of art, or of the artist, as he himself learns to capture time, as it were. This is part of the whole, surely, but *In Search of Lost Time* is, before the triumph of the artist, the triumph of *accidental*, and the trial of those who wish to *observe* such phenomena, and thereby become artists. The story traces this victory, and becomes preoccupied with discovering the means with which to do it. The question, it turns out, is entangled with questions of realism, production and reproduction, and observation. The narrator ultimately comes to the conclusion that the emotional impressions made of the accidental qualities of reality are those which are felt most fully - and pain must be taken to preserve not the realism of a moment, but the reality of the impression of a moment upon an observer. Not only is it the validation of the individual’s emotional reality, it is a victory of observation, and a relinquishment of the control of the intellect, in order to produce on the page not a reality which is true, but the truth of impressions, the reality of an individual’s experience at the moment of conception, at the moment before the

truth of the experience has been hampered by preconceptions of reality, or the logical ordering of the intellect.

Deleuze, realizing this also, stratifies the efforts of Proust into four “signs”, under which all the interactions and musings of the plot can be assigned to. It is through these signs that Deleuze understands the method Proust uses to recapture the “Lost Time”. To put it most clearly, the first of these signs can best be articulated by Deleuze himself,

“The first world of the Search is the world of, precisely, worldliness. There is no milieu that emits and concentrates so many signs, in such reduced space, at so great a rate... The worldly sign appears as the replacement of an action or a thought.” (Deleuze 5).

It is often in this space that the examination of humor is cordoned to when talking of Proust. Humour of this first strata will deal with the characters of Saint-Loup, Norpois, and Dr. Cottard, in their dealings with art as a cultural commodity. The reader is made aware of who is and is not a Philistine, and the cultural landscape and various vantages of the character are made clear through this sort of humour. Much like the concentration of these signs in such reduced space, at such a great rate, the concentration of this sort of joke, especially in early volumes, gives clarity and foundation to the landscape of the novel. In other words, the foundation of the Proustian universe is built through the characters’ cultural awareness, rather than a sense of realism.

Secondly, Deleuze posits love as the second strata of signs in *In Search of Lost Time*. He writes, “To fall in love is to individualize someone by the signs he bears or emits. It is to become sensitive to these signs, to undergo an apprenticeship to them (thus the slow individualization of Albertine in the group of young girls).” (Deleuze 7).

Swann is a prime example of the replacement of realism with the “worldly sign”. The reader is introduced to Swan the amateur critic, though we come to learn of Swan and the world not through strict realism, such as an exposition of his thoughts, or an ample body of his actions with which one can use to understand him; We are given our most interesting understanding of Swan through the medium of art. We’re introduced to Swann’s home, the eponymous *Swann’s Way*, by way of a class based farce between Swann himself and Odette. She writes him, as “an ignorant woman with a taste for beautiful things’, adding that she felt she would know him better once she had seen him in his ‘home’” (Swann’s Way 277). Very quickly, it becomes apparent Odette is indeed an ignorant woman, though one of more refinement would call into question if she indeed has a taste for beautiful things. Absent from this exchange is anything that grounds the scene in physical space. We are not shown Swann’s house, nor an example of Odette’s *beautiful things*, not even are we given any detail of the paper on which the letter is written. The physical universe here is absent, the reader is given orientation only through notions of class, humor, or in other words, the “worldly sign”. The letter from Odette continues,

“though she had to admit that she was surprised that he should live in a neighbourhood which must be so depressing, and was ‘not nearly *smart* enough for such a very *smart* man.’” (Swann’s Way 276).

This is perhaps the first proper introduction to the property of M. Swann, and it is in the form of the “worldly sign” manifested as humor. This continues to be the case, if the development of the relationship between Swann and Odette is followed throughout its infancy. We are introduced to the internal world of the characters, internal meaning not only including their homes, but their

psyches as well, not through a descriptive sense of strict realism, but through worldly signs. This process begins shortly after their first correspondence by letter, as the author narrates,

“But at the time of life, tinged already with disenchantment, which Swann was approaching, when a man can content himself with being in love for the pleasure of loving without expecting too much in return, this mutual sympathy, if it is no longer as in early youth the goal towards which love inevitably tends, is nevertheless bound to it by so strong an association of ideas that it may well become the cause of love if it manifests itself first.” (Swann’s Way 277).

This passage, not only a page away from the initial correspondence, at first seems contradictory to the previous claim that it is the worldly sign that defines the love of Swann; that would be a correct assumption. If this passage is read closely, we find that in fact not only the concept of love detaches from the worldly sign but so does the concept of Swann! The sentence shifts to discussing *a man*, whom we assume is Swann, but how could this be known for certain? Is this man a stand in, just a figure to represent all men, whom upon love acts? Is it the narrator? One could reason that this love of mutual sympathy could be in reference to the narrator’s mother more readily than one could argue that this type of love pertains to Swann. If for the sake of argument we allow that this passage is explicitly about the love between Swann and Odette, it does not reveal much beyond the fact that the *man* in question is content with little in the way of reciprocation.

This is not all to say that Proust shies away from physical description altogether, as he writes of Odette’s appearance and Swann’s understanding of her beauty,

“Odette de Crècy again came to see Swann; her visits grew more frequent, and doubtless each visit revived the sense of disappointment which he felt at the sight of a face whose details he had somewhat forgotten in the interval, not remembering it as either so expressive or, in spite of her youth, so faded; he used to regret, while she was talking to him, that her really considerable beauty was not of the kind which he spontaneously admired.” (Swann’s Way 278).

