READING FICTION AND THE PSYCHOANALYTIC EXPERIENCE:
PROUST ON READING AND ON READING PROUST

Reading can at times engage one emotionally and entail inner psychological experiences in ways akin to those in clinical psychoanalysis. In that light, after a general introduction regarding the import of reading, attention is turned to Proust, Freud's literary complement, as an exemplary instance to illustrate those similarities. Ideas of Proust on reading are followed by thoughts on reading Proust, with the ending of Proust's masterpiece used to illustrate a parallel to termination in clinical psychoanalytic experience.

We feel very clearly that our own wisdom begins where that of the author leaves off, and would like him to provide answers, when all he can do is provide us with desires.

—Marcel Proust

Two hundred and fifty years ago, Samuel Johnson wrote in The Rambler an allegory on the vagaries of Truth (Bate and Strauss 1969, p. 149). Truth, daughter of Jupiter and Wisdom, was sent to humanity as a gift from the gods; Falsehood came from below. However, confronted by Prejudice and the Passions, wounded by Impudence, Sophistry, Vanity, and Obstinacy, Truth felt unable to survive among mankind and fled back to the gods. Still, Johnson went on to write, “Jupiter compassionated the world too much to grant [Truth] her request . . . [so the] Muses wove . . . a loose and changeable robe, like that in which Falsehood captivated her admirers; with this they

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invested Truth, and named her Fiction. She now went out again to conquer with more success; for when she demanded entrance of the Passions, they often mistook her for Falsehood, and delivered up their charge; but, when she had once taken possession, she was soon disrobed by Reason, and shone out, in her original form, with native effulgence and resistless dignity” (p. 152). At times, Truth may be approached more readily when she arrives draped in the robes of Fiction.

We are much concerned in psychoanalysis with efforts to approach truth and with difficulties in those approaches: the problems of evidence inherent to epistemology. Remaining properly alert to the seductive deceits of fiction, we, like Johnson, also recognize that fiction can offer paths to truths not otherwise readily accessible. Reading likely will never produce the depth of psychic change possible in clinical analysis, but analysts’ sometimes proprietary sense of exclusivity for the power to effect change must yield to broad experience.

Psychoanalysis was born in Freud’s revolutionary self-analysis. A clinician, Freud naturally turned most of his energies to extending what he learned to the therapeutic setting. Yet deeply civilized and profoundly curious, he felt that analytic investigation ought similarly to extend to the study of culture.

Nonetheless, standing in the shadow of our preoccupation with the clinical, analytic concern for the culture has never thrived easily. The past tilt in the investment of psychoanalytic energy away from applied analysis has corrected a bit as public support for analysis as a formal therapy has diminished. However, some of the burdens carried by applied analysis come from its own intrinsic nature.

Without addressing those difficulties in depth, I must acknowledge one particular aspect. We have long been discontented with analytic readings of fiction because of our inability to engage a text and then observe its responses, the text’s own ensuing associations. A text is inert in response to interpretation. Balancing that, however, applied analysis has a compensatory advantage lacking in examination of interpretations in clinical analysis. As idiosyncratic as differing readers’ reactions may be, every reader has the opportunity to approach a text that remains unchanging. With time, readings and understandings of texts change, yet a published text is constant, ever available for all to study. In contrast, only the analyst present at any clinical moment can ever experience and truly know the substantive engagement with the patient during that moment.
Reading has one other advantage over the clinical engagement, and it is one described in detail by Marcel Proust. A reader can feel greater safety suspending disbelief approaching a text at the start than can an analysand trying to suspend defense when first engaging a living analyst. The presence of a responsive other, an attentive analyst, alerts resistance; the absence of such a lively presence while reading can ease the sense of emotional engagement.

Proust serves as an exemplary specimen for our consideration. But first it is proper to recognize that while the richness that Proust offers seems limitless, much that he has to teach has, since his time, been widely studied. Through the century following Proust, applied analysis of literature focused first on the text itself and then on the connection between the text and the author’s life. Study of a text alone is like early one-person psychology in clinical work, and study of the relationship between text and author seems more akin to two-person psychology.

In recent decades, psychoanalytic attention has focused more fully on the intersubjectivity of the engagement between analyst and patient. In like manner, literary studies over the past two decades have turned to the engagement of the reader and reading. Thus, modern developments in understanding of the analytic process follow a path parallel to that taken by reader response theory. Perhaps most central to this has been the work of Norman Holland. In *The Dynamics of Literary Response*, Holland (1968) examined the reading of texts in terms of a reader’s introjection of fantasy and form, with the reader’s subsequent addition of meaning. However, in his later *5 Readers Reading*, Holland (1975) turned to a fuller appreciation of the interactive process between reader and text. Theories of reading and theories of the psychoanalytic process have progressed side by side.

