



BROWSE



Proust and the Phenomenology of Memory

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Proust and the Phenomenology of Memory

Thomas M. Lennon

"I still believe that anything that I do outside of literature and philosophy will be so much time wasted." Thus did the twenty-two year old Marcel Proust (1871–1922) write to his father, reluctantly agreeing to consider a

career in the foreign service as an alternative to the legal profession otherwise being urged upon him. ("I should vastly prefer going to work for a stockbroker," was his comment.)¹ Happily for us all, Proust was obliged to do neither, and in fact was able to do both philosophy and literature. As André Maurois puts it, "[Proust's] great novel is philosophy incarnate."² Certainly, *In Search of Lost Time* is saturated with philosophy, the appreciation of which cannot help but enhance our understanding of this great work. The thesis here will be that a loosely phenomenological account of the work's central concept of memory gives us the structure of the work as a whole.

The biographical facts suggest such an approach. Proust received a *license* from the Sorbonne in 1895, and, more importantly, had previously been a student of the philosopher Alphonse Darlu at the Lycée Condorcet. Although he published very little, Darlu was a charismatic, inspirational figure for his students—not least of all for Proust himself, who described him as "the great philosopher whose inspired words, more certain to last than any writing would, gave birth in me as in so many others to thought itself."³ A touching artifact of Proust's time with Darlu is his report card, preserved in the Proust Museum at Illiers-Combray. Not incidentally, it shows a concentration on the classical authors who will be deployed here. We also have a wonderful little text that argues a kind of phenomenalism influenced perhaps by Hume, and certainly by Kant.⁴ The one author important to our account whose name does not figure as such in any of this material is Malebranche; but we know **[End Page 52]** that Proust was familiar with the great Oratorian since he quotes him.⁵ In fact, the only author appearing below who could not have been on Proust's shelf is Kundera, the most philosophical and Proustian of all recent novelists.

We begin with a text; it is the most famous of all in French literature, the episode of the madeleine from the *Search*. The text has become so well known—through hearsay more than from having been read, no doubt—that it has invited "kitchification."⁶ Even so, it is an exquisite piece of writing, which, in any case, is essential to the thesis here.

Many years had elapsed during which nothing of Combray . . . had any existence for me, when one day in winter as I came home, my mother, seeing that I was cold, offered me some tea, a thing that I did not ordinarily take. . . . She sent out for one of those plump little cakes called 'petites madeleines' I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate than a shudder ran through my whole body. . . . And suddenly the memory [*le souvenir*] returns. The taste was that of the little crumb of 'madeleine' which on Sunday mornings at Combray . . . my Aunt Léonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of real or lime-flower tea. . . . Immediately the old grey house upon the street rose up like the scenery of a theatre . . . in a moment all the flowers in our garden and in M. Swann's park, and the water-lilies on the Vivonne and the good folk of the village and their little dwellings and the parish church and the whole of Combray and of its surroundings, taking their proper shapes and growing solid, sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea.⁷

There are other such episodes of the past springing into being, but not many, and they occur but infrequently, until the very end of this vast work, when they come upon the narrator rapidly and almost...

THOMAS M. LENNON

PROUST AND THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF MEMORY

“I STILL BELIEVE THAT anything that I do outside of literature and philosophy will be so much time wasted.” Thus did the twenty-two year old Marcel Proust (1871–1922) write to his father, reluctantly agreeing to consider a career in the foreign service as an alternative to the legal profession otherwise being urged upon him. (“I should vastly prefer going to work for a stockbroker,” was his comment.)¹ Happily for us all, Proust was obliged to do neither, and in fact was able to do both philosophy and literature. As André Maurois puts it, “[Proust’s] great novel is philosophy incarnate.”² Certainly, *In Search of Lost Time* is saturated with philosophy, the appreciation of which cannot help but enhance our understanding of this great work. The thesis here will be that a loosely phenomenological account of the work’s central concept of memory gives us the structure of the work as a whole.

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