This passage underpins the entire farce of romance that is *Swann in Love*, though it does so quietly. We’re given a moment of physical description, which in the mind of Swann is mutable and impermanent, and always disappointing upon remembrance. In this passage, and a few sentences later, Odette de Crècy is physically described, in an appropriately accurate manner, though this has no bearing on Swann. Hers is a beauty which he does not desire. This begs the question, what is a beauty which Swann desires, and it’s art! Swann is infatuated with Odette because of her resemblance to the Botticelli piece! Not that he is infatuated with the piece *itself*, but because she shares some feature with the work. To put it another way, Swann’s love for Odette is based entirely upon a worldly sign; the relationship can hardly be penetrated any further, as there is no further depth to go to. This can be seen in a passage regarding Swann’s habit of seeking out these similarities,

“She struck Swann by her resemblance to the figure of Zipporah, Jethro’s daughter... He had always found a peculiar fascination in tracing in the paintings of the old masters not merely the general characteristics of the people whom he encountered in his daily life,



but rather what seems least susceptible of generalization, the individual features of men and women whom he knew.” (Swann’s Way 314).

Ironically, it is a generalization that allows these comparisons to be made based upon an individual trait shared between the painting and the person. Either that, or it is an accident; in the case of Odette, it is a sudden resting pose that casts. It is neither the physical painting, nor the physical beauty of Odette that causes this. It is a likeness of one found in the other. So, it is that the humor particular to this realm becomes one of the prime means of communicating the emotional drama of *Swann in Love*.

The decoding of symbols as an integral, if not the essence, of narrative imposes a more subtle quality on the work of Proust. That is, *In Search of Lost Time* is profoundly dependent on accident from which the author composes a story. The literary mechanism that creates this similarity is rather simple; it can be described as a relinquishing of control over the events in the novel. Particularly, in events and details unrelated to the narrator himself. To refer to a previously mentioned passage, this can be seen dealing with Odette and the Zipporah - Swann’s entire reason for existence is altered by a coincidental similarity between a woman in whom he recognizes traits from a painting. To refer again to a more previous, albeit grander passage, one needs to look no further than to the first pages of *Swann’s Way*, where the narrator, musing on boyhood, finds himself pitted against the realism and detail of his room at night,

“But I had seen first one and then another of the rooms in which I had slept during my life, and in the end I would revisit them... I lay stretched out in bed, my eyes staring upwards, my ears straining, my nostrils flaring, my heart beating; until habit had changed

the colour of the curtains, silenced the clock, brought and expression of pity to the cruel..  
 Habit! That skilful but slow-moving arranger who begins by letting our minds suffer for weeks on end in temporary quarters, but whom our minds are none the less only to discover at last, for without it, reduced to their own devices, they would be powerless to make any room seem habitable.” (Swann’s Way 7-8)

The narrator is met only with frustration in his room, embodied literally in its exacting description, and more metaphorically in the changing of the colour of the curtains. Both the description of the room and the routine of staying up late until the curtains shift color are an example of process; of narrative created by rote recounting of his surroundings. The young narrator is however powerless to make any room habitable without the guiding arranger of habit, thus forcing its acceptance.

This passage, set so early in the text, can be taken to serve not only as a beginning thread of the narrative in Combray, but as a challenge the narrator means to overcome in the first volume, and all subsequent volumes to come with regards to telling a story; asking, is there a way to overcome the “skilful arranger” of habit in a narrative? Surely, a reader cannot be asked to follow a boy’s evening in a room, no matter how skillfully described and how beautiful it is. The scene requires accident, or at least the promise of it, for any novel experience to occur. Accident, and the ability or inability to process it, becomes the generative means of creating narrative in *In Search of Lost Time*.

Shortly after the moment with the Magic Lantern, the narrator begins anew,

“But I cannot express the discomfort I felt at this intrusion of mystery and beauty into a room which I had succeeded in filling with my own personality until I thought no more of it than of myself. The anesthetic effect of habit destroyed, I would begin to think - and to feel - such melancholy things.” (Swann’s Way 11).

This melancholy is the early indicator of the narrator as a student of the accident, of the self-generated narrative. Ironically, it is the narrator’s own self insertion into the scene that begins to cloud and muddle it with a vague and nonspecific melancholy. Left undefined is the beauty of the intrusion. These intrusions, and the ability to acutely become aware of them come to make up each comedy and tragedy of *In Search of Lost Time*.

Odette comes to embody a lot of this uncertainty in the first volume, apparent upon her first introduction,

“On the table was the same plate of biscuits that was always there; my uncle wore the same jacket as on other days, but opposite him, in a pink silk dress with a great necklace of pearls about her throat, sat a young woman who was just finishing a tangerine. My uncertainty whether I ought to address her as Madame or Mademoiselle made me blush, and not daring to look too much in her direction, in case I should be obliged to speak to her, I hurried across to embrace my uncle.” (Swann’s Way 104).

The scene here again uses a symbolic reference to the biscuits and his uncle's jacket to denote the force of habit, while a quite literal uncertainty is spoken of when the narrator decides what he ought to call her. The completion of the sentence says much about the narrator of *Swann's Way*, and his dealings with uncertainty, or accident. Rather than offer a moment of levity, or meet head on the melancholy that the narrator has established comes with the unknown, he hurries to embrace his uncle, and the moment is left undefined. This embrace is a tactic not unknown to the narrator, introduced early with his mother, established to be a contingent for when the habit of the scene fails.

Earlier I made reference to the passage of Swann's accidental infatuation with Odette due to her resemblance to the Zipporah. It is not such a coincidence then that an author, concerned with accident, is introduced to the world of literature in large part due to the author Bergotte, in a manner extraordinarily similar to the manner in which Swann fell in love with Odette? That is to say, just as Swann was not initially enamoured with Odette, neither was the narrator immediately taken with the work of Bergotte; both men found their love for Odette and Bergotte's novels respectively through their containment of the past, be it the features of Odette's face, or the reinvigoration of antiquated phrases in Bergotte's works.