When considering the work of the mind in reading fiction, it seems particularly appropriate to turn back to Proust, for Proust’s consideration of the emotional impact of reading grew out of the same *fin-de-siècle* ambience of concern for psychological interiority as did Freud’s consideration of the psychopathology of everyday life. Despite the two having been contemporaries, despite their both being sophisticated and alert to new ideas arising around them, and despite their common interests, Proust and Freud do not appear to have read each other’s work. Yet concern for many of the ideas that each developed independently was in the air at the turn of the century. Freud and Proust were bathed in the same atmosphere. When they were crystallizing their
discoveries, sensuality, interiority, femininity, mesmerism, dreams, and the unconscious were pervasive themes.

Giving shape to what was stirring, these two geniuses exploded with creativity. Freud’s work, as we know, was so powerful as to become, in Auden’s words, “a whole climate of opinion” (1976, p. 217). Even those who would come to oppose him came to use the language that Freud created. Proust had a like effect in literature. As Graham Greene put it, “For those who began to write at the end of the twenties or the beginning of the thirties, there were two great inescapable influences: Proust and Freud, who are mutually complementary” (White 1999, p. 2).

For Proust, reading offered an entrance to the inner life. “Reading,” he wrote, “is for us the instigator whose magic keys open deep within us the door to those dwelling-places into which we would have been unable to penetrate” (Proust 1905, p. 36).

Of course, once engaged, both reader and analysand must struggle toward and against identifications, toward and against opening hidden urges and fantasies. Speaking of his own reading, Proust was explicit that “the emotions aroused in me” while reading came from “the action in which I was taking part” (Proust 1913–1927, vol. I, p. 91).

As a result, he went on, such feelings evoked by reading have special power . . . since we have made them our own, since it is in ourselves that they are happening, that they are holding in thrall, as we feverishly turn over the pages of the book, our quickened breath and staring eyes. 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 [vol. I, p. 92].

In A la recherche du temps perdu, Proust provided a host of insights into human psychology, describing and examining desire, longing and

loss, the quality of memory and the insufficiency of intentional memory for recapturing the past, jealousy and sexuality and perversion, falling into love and falling out of love. He offered incisive observations on emotions and on social interactions in almost infinite diversity. Yet it is the narrow issue of reading with which we now are concerned.

First, I shall report some of Proust’s own thinking on the psychological power of reading. I will then turn to *A la recherche* in general before, in closing, relating aspects of the ending of this work to the termination phase of an analysis. It is true that just as any clinical analysis is singular, unique, and particular, so too is any personal reading. Yet despite the idiosyncrasies intrinsic to any given analysis or to any particular reading, both reading and analysis have commonalities intrinsic to their structure.

**PROUST ON READING**

To read or to analyze is in part to give oneself over to an other. That “in part” implies that there are limits of both depth and time—how deeply and for how long one loses oneself in identification before reintegrating. As one “lends an ear,” in listening or reading or analyzing one partially defers self-definition and judgment in order to take in, to hear, the other. However, at some point one’s integrity of self-definition demands a drawing back, an implicit response of “Yes, but.” One lets oneself go in order to take something in, but what is taken in is not swallowed whole; it is selectively chewed over and only then digested. That is so as you consider what I say; it is so when the lights come on between acts at the theater; it is so when an analyst emotionally steps back to think about what has been heard and felt; it is so when a patient contemplates an interpretation; and it is so when a reader comes to the end after being lost in a book. The becoming-as-if-one-with and the separating-from are at the heart of both reading and analyzing. We recognize it clinically when, in a termination phase, it is as if an analytic patient wakens from the dream of a transference neurosis.

Let us look into some of Proust’s own thinking about reading, written before he embarked on *A la recherche*. In 1905, Proust wrote an essay on the nature of reading, an essay he later used as the introduction to his and Marie Nordlinger’s translation into French of Ruskin’s *Sesame and Lilies*. Ruskin, a leader of the Arts and Crafts movement dedicated to restoring beauty to domestic life in the face
of the effects of the machine age, had written on how reading could improve the lives of working people.

