

**PROUST/WRITING
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I now recaptured the living reality in a complete and involuntary recollection. This reality does not exist for us so long as it has not been re-created by our thought (otherwise men who have been engaged in a titanic struggle would all of them be great epic poets).¹

The irony of the opportunity did not escape me. It was 2020 and the world was locked down. My usual morning routine was disrupted as well as my afternoon and evening habits.

¹ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, 6 vols (London: Vintage, 1996)
vol 4 Penguin 1996, 180.

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"George Eliot, Marcel Proust, and the Logic of Desire
Kenichi Kurata"

Everything was upside down. Yet, when it came to the hours just before dawn each day, I found a new ritual. A new ritual is a contradiction, but fortunate are those who live in the juxtaposed. The new ritual of the early morning: I read Marcel Proust.

Marcel Proust is someone everyone always intends to read but never does. I have in my mind's eye a multitude of readers whose copy of *Swann's Way* has a dog ear or a bookmark somewhere around page 136 or 211 if you they are lucky. The idea that from this point forward there is over 3000 pages left to go creates the endless gathering of those who started the work but then moved on to other less ambitious endeavors.

That Proust wrote the majority of these pages locked away in a cork-lined room often writing when others slept seemed fitting as I rose in the dark to read while the world sought refuge from a plague, an illness yet defined and without cure. I was amused to consider what made the world pity Proust now made him enviable.

Reading *In Search of Lost Time* became a true source of freedom and as literature can a new way of living. The freedom began in a memory. I kept remembering being four years old and laid up for months in a full body cast. I broke my femur bone jumping into a plastic pool in my grandparent's backyard. I remember the grass, the doghouse for "Sam" off to the right. There was a frantic car ride, an examination with bright lights and then traction in a bed for a month.

What I came to see in these memories was how common it is to find writers, composers, thinkers whose childhood was marked by a long illness or debilitation where they were housebound, bedridden, isolated. I spent four months immobilized and thus was given a great gift for the remainder of my life: a well-worn path inward, an imagination, but most importantly a connection to memory. Reading Proust I remembered memory.

In the year of lockdown and confusion and persistent attendance to all things epidemiological, it was as if I were four again. Instead of a cast from my toe to my chest I had Proust. Instead of a small black and white television where I watched Gilligan's Island and the Lone Ranger, I had Swann and Odette and Gilbertine and Albertine. With the narrator I walked Paris and the entered the salons of the fabulous; I could see the way the light on the coast changed the image of a painting at the right time of day. There were hawthorns and of course clementines.

As Swann's Way led to Flowers and Flowers to the Guermantes and so on, my understanding of memory changed. What before was a vast storehouse, a kind of industrial shelving unit became, well, quite French. There were tapestries and china, there was Botticelli and wine. More important than the setting was the change in the memories themselves. Memory became alive. My memory, as opposed to my thoughts and my experiences, my impressions or even my feelings, my memories became living beings, free to come and go. What was boxed, marked, catalogued and stored on a shelf became a fabulous gathering, a cast of characters who appeared by their own volition and departed just the same.

What Proust made so clear was this: we can pursue understanding, we can force our will into a regime, but memory cannot be so ordered. For memory we can only invite. And if we are honest, too often memory comes uninvited. Consider how often you have been at a table or in a park or in a car driving and a memory will come to you. If we are lucky the memory is pleasant and lovely, something we greet with a sigh of delight. If we are unlucky, memory comes with a wounding presence; we wince with pain and squint our eyes, we gasp and shudder.

Memory is like the women of J. Alfred Proofrock who "come and go and speak of Michelangelo." We are at their disposal. How often have you tried to remember something. You rack your mind, you focus your gaze, you are annoyed when someone says, "well, where did you last see your keys?" The frustration is that we cannot command, nor control memory. We can make what we remember a part of our understanding through writing or art or sculpture. This is what Proust did relentlessly. Yet, as he was capturing memory he was quick to suggest, she has escaped, or I have no more desire to remember.

The "search for lost time" is the greatest of all memorials and monuments; it is a kind of private collection we find at the Frick. The cost of construction is the writing, the time, the devotion, the persistent demand for honesty, what is it you want to remember? No matter what memorial we construct, no matter how grand the monument or vast the curation, we must pay the price of memory. The true price is honor and gratitude and penance. If we conjure them, if we invite memory, or just as likely if they come uninvited, there is a cost. Something we owe. This is the oppressive weight of memory just as it is the lightness, the lifting of the soul where we seem to overcome gravity.