Bloch introduces the narrator to the work of Bergotte, who recounts his early moments spent reading the established author's work,

“For the first few days, like a tune with which one will soon be infatuated but which one has not yet ‘got hold of’, the things I was to love so passionately in Bergotte's style did not immediately strike me. I could not, it is true, lay down the novel of his which I was

reading, but I fancied that I was interested in the subject alone, as in the first dawn of love when we go every day to meet a woman at some party or entertainment which we think is in itself the attraction.” (Swann’s Way 129).

This passage at once recalls, in the narrator’s hesitation to sing the praises of the work, Swann’s initial indifference to Odette, believing her to be little more than another accessory to some grander attraction. The narrator then goes on to explain that it is in fact, “certain archaic phrases” which initially drew his attention to the novel, not unlike Swann, who found himself drawn to a woman whose features resembled a painting of the old masters. Further, this passage establishes something necessary for the thesis of *In Search of Lost Time*, or of the ability of art to manifest as accident; that is, art itself must be able to elicit the same powerful response as the forces which it attempts to capture. Perhaps it is no accident either that Bloch introduced Marcel to Bergotte, only to claim that his great aunt was a tempestuous kept woman in her day (129), foreshadowing the following volumes’ preoccupation with the capture and possession of womens’ love and beauty, which is ultimately not unlike the struggle of creating a work of art that captures a moment in time. Joking aside, the question remains; can art capture the accident? Or is it rather like the kept woman, both a preoccupation of the narrator, and a figure with whom Proust draws many comparisons to with works of art, as well as a figure Proust suggests will never truly be bound. The narrator however, finds himself bound by the work of Bergotte for the remainder of his life, which seems to show that his task is not without hope.

Throughout the volumes of *In Search of Lost Time*, the answer of *how* art could have this ability to capture the accident, such as those moments with the madeleine, begin to be explored

through various engagements with works that seem to possess the ability to do so. The first instance of this comes again with Swann, as he hears a Sonata in f-sharp,

“The year before, at an evening party, he had heard a piece of music played on the piano and violin. At first he had appreciated only the material quality of the sounds which those instruments secreted. And it had been a source of keen pleasure when, below the delicate line of the violin-part, slender but robust, compact and commanding, he had suddenly become aware of the mass of the piano-part, beginning to emerge in a sort of liquid rippling of sound, multiform but indivisible, smooth yet restless, like the deep blue tumult of the sea, silvered and charmed into a minor key by the moonlight.” (Swann’s Way 294).

While not stated in explicit terms, this passage could be said to contain an early model of the mechanics used to contain the accidental qualities of experience within art. First, the narrator suggestively continues the comparison between the figure of the woman and finely crafted works of art. The rather crass reference to the tones produced by the piano and violin as secretions could indeed be taken this way. The passage continues similarly, as the violin-part is defined in a way that can only be seen as both physical and feminine. If the reader understands the description of the violin-part, then there’s no reason to explain the role of the piano-part, as well as their interaction within the sonata. It is only natural that this early understanding of art is related to the realm of experience so crudely, as it is certainly easy to immediately grasp, and presents a very intelligible comparison between the power of art when compared to the accident,

be it through love or a physical encounter, which breaks the druthers of habit, or some *grander attraction*.

The passage is not so easily contained in such an explicit comparison, however - it is not entirely *lost time*, complicated by the relationship of the key, an immaterial construct, to the sea and the moonlight. The previous comparison to the woman, almost entirely physical, and entirely two dimensional, between the two objects of comparison no longer holds. The music, via the key becomes related to the color of the sea, to the silver of the moonlight, implying a relationship to the accidental qualities of the experience of the listener. The sonata is additionally related to the yet unseen and unfinished painting of the sea by Elstir, which the narrator chances upon in his studio in a subsequent volume. By way of this complication, the scope of the passage can no longer be contained neatly within the half of or so page of text that it occupies. The nature of this reference of the sea transforms what would otherwise be a quip into an experience along the trajectory of the narrator's development as a budding artist himself. A page later, the narrator says, not of his own musing, just as much about the sonata that has captured Swann,

“And this impression would continue to envelop in its liquidity, its ceaseless overlapping, the motifs which from time to time emerge, barely discernible, to plunge again and disappear and drown, recognised only by the particular kind of pleasure which they instil, impossible to describe, to recollect, to name, ineffable - did not our memory, like a labourer who toils at the laying down of firm foundations beneath the tumult of the waves, by fashioning for us facsimiles of those fugitive phrases, enable us to compare and to contrast them with those that follow.” (Swann's Way 295).

Through the extension of the symbol of the sea, Proust allows his words to capture a facsimile of the moment when Swann was first introduced a year earlier to the piece of music. These replications, in artwork that is capable of generating a response that could be considered analogous to the madeleine or the magic lantern, are accurate enough to allow for a reconstruction made by the observer, or reader, in the case of Bergotte, that will elicit in them a comparably powerful response. The mechanism here seems to be a blurring and consequently breaking of boundaries between the artist, the components, or facsimiles, he produces, the observer's own experience, and finally, his own response. For instance, the narrator writes of Swann's understanding of the "fugitive phrases" of the sonata - and we are not given an exact replica of the sonata - how could that be possible? We are given the impression of a sonata that is perhaps fluid, and varied in texture between the violin and the piano, perhaps the reader has heard the work of Debussy, or even Cesar Franck, and can begin to create their own useful impression of the sonata. The use of the word fugitive recalls previous explorations of the dynamic between suitor and kept woman, as of that between Swann and Odette - or perhaps even the reader can impart their own experience upon this recollection. The phrases are additionally allowed to include not only the foundations and phrases of past and present, but "those that follow" as well, indicating that, as though a wave in the sea, these phrases, these facsimiles, may be permitted to combine and recombine, plunge and reemerge, to wax and wane in strength until it is inevitable that they will, at some moment, succeeding in impressing themselves upon the reader, as if by chance.