In his introduction, Proust turned from Ruskin’s emphasis on the educational role of reading to the power of reading to develop and stir the imagination, to open the mind. Although he praises Ruskin, his own thinking developed in direct contrast to Ruskin’s. Proust’s argument was similar to the argument for psychoanalysis as contrasted with conventional therapy: in lieu of shaping a mind by the transmission of content or by influence toward preferred points of view and behavior, what is offered is liberation by exciting new capacities for feeling and thinking. Proust, like Freud, emphasized inquiry and opening rather than education or indoctrination.

Proust’s conceiving of this essay appears to have been part of the process of his personal growth and developing identity. In working on this piece he began with an idealized sense of Ruskin, a valuation that changed as Proust, in the process of writing, separated and distinguished his own ideas. The relation of loss to maturing of identity was a process that subsequently would become the organizing theme of Proust’s later major opus. In *On Reading* (1905), Proust already actualizes his personal individuating even as he describes the role of reading in that service.

The essay begins with Proust describing, as he would later in *A la recherche*, how central reading was to his childhood: “On no days of our childhood did we live so fully perhaps as those we thought we had left behind without living them, those that we spent with a favourite book” (Proust 1905, p. 3). But Proust went farther and brought forward dynamics of reading that underlie the idyllic image painted.

In contrast to Ruskin, who viewed reading as instruction, Proust saw reading as incitement. He considered the greatest power of reading as coming from a text’s stimulation of the reader’s mind, its opening of the mind to new possibilities far beyond the mere transmission of information. Incitement!

Is not inciting to new openness also the heart of the analytic situation? Proust emphasized that the author-reader conversation differs radically from ordinary conversation, just as does analytic conversation. That difference starts in the *asymmetry* (Proust’s word) of give-and-take between author/analyst, on the one hand, and reader/analysand, on the other.
Just as structural change requires more than transference cure, Proust insisted that the power of reading to awaken and stir the mind depended not on instruction, but on incitement. He wrote, “[Reading] becomes dangerous . . . when, instead of awakening us to the personal life of the mind, reading tends to take its place” (White 1999, p. 36). He was saying what Freud said fourteen years later when he warned, “The patient should be educated to liberate and fulfill his own nature, not to resemble ourselves” (Freud 1919, p. 165).

In his 1905 essay, Proust highlights another similarity between reading and analysis, addressing those difficult times when each seems insufficient in power. In this instance, he makes the comparison explicit: “There are certain cases . . . in which reading may become a sort of curative . . . reintroducing a lazy mind in perpetuity into the life of the mind. Books then play a role for it analogous to that of psychotherapists with certain neurasthenics. . . . In certain conditions . . . the patient is mired in a kind of impossibility of willing, as if in a deep rut, from which he cannot extract himself on his own. . . . He is incapable of willing those various actions, which he would be capable of performing” (p. 3). Proust saw the special value reading can provide as beyond so limited a function, just as psychoanalysis sees itself as having more to offer than the symptom relief sought by general therapies. Also, just as Freud was concerned with the factors that might render analysis interminable, so too Proust carefully thought about what might be called “reading interminable,” and found it the result of characterological passivity.

Proust even recognized the power of resistance, the defensive nature of falsely submissive rather than actively engaged reading. “What happiness, what respite for a mind weary of seeking for the truth within, to tell itself that the truth is located outside, in the sheets of an in-folio . . . ” (p. 37). In reading and in analysis, idealization and disowning of personal agency serve as a mask that substitutes for actual growth.

Alert to this danger, Proust also spoke—as analysts do today—of the question of authority. While the author (or analyst) has significant partial authority, it is the reader who keeps the inner last word. In that sense, both reading and analysis differ from conventional conversational give-and-take. Proust again is explicit: “Reading being the exact opposite of conversation in consisting for each one of us in having another’s thought communicated to us while remaining on our own,
that is while continuing to enjoy the intellectual authority we have in solitude and which conversation dispels instantly, while continuing to be open to inspiration, with our mind yet working hard and fruitfully on itself” (p. 26; emphasis added).

Thus, the author/analyst does not provide the other’s new world view, but merely works to shape the possibility of its opening. Again, Proust: “To make it [reading] into a discipline [that is, instruction] is to give too large a role to what is only an incitement. Reading is on the threshold of the spiritual life; it can show us the way into it; it does not constitute it” (p. 32). Those words could serve as a motto for psychoanalytic discipline, for the analyst’s facilitating insight rather than imposing an indoctrination.

