

The “Immense Edifice”:¹
Memory, Rapture, and the Intertemporal Self in *Swann’s Way*
 Andrew Mullen

Excerpt

Claudia Brodsky poses the central conundrum surrounding the disjunction in time at the heart of *Swann’s Way*: “How does any narrator come to know the details of the life of the dead with a precision exceeding his knowledge of the living he knows best?”² In both “Combray” and “Swann in Love,” the adult narrator’s own identity vanishes into the labyrinth of the narrative he recounts—the time and space occupied by his previous, youthful self. Indeed, the only time the “I” of the narrator surfaces in “Swann in Love” occurs when he compares Swann’s torment over Odette to his own over Swann’s dinnertime visits in Combray.³ Put simply, the narrator’s retrospective introspections are not “real”; they are reflections, or perhaps projections, of his *past* self. They, like the streets of Combray, “exist in a part of [his] memory so withdrawn, painted in colors so different from those that now coat the world for [him], that in truth all of them ... appear to [him] even more unreal than the projections of the magic lantern.”⁴ In this way, the narrator’s consciously recounted memories seem synthetic: they possess a level of certainty, organization, and self-effacement uncharacteristic of actual experience.⁵ In the same vein, his idealistic grandmother stops giving him still photography because of the “mechanical” banality they impose by “reproduction” on otherwise dynamic beauty.⁶ Instead she lavishes him with photographs of paintings, chaotic renderings of water and fire erupting from the earth, which seem to lack the inflicted stasis of still photography:

¹ Marcel Proust, *Swann’s Way*, Trans. Lydia Davis, Ed. Christopher Prendergast, New York: Viking Penguin, 2003, p. 47.

² Claudia Brodsky, “Remembering Swann: Memory and Representation in Proust,” *MLN* 102.5 (1987): 1025.

³ Proust, *Swann’s Way*, 308.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁵ In this light, it is perhaps no accident that in the final sequence of “Combray” the narrator’s room, which he has in darkness reconstructed *in toto*, is banished; all of its bestowed order is supremely disrupted, everything he the artificer has built in his mind “put to flight by the pale sign traced above the curtains by the raised finger of the dawn” (*Swann’s Way*, 191)—the lux aeterna of the *present day*.

⁶ Proust, *Swann’s Way*, 40.

Turner's *Vesuvius Erupting* and Robert's *View of a Park with a Water Fountain*.⁷ This transition telegraphs the narrator's central flaw: whereas the identity of the photographer is lost in his final product, the artist—by the nature of his brushstrokes, or his imagination—infuses his own identity into his art. In effect, the narrator has lost his own conception of himself within the universe of his childhood self; moreover, he is unable to distinguish between the two. He lacks the “I” of the great artist—the “I” of the free, unanchored mind, which might more easily turn the mirror on itself.[8]⁸

As intimated by the narrator, Swann's peculiar brand of suffering mirrors his own. Just as the narrator cannot take ownership of his own experience, his own self, Swann cannot take ownership of what he thinks and says in “Combray”:

It appeared that he dared not have an opinion and was at his ease only when he could with meticulous accuracy offer some precise piece of information... For what other lifetime was he reserving the moment when he would at last say seriously what he thought of things, formulate opinions that he did not have to put between quotation marks, and no longer indulge with punctilious politeness in occupations he declared at the same time to be ridiculous?⁹

As Brodsky points out, however, Swann seemingly matures when time regresses backwards with “Swann in Love”: from the moment when he stands up to Mme. Verdurin, in defense of his opinion of the duchess of La Trémoilles,¹⁰ until the very end of his love, Swann speaks “*en dehors de guillemets*”.¹¹ The gaping paradox, here, is that, even as Swann comes into touch with his real identity, his whole story (“Swann in Love”) opens with the narrator's caveat emptor:¹²

... I had learned, about a love affair Swann had had before I was born, with that precision of detail which is sometimes easier to obtain for the lives of people who died centuries ago than for the lives of our best friends, and which seems as impossible as it once seemed impossible to speak from one town to another—as long as we do not know about the expedient by which that impossibility was

⁷ See Eric Karpeles, *Paintings in Proust: A Visual Companion to 'In Search of Lost Time*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2008, 32-33.

⁸ The narrator's seeming inability to turn inwards evokes a line from *Ulysses*, in which Buck Mulligan calls upon Stephen Dedalus to gaze into a cracked mirror: “Look at yourself ... you dreadful bard!” See James Joyce, *Ulysses*, Ed. Hans Walter Gabler, Wolfhard Steppe, Claus Melchior, and Michael Groden, New York: Vintage, 1993, p. 6.

⁹ Proust, *Swann's Way*, 100-101. The ellipsis represents a part of the text that has been removed in the interest of conciseness.

¹⁰ See *Ibid.*, 268-269.

¹¹ Brodsky, “Remembering Swann,” 1024.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1024-1025.

circumvented. All these memories added to one another now formed a single mass, but one could still distinguish between them—between the oldest, and those that were more recent, born of a fragrance, and then those that were only memories belong to another person from whom I had learned them—if not fissures, if not true faults, at least that veining, that variegation of coloring, which in certain rocks, in certain marbles, reveal differences in origin, in age, in ‘formation.’¹³

As Brodsky puts it, “the narrator informs us, before ‘Un amour de Swann’ begins, that the problem posed him in his youth by single words spoken in quotation is about to be solved by their replacement with an entire narrative told in quotation, having already been told or reported to him.”¹⁴ In this way, Proust doubles down on the narrator’s flaw: just as he foists a false consciousness, absent of all interstice, onto his memories in “Combray,” so too will his account in “Swann in Love” force onto Swann’s tale a superstructure of the narrator’s mind’s own desire—a superstructure in which is embedded, almost tragically, the solution to his own conflict of self: Swann’s assumption of self-ownership.