To answer the question of a few paragraphs prior, "can art capture the accident?" as it were, or the lived experience of the observer, the answer is yes. The mechanism, not overtly



stated, lies in the production of facsimile, from the author to the work, and again from the work to the observer. Facsimile meaning an exact replica, though there is a key distinction that must be made. A replica not of reality, as that would only mean that the narrator aims towards a degree of realism, which is not the case. Rather, facsimile of the initial *impression of* the experience. This is not yet stated, nor is it made clear *yet* in this instance, as its absence in this moment is part of the experience the narrator is creating, but for the sake of the argument this distinction must be made clear. It is however, in this way that the throughline can be preserved, from the accidental encounter of the artist, to the observer's accidental encounter with the work, then the barrier between life and art can in fact be effectively broken; the implication being that the incident involving the madeleine and the encounter with the sonata can in theory be made to be functionally no different from each other. Further, the narrator betrays, without outright naming, a quality in art admired by the narrator; that is, a sort of impressionism that breaks down the barriers between subject to subject, or object to subject.

As the novel proceeds, this argument is made more salient as the narrator examines other artists. A more explicit statement on the subject can be found in the beginning pages of *Within a Budding Grove*, as the narrator reflects on a performance of Berma, by first presenting the antithesis of what will become his style of writing,

“ ‘What a great artist!’ It will doubtless be argued that I was not absolutely sincere. But let us bear in mind, rather, the countless writers who, dissatisfied with the passage they have just written, read some eulogy of the genius of Chateaubriand, or evoke the spirit of some great artist whose equal they aspire to be, humming to themselves, for instance a

phrase of Beethoven, the melancholy of which they compare with what they have been trying to express in their prose, and become so imbued with this idea of genius that they add it to their own productions when they return to them, no longer to see them in the light in which they appeared at first, and, hazarding an act of faith in the value their work, say to themselves: ‘After all!’ ” (Within a Budding Grove 72).

Here, the narrator considers the many artists who muse not on coincidence or chance, but on the greatness of other artists whom they aspire to equal. This has the paradoxical effect of lessening the genius of the emulated artist, arguably to the observer to the work, but more importantly, and central to the passage, had upon the artist performing the emulation. The reasoning is quite simple; rather than emulating some element of the artist’s own experience, the artist is rendering the work of another artist, in order to evoke not a novel experience or sentiment, but now a moment once removed. One could argue that this means of composition is generative of an artistic stagnancy, which surely could be considered to be antithesis to the production of facsimile that the narrator asserts earlier that great works of art rely upon to function, as, logically, the only way one can produce artistic facsimile of art is literal reproduction. This is not to say that this sort of emulation is useless or a waste of time, Proust himself was known for a time as a great imitator himself for his work pastiching various writers of the day, but it would be simplistic to read in this passage that originality is the font of artistic greatness; the narrator is simply detailing in the negative what he will shortly detail in the positive - that is, that great art is contingent ultimately upon capturing immediacy, and that genius or artistic talent are only prerequisites for the ability of this type capture, namely the construction of facsimile.

On to the latter half of the passage, Proust writes,

“They have introduced the memory of marvellous pages of Chateaubriand which they assimilate to their own but which, after all, they did not write... let us bear in mind also the travellers who come home enraptured by the overall splendor of a journey from which day by day they experienced nothing but tedium; and let us then declare whether, in the communal life that is led by our ideas in the enclosure of our minds, there is a single one of those that makes us most happy which has not first sought, like a real parasite, and won from an alien but neighbouring idea the greater part of the strength that it originally lacked.” (Within a Budding Grove 72-73).

Here, the reader is urged to consider the man who has positively experienced the moment of artistic realisation, though only too late - the traveller who looks back on a trip during which he found only tedium - this could even be thought to be the narrator himself, as he reflects on his hotel rooms, first with disdain, later with fondness, though always with the vantage point of an author looking back. The two key positive phrases from this passage is the “communal life that is led by our ideas in the enclosure of our minds” - a more intellectual way of identifying the ephemeral, always interactive nature of symbols such as the narrator’s Sea and Vanteuil’s little phrase. This moment can be identified not as an example, but as an early definition of this sort of Proustian Accident, or something worthy of the construction of a facsimile.

It is unsurprising then, that the sonata is connected, by way of the symbol of the sea, to Elstir's unfinished piece, chanced upon by the narrator while visiting the artist's studio. Almost expectedly, when the narrator begins to ponder the effect of Elstir's paintings, he remarks:

“Most of those that covered the walls were not what I should chiefly have liked to see of his work, paintings in what an English art journal which lay about on the reading-room table in the Grand Hotel called his first and second manners, the mythological manner and the manner in which he showed signs of Japanese influence, both admirably exemplified, the article said, in the collection of Mme. de Guermantes.” (Within a Budding Grove 565-566).

There are a few things worthy of mention in this introduction; the first being that this is not the first time the narrator claims not to be immediately taken by a work which he later comes to hold very dear. This suggests that the narrator operates from a complex vantage point as the teller of this story - he is both at the mercy of the irregularities and chance of those moments that he writes of, but he is also removed and an observer. As the passage progresses, this becomes important in understanding both its construction and its place in the novel.