What matters ultimately is the reader’s experience, transforming the words taken in into an emotional engagement; what matters ultimately is how the analysand digests the clinical emotional experience. Almost as if he were addressing an audience of psychoanalysts, Proust speaks of creative forward motion: “But the most elevated conversation and the most insistent advice are of no use to it [the reader’s mind] either, for they cannot produce this original activity directly. What is needed, then, is an intervention which, though coming from another, is produced deep inside ourselves, the impulsion of another mind certainly, but received in the midst of our solitude” (p. 35). We readers, even in our conversation with the author, are always “in the midst of our solitude.” It is the same in practice, where the clinical engagement matters as it is digested and assimilated within the solitary privacy of a patient’s mind. Psychoanalysis, like reading, “works only in the manner of an incitement” (p. 35).

Etymological development confirms our observations; the origin of the word “reading” itself reveals the process at hand. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, long before the word referred, as now it most commonly does, to the passive taking in of what is written outside oneself, it spoke of actively deliberating, considering, and attending to. Reading originally implied a dominating activity. “The original senses of the Teut. verb are those of taking or giving counsel, taking care or charge of a thing, having or exercising control over something, etc.” (emphasis added). One must forego the activity of domination of the other in order to take in incitements that then can free one from defensive passivity and allow an active stance regarding impulses, urges, and fantasies.
The borderline between liberating and influencing by teaching is as hazy as that between psychoanalytic inquiry and therapy. Yet both work to stir a mind to activity, not to passive reception. Incitement of a mind from fixed knowledge and fantasy to ever more open possibilities was as central a goal for Proust in reading as for Freud in analyzing.

ON READING PROUST

We turn now to Proust’s final grand work, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, knowing how broad is the ocean from which we take so small a sample. (Dr. Johnson complained about this problem, saying that such examples reminded him of the pedant who, having a house for sale, carried a brick in his pocket as a sample.) Nonetheless, we can select cogent snippets for the sake of illustration.

At issue in *A la recherche du temps perdu* is the partial loss of self in an engagement with an other and the possibilities for change and growth that come from working through that loss. Shengold trenchantly observed, “Every step away from the primal everything toward the establishment of an identity must be paid for since it involves a loss” (1991, p. 9). The tale of Marcel is such a tale of desire, of profound longing for union, and ultimately of the disillusionment that liberates. An engaged reader can share the experience.

Proust uses authorial techniques that facilitate the pulling of the reader into the story. He blurs the lines between the protagonist Marcel, the narrator, and the author. The effect is akin to that of the analytic situation where the ties of conventional society are loosened to facilitate regression. Proust pulls the reader into a haze of boundaries with shifting identifications. Then, after prolonged observation, exploration, and investigation, he ends the journey in a manner like that of the termination phase of a successful analysis; waking succeeds dreaming, ghosts are recognized, new self-images are sharpened, and the traveler has new strength to turn passivity into personal activity.

Behind the universe of observations about society and about human dynamics, this is a story of longing and loss. The ultimate desire driving the tale appears always to be that of establishing union, primarily and initially for Marcel with his mother, and in derivative contexts with his grandmother, with aristocratic society, with his lovers, with Albertine. Desire is for union; horror is of separation and isolation; consolation is taken in imagining oneself as related.
In this novel, as in his earlier essay, the struggles in the literary work reflect those in the author, with the written novel itself attesting to Proust’s success. Reviewing biographies of Proust, Aciman (2002) saw conflict over intimacy as central to both Proust’s life and his writing. Dealing in the novel with the death of his grandmother, Marcel lies sobbing in bed next to the wall on which boy and old woman had tapped their connections, and thinks “She was my grandmother and I am her grandson.” Observing that Proust was only able to start writing *A la recherche* three years after his mother died, when no one was left to “knock back,” Aciman saw the writing itself as an inner effort of reunion. “He knew that each time he wrote the word *je* he was indeed already convening the immortals” (2002, p. 62). The driving force of unconscious fantasy remains, but the power of disillusion and of accepting loss frees one for active creativity.

Now, back to *A la recherche* itself. To read Proust’s great work is to take a journey through a magical hall of mirrors, a maze of reflections of life and on life, where one often feels lost in long hallways and then turns a corner into a moment of incisive clarity; where one often feels confused by endlessly shifting associations only to be charmed by a magically apt and frequently witty insight; where, through several wandering volumes, one wonders if there will ever be an end, arriving at last at an ending where there is a person changed, a character integrated, a life put into action. It is impossible to read Proust without at times feeling at sea, without sometimes feeling sad, but without also many times laughing aloud. In contrast to the reading of a case report, how very like it is to the actual experience of an analysis, the mostly confusing but generally moving travel through an individual psychoanalytic experience.