Works Cited

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¹³ Proust, *Swann's Way*, 190.

¹⁴ Brodsky, “Remembering Swann,” 1025.

Author Commentary

Andrew Mullen

Marcel Proust’s earth-rattling seven-volume epic, *In Search of Lost Time*, traverses the “immense edifice” of an unnamed narrator’s memory—from his childhood in Combray to the tormented love affair of family friend Charles Swann, to the war-torn streets of Paris in 1916. The first volume, *Swann’s Way*, is a breathtaking work of art. Proust’s prose undulates like waves on a sea, drawn out and dreamlike, slowly rising to a crescendo before drifting to a gentle punctuation.

In this paper I discuss one of the central themes of *Swann’s Way* and of the novel in its entirety: involuntary memory, the only avenue through which the narrator can reliably repossess the past. Specifically, I argue that the “narrator convinces himself of the illusion that he has retained the ‘self’ of his happy childhood, whereas in truth his current self is distinct (and conspicuously absent from most of the narrative); for Proust, only in stimulation of unconscious memory can the narrator transcend the artificeries of the mind, reclaim his *present self*, and come alive again.”

The excerpt here focuses on the strange relationship between the narrator and the enigma Swann, who despite his wealth, social aplomb, and intellect struggles with self-ownership. Just as Swann is incapable of expressing an opinion without first placing it in quotation marks, the narrator must dress his entire tale in quotation marks. There is a double nesting here: Swann’s crisis of identity reflects the narrator’s own, but the narrator assures us that it is *he*, the narrator, who is telling Swann’s story. The essay builds on that layering of abstraction; it first analyzes the narrator’s own inner conflict, then draws a connection between the narrator and Swann (by way of their reliance upon quotation marks), and then homes in on Swann’s own voyage into memory.

The analysis here centers on Swann’s fractured self, on how the Swann of the present looks upon his love-addled former self as a totally different entity; this argument provides the foundation for the thesis of the essay, which links Swann to the narrator. The paper then discusses Swann and the narrator’s experiences with unconscious memory in tandem—their mutual quest to reclaim what has been irreparably lost.

The general structure of the analysis is simple: an “inside” view of the narrator, a hitching of the narrator to Swann, an “inside” view of Swann, and then an “outside” view of both in concert. In this way, each section of the paper builds on the preceding section, and so (hopefully) there is a natural flow to the argument. If only it flowed like Proust!

Editor Commentary

Harrison Blackman

When you put something underneath a magnifying glass, the details are revealed. This amazing opportunity is tempered by the fact that you have to exercise caution: you don't want to evoke the trope of burning ants with a magnifying glass. You have to hold the lens carefully to avoid the destruction of the object under study.

In a similar vein, the lens essay possesses a relatively simple structure - a theoretical text is used to analyze a source. The careful use of the lens can bring out the details and make them shine. A reckless use of the lens can obscure the truth entirely.

The lens essay is one of the fundamental essays taught in the Princeton Writing Program's Writing Seminars. Though Andrew's essay is for an upper-level comparative literature course, it demonstrates the full potential of what a lens essay can be.

Andrew's essay owes its success in large part to his masterful analysis. The excerpt published here is noteworthy for how it breaks down Proust's novel through a lens text and auxiliary sources.

Structurally, the text under consideration is *Swann's Way*, and the main lens Andrew uses to analyze the book's exploration of time and memory is Claudia Brodsky's article and its explanation of the book's use of disjointed time. Eric Karpeles's *Paintings in Proust* and, for comparison's sake, James Joyce's *Ulysses* serve as auxiliary analytical pieces to move his argument forward.

Andrew's paper uses Brodsky's analysis as scaffolding to mount his own argument regarding the book. In the first part of the excerpt, Brodsky's analysis presents a lens for viewing the text—the idea that “the narrator's retrospective introspections are not ‘real’; they are reflections, or perhaps projections, of his *past* self.” This concept informs the paper's reading of the Proustian narrator losing himself within his conception of his childhood self—a point bolstered by the references to the real-life art that Proust's narrator is recalling.

Next, Andrew quotes *Swann's Way* with a passage describing the narrator's thoughts in Combray. Interweaving Brodsky and Proust, Andrew is able to make the claim that Swann's narrative quotation in “Swann in Love” superimposes Swann's desires over his memories, causing the narrator to unwittingly lose self-ownership.

While Andrew's analysis is ostensibly simple, the archetype of a lens essay (Brodsky is used to analyze Proust), it shows us the full potential of what a lens essay can be. In carefully weaving together his lens strands with his textual base, Andrew's analysis is made adeptly clear, spiraling and complicating into his full argument. Most impressively, his commentary draws out the “double nesting” aspect of the novel in a way that is intuitive and logical (though you should see his commentary for a fuller explanation).

Andrew's commentary notes that he hoped his paper had a “natural flow” to it. In the Writing Center, we consider “flow” to be symptomatic of structure, motive, and transitions. That said, it is abundantly apparent that his paper flows quite well, meaning that is structurally impressive and smooth.

To look at it another way, Andrew's essay holds the magnifying glass at just the right distance. From there we can see Proust's sumptuous language in all its details.