Second, the passage immediately raises the question of specificity, particularly as it relates to the artist's distance from the subject matter. The first mention of Elstir's work here is in the negative, and set within the language of places and names. His work is admired in an *English* journal for *Japanese* influence, and the narrator came to be aware of the influences on the coffee table of the *Grand Hotel*, a place immediately evocative of transit. Moments later, the narrator reveals what he finds to be the charm of Elstir's work:

“Naturally enough, what he had in his studio were almost all seascapes done here, at Balbec. But I was able to discern from these that the charm of each of them lay in a sort of metamorphosis of the things represented in it, analogous to what in poetry we call metaphor, and that, if God the Father had created things by naming them, it was by taking away their names or giving them other names that Elstir created them anew. The names which denote things correspond invariably to an intellectual notion, alien to our true impressions, and compelling us to eliminate from them everything that is not in keeping with itself.” (Within a Budding Grove 566-567)

This subject matter quite naturally links the paintings of Elstir to the sonata of Vinteuil, by way of the sea, and continues to expand the exploration of accident and exploration in the narrator’s conception of what makes art fantastic. Another element of extreme importance is introduced as well - with the mention of God. That is to say, the element of Providence, particularly in prose, must be considered. The question of names is of the utmost importance, as it is a potential interruption to the process which instills a memory in an object, as in the case of the madeleine. If the object is not free from the name, or purpose, it has been bound to, then it is not possible for it to contain readily the essence necessary to trigger a moment of memory, or to accidentally reveal some truth to the observer. Providence does not concern itself with accident, only with what is absolute, and thus represents here an impasse for impressionistic art. This could be put more simply by saying that names hold power in that they create a cognitive distance from the immediate impression which the object inspires. Oddly enough, the narrator displays this negatively moments before mentioning it, by using the names of states, nations and

the Guermantes to mediate the reader's impression of Elstir's work, before introducing the truth of the matter, which is subsequently revealed in the further extension of the scene in the studio. The consideration of these names in the analysis of Elstir's work make apparent the interruptive power that they hold; Elstir's work operates like the sea, in a manner much the same as the sonata, and that is by the blurring of subject to subject in the painting, the blurring of the piano and violin, one could even venture to guess that the narrator could find the leitmotif of the sonata within the paintings with enough consideration. The narrator goes on to say as much,

“But the rare moments in which we see nature as she is, with poetic vision, it was from those that Elstir's work was taken. One of his metaphors that occurred most commonly in the seascapes which he had round him was precisely that which, comparing land with sea, suppressed every line of demarcation between them. It was this comparison, tacitly and untiringly repeated on a single canvas, which gave it that multiform and powerful unity, the cause (not always clearly perceived by themselves) of the enthusiasm which Elstir's work aroused in certain collectors.” (Within a Budding Grove 268).

That it is Elstir's work in comparison, without deference to the imprecise specificity of naming, that allows for the poetic truth of the seascape, which is one of appearance and reappearance, but always of unity, to be revealed not to an English art journal, but to a handful of *certain* collectors, who themselves remain undefined.

Of course, one must acknowledge that it is the author who ultimately holds Providence over his own work. This must be acknowledged and contended with by any artist who counts himself among the Impressionists whom Proust is discussing and basing the character of Elstir around. The dilemma presented is an obvious one; simply, how can the artist, who through enough artistic prowess can hold complete control over the outcome of a work, remove this control over the accidental events of the work, much like Elstir removes the power of named objects? The answer to this question lies at the core of *In Search of Lost Time*, and is realized constantly without being named. It is the understanding that the artist is primarily an observer - not an observer who must labor to remove himself through technical precision from a work, but an observer who realizes that he himself, with all of his own poetic vision, is a part of *nature as she is*. Thus, it is necessary that the artist removes his own dominion over the circumstance of his work, not for the sake of realism, but for the sake of creating a work that holds within it the truth of an experience. Deviations from reality, then, are not taken to alter circumstances, or to give authority to the creator of the work, but to represent the emotional reality of the experience, whether it is through the palette chosen, lines of demarcation drawn, or the turn of a certain phrase. This technique, if it could be described as such, seems to be shared between art and literature, and is likely why the narrator of *In Search of Lost Time* finds himself so drawn to Elstir and to Swann, both men being so preoccupied with the visual realm of experience. Both literature and visual art are particularly given to experiential representation of a place, or a moment in time. While Elstir seems inclined towards the removal of lines of demarcation, in other words, obfuscating the representative elements of his work, the narrator can still discern quite clearly that the subject of his painting is often a coastline. The same cannot be said of Vianeuil's sonata; Swann, though so taken by the piece, does not discern a representative

subject, instead intertwining the sonata with his preoccupation with Odette, the sonata becoming in part a representation of his own experience. It seems worth exploring whether or not music is governed by a different set of parameters than visual art or literature in *In Search of Lost Time*, or if there are any similarities to be found.

Before one begins to explore the effects and properties of music within *In Search of Lost Time*, it is useful to look towards the narrator's exploration of sound, and to understand that it possesses a quality which could be described as generative, and more easily mutable, rather than being simply representative. Of this, the narrator writes,

“To return to the problem of sound, we have only to thicken the wads which close the aural passages, and they confine to a pianissimo the girl who has been playing a boisterous tune overhead; if we go further, and steep one of these wads in grease, at once the whole household must obey its despotic rule; its laws extend even beyond our portals.” (The Guermites Way 93).

What this passage says of sound, is that it is a medium over which we have a particular control, as it can be blocked, created, or altered through time. This is explored through the way in which the narrator supposes a man who blocks his own hearing with greased wads of cloth, to which no precise parallel exists in the visual world. Sound is simply more mutable a medium than the visual, and far more still than the medium of language. One can create a tune with their voice, or alter the sounds that they receive by cupping their ears in a way that a viewer of a painting cannot. If the painter wishes to achieve a similar effect, it must be realized not in the



natural world, but upon the canvas itself, and the resulting work is ultimately representative of the natural, physical world. Sound is freer of this relationship, and the nature of this freedom is explored in how associations are drawn by the characters of the novel, in a way by accident, to works of music. This happens simply because the subject of a piece of music can never have a subject so concrete as, for instance, a Botticelli Fresco. When Swann first heard the Sonata and its undulating, appearing and reappearing motif, he was free to make, due to the circumstance of his life, an association between the piece and Odette. The narrator writes of this mutability again, in the latter half of *Swann in Love*,

“When it was the little phrase that spoke to him of the vanity of his sufferings, Swann found a solace in that very wisdom which, but a little while back, had seemed to him intolerable when he fancied he could read it on the faces of indifferent strangers who regarded his love as an insignificant aberration. For the little phrase, unlike them, whatever opinion it might hold on the transience of these states of the soul, saw in them something not, as all these people did, less serious than the events of everyday life, but, on the contrary, so far superior to it as to be alone worth while expressing.” (Swann's Way 495).