A labyrinth of mirrors is especially apt as a metaphor because the volumes are reflections and reflections on reflections. And as the reflections on reflections in a clinical analysis pull the emotions of the analyst into the experience of the stories the patient tells, so do these multiple reflections pull the reader into Marcel’s experience. Analyst and reader are ever oscillating, ever in and out, ever experiencing and becoming detached. Indeed, Proust both represents and demands that oscillation by creating two speakers, the narrator and Marcel, switching subtly back and forth between the two so that the reader loses some of the sense of himself and inevitably becomes both a part of and apart from the emotional experiences. Inner and outer, self
and other, illusion and reality—all become mixed in the transitional lands of reading Proust and of an analytic hour.

In the book’s famous opening line, Marcel tells us, “For a long time I used to go to bed early.” The voice, to start, is the “I” of Marcel, the protagonist. Subtly, however, the voice shifts back and forth between Marcel and the narrator and also between Marcel, narrator, and reader. In the passage cited earlier on idyllic reading, Marcel reminisces about the pleasures of reading in childhood. He speaks of “the emotions aroused in me” and “the action in which I was taking part” (vol. I, p. 91). Then, turning to the reader, he slides over to “we.” (How very like Sterba’s [1934] use of the “we” to effect an ego split and an analytic alliance.) Indeed, we cannot even be certain whether it is Marcel’s or the narrator’s voice we hear. What is clear is that the reader is now taking part. The words in the book are: “It is in ourselves that they [the actions and emotions] are happening” and “the novelist has brought us to this state” (p. 92). Who are “ourselves,” and who is speaking to whom? We have no choice but to be part of what unfolds.

Barthes (cited in White 1999) speculated that Proust’s capacity to tell the story in the first person so that “I” slides from author to narrator to hero was one of the conditions that permitted him to move from writing fragments to writing his great novel. The novel, like the psychoanalytic situation, calls forth ghosts by dimming the lights that shine on boundaries. The confusingly shifting voices unite into one only in the integration that follows prolonged working out and working through, only in the “termination phase” of the final volume of the series, Le temps retrouvé (Time Refound).

Like a detective story, like an algebra problem, like a clinical analysis, much comes clear—and comes to be seen differently—only in the end. And what comes clear is now not only freshly understood but changed, as Proust finally appreciates how present experience recreates the mind’s sense of past relationships, “casting them in an original creation” (vol. III, p. 73). Time Refound, the final of the several volumes, provides a clarity that informs as Marcel moves from seemingly endless reflection to a capacity to act, indeed to the very writing of the novel as manifest proof of such activity.

Many have read the charming Swann in Love that opens the introductory volume Swann’s Way, yet few are likely to follow all the way to Time Refound. For those who do not have this necessary literary patience (matching the Sitzfleisch needed to stay with an analysis to
its termination) but who are genuinely interested to learn what Proust has to conclude, reading the last half of the last volume is invaluable. For there Marcel and narrator are no longer split; indeed Marcel and narrator and Proust are no longer split. United, Marcel Proust can move from reflecting to acting, turning inner reflections into the outer activity of writing. Marcel the character and Proust the man can act.

It is in *Time Refound* that the nature of memory is described, its elusive evanescence drawn out, and its relationship to unfolding experience and sensation critically defined. This is the area of most concern to us as we try to discover what as psychoanalysts we can learn from Proust.

As Proust demonstrates the quality of free association with his writing style, however, it seems appropriate to ramble just a bit more before ending, at last, with the matter of termination. In one more diversion concerned with both reading and analysis, I would like to add a few words about translation.

Memory and the sensation of experience, relationships, longing and disillusionment—these are identified as both the underlying subjects and the manifest content of the story. But with both Proust’s work and clinical analysis, reflecting and translating are the processes by which we approach our subjects, take part in our subjects, and step back to add the insights that contribute to change in our subjects and change in ourselves. An author first translates a fantasy when he writes, and the reader translates it yet again when he carries what he reads into his own inner world. A patient translates emotional experience into words when he speaks; the analyst translates those words when he listens; he translates them further when he interprets; and the patient translates them yet again when trying to digest them. Translation is a problem always at work in a reading and always at work in an analysis, even when author/analyst and reader/analysand seem to share the same language. Study of translation may clarify processes present in all communications, even within what seems to be a single language. By way of example, let us briefly consider translation of just the title of the work at hand.

*A la recherche du temps perdu.* In its first major English translation, those words were rendered through a line from Shakespeare, *Remembrance of Things Past.* Lately the title has been transformed into a schoolboy’s more literal *In Search of Lost Time.* Each is a translation; yet each, being a translation, loses something.
In its poetic context, *Remembrance of Things Past* does approach the mood Proust likely intended, that of an emotional experience of loss and longing. Its great limitations are with the words “remembrance” and “things.” As a noun, “remembrance” seems to speak more of content and subject than of effort and activity. The problem when those words stand on their own decreases when the context of the Shakespearean sonnet from which the phrase comes is allowed to resonate: “When to the sessions of sweet silent thought / I summon up remembrance of things past.” Summoning those remembrances may well be the essence of Proust’s title.

As we know from Proust as well as from clinical experience, successful summoning comes not from active seeking and logical interrogation, but from a way of being open to sensations that allows and welcomes rather than chases after memory.

It is in that sense that Shakespeare’s thirtieth sonnet fittingly expresses both Proust’s ideas and classical analytic ideas about memory, about mental representation as standing for the lost object, about the outcome of loss, longing, and summoning. Shakespeare’s sonnet makes that explicit, saying “I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,” and it ends with the couplet, “But if the while I think on thee, dear friend, / All losses are restored and sorrows end.” The “things” that seems off the mark in the translated title of Proust’s work refers not to objects in the colloquial sense of the word but in the psychoanalytic sense, that of emotional attachments. How at once both very Proustian and very Freudian, that objects are relevant not as things in themselves, but as carriers of meaning born in emotional relationships.

These days, Shakespeare’s sonnets are not of such ready currency as to effect their power on modern readers. So we turn to the translation du jour, the translation in fashion but likely due to suffer its own transience also: *In Search of Lost Time*. Is that quite right? Perhaps, but a few words remind us of the need for modesty in the acceptance of any single understanding when dealing with a translation.

*In Search* and *À la recherche*. The English is *in*, but the French *à* can mean not only *in*, as in *à Paris* for *in Paris*, but also *to* or *toward*. The sense of effort, of reaching out toward, the very sense of stretching to try to find—all are diminished by the English word *in*. And what of *recherche*? *To search* in French is *chercher* (familiar in the common phrase *cherchez la femme*) as well as *rechercher*. *Rechercher* is translated as *to search*, but to the anglophone ear it strongly carries
an implication of research. Research in English has a scientific laboratory flavor that misses the usual effect of adding re- to a word. The word loses the flavor Proust likely was emphasizing, that of searching and then searching again and then searching still more. And what of temps? Time seems apt, but the word temps in French carries richer connotations of weather, of matters closer to emotional climate.

Rosenzweig (Scholem 2002, p. 118), himself a historically famous translator, wrote, “Only someone who is inwardly convinced of its impossibility can be a translator. . . . There is no such thing as a simple linguistic fact.” Beyond what is written or spoken on the lines, it is in the space between the lines that full meaningful engagement can come to life. It is there that there is room for new openings and growth through engagement in reading or in psychoanalysis. Writers and analysts can succeed in helping open others’ minds only if they know and respect the limits of translation, the impossibility of precise communication.

A CLOSING ILLUSTRATION: TERMINATION

Now, let us at last turn for an illustrative specimen to a particular moment in reading A la recherche. The process of change in Marcel in the book, the parallel process of change in an immersed reader, and the process of change in a psychoanalytic patient all resonate. For our own closing we narrow our attention to the closing of the story and to similarities with the closing of a psychoanalysis.

As it would be for a successful lengthy analysis, so is it also a bit silly to try to summarize A la recherche in a paragraph or two, but a quick statement may nonetheless be of benefit. The novel famously opens with the young Marcel’s inability to fall asleep as he desperately longs for his mother’s kiss. Then, over the course of almost 3000 pages, Marcel grows and spends his life seeking unavailable love, whether in the form of acceptance by the aristocratic world after whom he hungers, or in the form of possession of his desired Albertine, his detached longed-for lover, after whom he also hungers, and with as little satisfaction. En route, Marcel and the narrator make profound observations about people and society, but gradually Marcel becomes bored, feels jaded, in the end feeling detached even from himself.