The musical phrase is given agency here over the character Swann, and again removes some of the author's control over the course of events in the story. The music has this ability to have an “opinion”, so to speak, because it is not simply a shoreline, or a beautifully written passage, both of which contain a subject, but an immaterial organization of sound, though it holds a *poetic vision*, as the narrator finds in the work of Elstir, all the same.

To make clear why this is important, it must be said that music, particularly when depicted in literature, is uniquely capable of demonstrating the artistic value of seeking out the accidental. One could imagine, for the sake of demonstration, that they are writing a novel, wherein the narrative depends on a woman who coincidentally appears to resemble a historical painting. Of course, the connection made by Swann in the work of fiction itself is a chance encounter, but the narrator likely has concocted the character and the scene in such a way that the spontaneity of the encounter is false, and in fact very well organized and planned. When one considers an unnamed sonata, this sort of reverse engineering ceases to make sense. How could it be that an unnamed sonata in F sharp is chosen to function within the story as a means of recalling a particular woman? The author is instead left to infer from the character he has created the reaction and connection that the character will make - this essentially allows Proust to create a moment of overwhelming impression, much like the madeleine, that actually occurs within the fiction all without the direct exertion of authority on the part Proust. Rather, the author is merely tracing what seems like what would be a character's natural association with a piece of art that is non-representative in nature.

If the preceding argument is still met with scrutiny, a discussion of Berma's performance of Phedre is both a natural piece of supporting evidence, as well as a moment not only argumentatively important, but a victory for the artist as well. We are introduced to Berma's performance by way of the role of Phedre; consequential for a number of reasons. First; Berma's is not the author of Phedre, and her role is, unlike that of Elstir and Vianteuil, primarily interpretive. This inevitably creates a challenge both for the narrator as an analyst in divorcing the role of the playwright and the actress, and *seems to* raise the question of whether or not this is

even a task worth taking on at all. Second; the text is iconoclastic, and presents a challenge to the narrator as an appreciator of the theater, as he attempts to interpret and revel in motifs of language and diction ossified in the tradition of the theater itself. Unsurprisingly, we find the narrator caught in the mire of both of these questions:

“Truth to tell, I set little store by this opportunity of seeing and hearing Berma... And it was not without a sense of melancholy that I registered to myself my indifference to what at one time I had put before... everything. It was not that there had been any diminution in my desire to be able to contemplate at first hand the precious particles of reality which my imagination envisioned. But it no longer located them in the diction of a great actress; since my visits to Elstir, it was on to certain tapestries, certain modern paintings that I had transferred the inner faith I had once had in the acting, the tragic art of Berma; my faith and my desire no longer coming forward to pay incessant worship to the diction and the presence of Berma, the “double” that I possessed of them in my heart had gradually shrivelled, like those other “doubles” of the dead in ancient Egypt which had to be fed continually in order to maintain their originals in eternal life. That art had become a poor and pitiable thing. It was no longer inhabited by a deep rooted soul.” (The Guermentes Way 39).

Indeed, we find the narrator grappling with the separation between the actress, her diction, her performance, and the narrator’s own remembrance, or “double”, of these characteristics. Without mention, the focus shifts from the narrator’s “double” of Berma in the theater, dead as those of ancient Egypt, to the pitiable art of theater, no longer inhabited by what the narrator calls “deep

rooted soul.” This is pitted directly against the *modern* work of Elstir the painter. The reader is left to wonder, along with the narrator, whether this failure is the fault of the theater or of the actress, without a good way of making this distinction. Instead, a simplistic offering is given; the theater fails to excite when compared to the *modern*, impressionistic work of Elstir. Also of note, the art of theater itself is referred to explicitly as *tragic*. This realization is had by the narrator as he examines the diction and presence of Berma, as she inhabits a role from a day long past.

Logically, it looks as though the tragedy of the theater is that, despite a compelling tale, and a skilled actress, known to masterfully deliver her lines with perfect diction and understanding of her role, the theater is lacking a *soul*, if it may be called, that the work of Elstir, in contrast does not lack. To refer to an earlier analysis of Elstir’s role in Proust, this *soul*, could be considered to be Elstir’s ability to make fantastic a landscape by demarcating points of reference, and removing the shackles of association so that only a concise poetic vision remains. Of course, the theater is a complete antithesis to this. Gone is the *naming anew* of Elstir - the viewer is left with the iconoclastic role of Phedre, played by Berma, while the plot is known in synopsis by the theater culture at large merely through rote repetition. It appears that the theater is met by the narrator in quite a tragic state indeed, though that is not why he is attending. But what of Berma? As she is only a performer, these faults do not seem to be hers, suggesting that the art of Berma and the state of theater can be considered separate; to put it another way, Berma is a great artist bound to a dying medium. This distinction is simplistic, however, as the narrator soon finds,

“The part itself, a part, the common property of all the actresses who appeared as Phedre, which I myself had studied beforehand so that I might be capable of subtracting it, of

gleaning as a residuum Mme Berma's talent alone. But this talent which I sought to discover outside the part itself was indissolubly one with it." (The Guermantes Way 54).