The final of the original twelve volumes is entitled Le temps retrouvé (Time Refound or Time Regained). In it, the weary older Marcel
dispiritedly attends yet one more grand party, one destined to be the last in the book. Alighting from his carriage, he feels himself trip on cobblestones; then, while waiting to join the gathering, he hears the ring of a teaspoon against a plate; and finally he feels the crispness of a napkin against his face. Each of these three sensations recalls a flood of previously lost memories, vital recollections similar to those he recalled earlier after dipping a madeleine into tea. Now, however, Marcel is different, and that difference is crucial. Thinking back to his experience with the madeleine, Marcel now recognizes that the enjoyment of the earlier memory was pleasant but wasted. As Shattuck put it, “The ultimate moment of the book is not a moment bienheureux [a happy moment] but a recognition” (Shattuck 2000, p. 135). What counts is not transient reminiscence, but the use to which one puts those memories—what analysts might call the working through of insight.

It is here that character change crystallizes, with an outcome that places all that went before in a new light. Here it is as it is in analysis. Interpretation has aptly been called “a commemorative event” (Laurence Hall, personal communication), but insight is more than a victory parade after long emotional battles. Full appreciation of the past permits new possibilities in the future. It is an opening into new prospects, new potentials, new beginnings.

When the musical performance that blocked his immediate entry into the party is completed, Marcel joins the crowd. Then, in a scene both brilliantly witty and piercingly sad, Marcel faces former friends, confused by how old they all look, troubled by his realization of how old he must now appear to them. Seeing people more for themselves and recognizing himself more truly for who he now is come not as separate forces but as an integrated unitary process.

With appreciation of his own role in creating the world as a place in which he was bound ever to seek his missing mother, chasing ghosts that always receded to beyond his fingertips, Marcel now realizes more fully for the first time his own powers, what analysts speak of as his agency. “Ideas come to us as the successors to griefs, and griefs, at the moment when they change into ideas, lose some part of their power to injure our heart” (vol. III, p. 944). Marcel now realizes that all of his search—his working toward, his working out, and his working through—was preparation that made possible his own more freely self-determined life. At last he can act, and he knows that his way to do that is to write.
To read Proust’s own behavior in his final years as reclusive is to misread it perversely. In the closing, Marcel and Proust have come together. Proust’s withdrawal from the social scene was for him not a withdrawal from life but, more truly, a turning to life. Now fervent for creative engagement and painfully aware of how little time he had, he threw himself into his newly possible work with unbound passion. Despite the conventional appearance of social withdrawal, Proust was choosing a life of action, the life of actively writing.

For brevity’s sake, I outline only a bit of the parallel between the ending of *Le temps retrouvé* and the termination phase of an analysis.\(^2\)

Dreams can become sources of replenishment as well as engulfing traps of quicksand; idealization as a way of obscuring longing can give way to appreciation of loves lost; diminishing grandiosity and omnipotence can permit mourning to be replaced by grieving; and entanglement in the dream world of transference can diminish so that insistence on passive satisfaction can make way for activity in the world of finite actuality.

As already mentioned, boundaries are hazy throughout the novel until its end, just as they are through much of a clinical engagement when reality testing is set aside and the transference is felt to be fully true in its own right. Throughout the long text as throughout an analysis, the boundaries between the minds fade and sharpen, refade and re-sharpen, repeatedly.

A self becomes clearer as boundaries become clearer, both in *A la recherche* and in an analysis. Only once in the work does Proust make the unity of Marcel and the author explicit. He does so when he is describing separateness rather than merger, speaking of one person’s “possessing” another\(^3\) (vol. III, p. 147). And only one other time in the work does Proust sharply break the frame and acknowledge himself as author of the world in the book being read. At that moment he turns directly to the reader of the book so as to name the family Larivière, the

\(^2\)For those who have not the heart or the time or the patience to read the entire work, I strongly recommend the final half of the final book, starting when Marcel says he got out of his cab just before it reached the house of the Princesse de Guermantes. Not only do they give a fair taste of Proust’s writing, these final 210 pages contain much of what Proust has to say to psychoanalysts about memory, sensation, and loss.

\(^3\)Marcel thinks of Albertine’s awakening as he watches her sleeping. Then Proust writes in the text, “Then she would find her tongue and say: ‘My—’ or ‘My darling—’ followed by my Christian name, which, if we give the narrator the same name as the author of this book, would be ‘My Marcel,’ or ‘My darling Marcel.’”
actual name of real people, not merely characters in the fiction of the book, heroes who merit recognition in the world at large because of their contribution to the survival of France (vol. III, pp. 876–877). Putting into words and, importantly, giving both people and feelings their proper names are essential to sharpening hazy views, crucial to gaining inner freedom and crystallizing and integrating an identity.

In *Le temps retrouvé*, Marcel and the narrator and even Proust himself all come to face prior idealizations and to see others more for who they actually are than for whom one believed, and would have wanted, them to be. Such resolution opens passivity into possibilities of fresh activity without relentless regression into fixation. Mourning the loss of an illusory nirvana brings with it a wider range of new possibilities in life, broadening ways of living, of feeling, of dreaming. Self and others, hopes and fears and regrets, permanence and transience—all can be faced with less determined distortion as *A la recherche*, and as an analysis, resolves. The mood at the end is one of appreciation but disengagement in order to go forth in the world.

The experience of an analytic journey or the engagement of reading a novel is similar to the passage through a dream, and the ending of each, with its return to the world of daily reality, entails both gain and loss. Waking up implies letting go, losing the ephemeral atmosphere in which one had lived only a moment before. A passionately literate young writer came to the moment when she first fully realized that her analysis would one day end. Mourning what would be gone as she moved into the termination phase of her analysis, she tearfully observed, “It is like coming to the end of a Jane Austen novel.”

Proust succeeded well in describing the joy and the sadness of that transition and in making clear the character change that ensued. As Marcel was able not only to experience moments like those with the madeleine—moments of sensation that in his descriptions ring so immediately true that they have become known throughout western civilization as “Proustian”—so was he by virtue of his emotional inner journey also able to integrate and use those moments, to become a new man, a man changed in a way that left him able to be more, not less, himself. Marcel and Proust both became newly able to act in self-determining and self-defining ways. And the reader, a reader who gives himself over to experiencing a book and who lets in the book’s incitements, comes to know anew both the experience of opening and awakening and that of the sadness of loss, the grief when a shared universe closes.
Success implies loss, but it is the very acceptance of that loss and renunciation of the demand for direct satisfaction that makes possible new life. That is so when waking from a dream allows one to face the break of day. That is so when forgoing the demands of transference longings allows an analysand to engage the possibilities of a current life. That is so when Marcel lets go of his profound desire for his mother’s kiss as if it would be actualized through acceptance in a society from which he felt excluded. It was a letting go that allowed him to become a creative adult, a man in his own right. Proust tells us all of that while Marcel awaits entry to what will be the final party in the book. The party is over. Marcel and Proust now each can write, and we move from being identifying participants to becoming witnesses apart.

A novel must come to its ending, while a life after an analysis, happily, can go on. Hanns Sachs commented that in completing an analysis one has scratched the surface of a continent. Termination does not imply closure on essential human inner conflicts. Self-analysis replaces formal analysis, so that introspection can continue even as, and indeed because, core issues have been mastered. In contrast with transient commercial bestsellers, literary classics do not necessarily end with all conflicts finally resolved, all threads neatly tied together. Yet completing the reading of a great work can leave a bittersweet satisfaction like that in ending an analysis—the sense of achievement of important insight and mastery even as more uncertainty lies ahead.

### In Closing

In writing on truth in fiction, Hanly (2003) noted that “psychoanalysis and great literature share a common object of observation. That common object is psychic reality. The greater the work of literature, the more it tallies with what is most fundamental to psychic reality.” We analysts feel proudly protective of that which only psychoanalytic exploration can provide, yet credit must be paid to the valuable insight and growth that have been available through drama and fiction from time immemorial.

Like an analyst with an analysand, an author invites his reader into an inner world, facilitating engagement so as to incite the reader’s mind. Freud and Proust were both geniuses of engagement and insight. And though both Freud and Proust have been accused of grandiosity, both indeed were modest but resolute as they recognized the daunting challenges they faced.
Proust was explicit that “the essential, the only true book, though in the ordinary sense of the word it does not have to be ‘invented’ by a great writer—for it exists already in each of us—has to be translated by him. The function and the task of a writer [and, we can add, an analyst] are those of a translator” (vol. III, p. 926). The task is incitement, the struggle to open a mind.

Proust takes us with him, and like a successful analyst artfully captures much of our human universe as he struggles to summon lost remembrances. Finally, with time refound, like an analysand, Proust discovers that such refinding alone is not enough, that the uses of such refinding also matter much. Proust began by having Marcel say that for a long time he used to go to bed early. Like a successful analyst, he ends by helping us awaken to life.

REFERENCES