We see that Phedre and Berma, at least to the viewer, are inseparable - As Vinteuil, "So fine a pianist that one is no longer aware that the performer is a pianist." (The Guermantes Way 54) and as the blurred seascapes of Elstir.

Finally, after reaching a sense of unification between the prominent artists of the novel, we are left only to consider one other; and explaining why so much time has been spent exploring the work of those who are not necessarily writers, but painters, musicians and actresses. What of the narrator himself? In the novel, the voice of the narrator is nearly omnipresent, but the character of the narrator, his work, his role as an artist is left relatively untouched and unconnected for a great duration of the story. It is important to consider whether the narrator can be thought to have gained anything from his observation, or can be considered a part of this collection of artists. Ultimately, the artistic vision of *In Search of Lost Time* relies on the narrator's own integration with the didactic lessons gleaned through the observation and the experience of the work and life of these characters.

The narrator poses an unusual challenge when compared to the other artists, as he is, in a sense, two entities. There is both the narrator, the teller of the story, and identifier of these artistic elements and motifs, and then there is the character of the narrator, who is, by his own account, an artist with little merits of his own, moving through time and place alongside those whom he is observing. This conundrum, remains, and is made explicitly clear when he speaks of himself as an artist, quite late in the novel:

“I knew that I knew myself to be worthless. If I really had the soul of an artist, surely I would be feeling pleasure at the sight of this curtain of trees lit by the setting sun, these little flowers on the bank which lifted themselves almost to the level of the steps of my compartment, flower whose petals I was able to count but whose colour I would not, like many a worthy man of letters, attempt to describe, for one can hope to transmit to the reader a pleasure that one has not felt?” (Time Regained 239).

The core challenge of understanding and analyzing is made explicit in this first sentence. *I knew that I knew myself*, the narrator declares. This remark declares a distinction, from a sentence that may have simply read, “I knew myself”. This passage contains both the character, who knows himself, and the narrator, who himself knows this, superimposed above the character of the narrator. This blurred distinction happens so quickly, not like the undulations of a Carquethuit seascape, but as a flash of lightning in a storm above it. So suddenly, this superpositioned narrator disappears, and we are left again with the character. In this moment, we find the narrator’s character engaging in an act of brittle observation, that seems to run counter to the observations he has made on the work of other artists. He identifies a desire to reap from the environment a certain beauty, both in the observation of the scenery before him, and in what would be a true *man of letters*’ attempt to describe the moment. The narrator here does not seem inclined to “name anew” that which is already there, but to fabricate a description of a scene, fitted with a beauty and a pleasure unfelt at the moment of its observation.

This passage, however, is not as much of a hyperbolic demonstration of artistic failure as it may initially seem. It must be viewed as demonstrating both a positive statement on the narrator’s conception of art, as well as a negative one - in other words, a victory, and a failure,

both contributing to the development of the narrator's argument and vision of artistic method. The positive achievement of the narrator here is somewhat paradoxical; he declares himself a failure, but succeeds in differentiating between himself as the character, a would be author moving through a world of artistic contemporaries, and himself as a superimposed narrator - the same narrator that we have, throughout the course of the novel, grown accustomed to read as he muses on various artistic and literary theories. One only has to look towards a passage we have previously visited to see both of these personalities, so to speak, existing at once. Fittingly, he appears in the studio of Elstir.,

“But I was able to discern from these that the charm of each of them lay in a sort of metamorphosis of the things represented in it, analogous to what in poetry we call metaphor, and that, if God the Father had created things by naming them, it was by taking away their names or giving them other names that Elstir created them anew. The names which denote things correspond invariably to an intellectual notion, alien to our true impressions, and compelling us to eliminate from them everything that is not in keeping with itself.” (Within a Budding Grove 268).

In this instance it is the narrator as a character we see first, observing what he believes to be an artistic mechanism of Elstir's work. In the second sentence, we see a narrator that is declarative on the nature of things. Not surprisingly, we find the superpositioned narrator declaring that the intellectual notion that exists alien to true impressions - an idea that the *character of the* narrator could use, if only the two could be unified. In other words, the narrator of the story, and the character of the narrator within the story are largely distinct and alien to one another. The

paradox of, and artistically affirmative aspect of the passage beginning, *I knew myself*, depicts then, a great success. The superimposed teller of the story claims that he knows himself, the character, and they are, in a strange way, separate, but existing together in the same sentence. Then we find the *character* of the narrator, the hapless writer, desiring the elusive “soul of an artist” so that he may fashion a description of petals and treelines from which one can reap a pleasure never experienced - an action which represents everything that the teller of the story seems to know is an exercise in futility.

The effect of the brief interactions of these two aspects of the narrator begs the question of, “Who exactly is the narrator, and how much does he know?” We find the artistically astute and analytical, superpositioned narrator with the experiential narrator, who is a character of the novel himself, often close by, though rarely in direct communication. In stating, *I knew I knew myself*, the narrator calls into question the vantage point of the narrator throughout the *entire* work; This blurred distinction between the declarative, authorial narrator, and the character of Marcel renders in literature something that quite resembles the seascapes of Elstir. The role of the narrator, character and author have been unbound from our previous intellectual notions of their roles. Through the naming of these two selves, the narrator allows a reimagining of these roles, now allowed to exist so closely together.

Further, this passage reaffirms the power of coincidence within the artistic realm of *In Search of Lost Time*, though again, negatively. Just as one has the capacity to be overcome by a display of flowers, set against a treeline, before the setting sun, one has the capacity to reap entirely no pleasure from the experience. It could likely be entirely an incident of pure chance that the narrator is unaffected by this display; he gives us no reason to think that the scene,



though undescribed, is not beautiful. It is reasonable to believe that just as one can be overcome by something as mundane as a madeleine, something that can by chance initiate a moment that begins an all consuming search for the narrator, that something else, so beautiful as an abundance of flowers and trees against a setting sun, fails to inspire anything at all - leaving the narrator as lost and dejected as he was taken and invigorated by something so simple as a small sponge cake.

Neither is it that the narrator is incapable of descriptive writing, it is instead that the beauty of a scene comes second to the power of accident; if the scene is not coupled with experiential significance, it fails to capture, or even approach the rapturous nature that the narrator seeks. Take, for instance, a moment from earlier within the final volume:

“... We would leave the town by the road which ran along the white fence of M. Swann’s park. Before reaching it we would be met on our way by the scent of his lilac-trees, come out to welcome strangers. From amid the fresh little green hearts of their foliage they raised inquisitive over the fence of the park their plumes of white or mauve blossom, which glowed, even in the shade, with the sunlight in which they had bathed.” (Time Regained 190).

This passage is made beautiful not strictly by the narrator; it relies heavily on the influence of Swann in order to take shape. This can be gleaned from two observations of the passage. The first is quite simple; these lilac trees, like the madeleine, like the little phrase, in a matter much the same as any instances similar to those mentioned, have impressed themselves upon the narrator through repeated visit, due to the narrator’s coincidental relation to M. Swann. This

argument can only be made speculatively, though a second argument, while related, is a much stronger one. It is that the description of M. Swann's lilacs contain within them something of the *essence* of M. Swann himself, one that the narrator could only have come to know through his accidental acquaintance with M. Swann. The entire description of lilacs could be read two ways; as descriptive of a scenery, or as a metaphor based upon Swann himself. Welcoming to strangers, an inquisitive, if lazy, student of art and literature himself, one can see something of Swann in the lilacs that the narrator now describes. Perhaps most critical to this metaphor is the glow, even in the shade, perhaps as the early introduction of the narrator to society, and to fine art, shines through the narrator, now as he recounts a vision of a time past. The passage undoubtedly relies upon the coincidental association with Swann, though. Without this accident, *Swann's* lilacs may very well have been only lilacs beside a white fence - something that any *man of letters* may have been able to describe, but that the narrator could not.

The lilacs again raise the question of vantage point. Here we have the character of the narrator, the very same who has not yet found a means of constructing his work, and, while reflecting upon his childhood, employing the technique within his recollection which he has not yet discovered as a writer, and as the protagonist of the story. The effect is again, distinctly impressionistic and reconsiders the relationship between the protagonist, who happens to be the narrator, though who also seems to contain moments of understanding, as though they have been bestowed by the author. This is impossible to intellectually reconcile, but it is profound in its effect upon the story. These different aspects of the narrator, always appearing and reappearing, conjure for the reader an emotional reality that resembles his own sudden inspirations, and their consequent disappearance.

In *Time Regained*, the narrator begins to describe this very mechanism, and how it is defeated by realism. The narrator thinks to himself:

“At most I noticed cursorily that the differences which exist between every one of our real impressions, differences which explain why a uniform depiction of life cannot bear much resemblance to reality- derive probably from the following cause: the slightest word that we have said, the most insignificant action that we have performed at any one epoch of our life was surrounded by, and coloured by the reflexion of, things which logically had no connexion with it and which later have been separated from it by our intellect which could make nothing of them for its own rational purposes” (*Time Regained* 260).

This is the essential argument of *In Search of Lost Time*. That felt experience is distinct from “uniform depiction of life” or in other words, realism. These impressions of felt experience, colored by insignificant action, the reflection of things which are not connected logically, are the dominant force of how the world is engaged with. This is due simply to non rational connections made, *accidents*, which are later removed from our understanding by the intellect. It is why Proust says that the “True paradises are the paradises that we have lost.” (261) This Paradise is made of the multitude of accidents, all connected and unified before the rational mind sets to erase them from the memory. Why would it be that art is any different? Further, it can be reasoned that an art that is to be realistic in terms of depicting a real impression, a real paradise, it is not necessary that such a work of art is realistically portrayed. In fact, the passage makes an even stronger argument, that for a piece of work to depict one of these paradises, it is imperative

that the piece eschew the reality of the scene, and that it instead depicts the reality of the felt experience. This could be used to explain why the narrator operates from such an obscured vantage point. Obviously, we know that Marcel Proust, sharing a name and many similarities with the narrator, Marcel, wrote the novel. To realistically portray the plight of the would be writer as created by the writer himself realistically would be erroneous; we would be left with the logical image of a man who is not yet a great writer, with no notion of the paradises as they appear before him. Instead, the *author of In Search of Lost Time*, in order to accurately capture these paradises, these experiences, must lend some of his own talent, which the narrator does not yet possess, in a manner that is entirely unreal and paradoxical, in order to accurately allow the *reader* to experience for himself that which was felt by the narrator. Put more succinctly, the story, which is told in the first person, would crumble if it was not imbued with the prowess of one who had already learned the lesson of the novel. Now, if the artistic lesson of the story was one of the triumph of intellectually driven, logical reason, or of realism, this would make entirely no sense. Of course, this story is about quite the opposite; it is the triumph of accidents, of the coloring of one object by another, the reflection of a painting in the face of a woman - things which are entirely illogical, yet made real by the observer, only to be blocked moments later by the rational intellect. Instead, it is the paradox of the superpositioned narrator that allows the moments of paradise, now in the past, to be experienced by the reader *as* the paradise they once were to the protagonist of the story.

So it is that *In Search of Lost Time* finds itself unified and complete. Not so much a capturing of the past, as though a prisoner or an insect framed upon the wall, but as an experience reconstructed, and revisited, now left upon the page, as the reader is now able to feel the truth of moment not their own, one that they are free to return to, to make associations with,

to remember and forget, only to return again - as though colliding with one of many waves upon  
a sea.

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