

P R O U S T I N T H E
D R E A M T I M E



M A T T H E W S P E L L B E R G

With Proust, the beginning of the beginning contains it all in all its infinite strangeness. “Longtemps je me suis couché de bonne heure,” reads the modest first line of *In Search of Lost Time*: “For a long time I went to bed early.” French critics have long been fascinated with this sentence, and especially with its tense, for the adverb *longtemps* and the perfective “je me suis couché” are somewhat mismatched (one would expect, under normal circumstances, the imperfect, “je me couchais”). But the subtleties of grammar have tended to obscure a much stranger and grander fact, a fact that is key to all that follows: that this three-thousand-page novel begins with its narrator and protagonist falling asleep.

Even though many novels contain scenes of dreaming and sleep, this is an unprecedented move. In the end the novel is an emphatically waking art form, mostly because it is an emphatically social art form, and people must usually be awake in order to be in communication with one another. Beginnings of novels are usually crowded and alert. In *Madame Bovary*, for example, Flaubert lifts the curtain on a schoolroom where the young Charles Bovary is about to endure the first, though not the worst, of his many humiliations. In *Ulysses*, Joyce makes the very classi-

cal decision to begin at daybreak, with Buck Mulligan waving his bowl of shaving lather at Stephen Dedalus and pretending to be a Catholic priest (in chapter 4 there is a second beginning, again at daybreak, with Bloom fixing breakfast for his indolent and unfaithful wife). On the first page of *Buddenbrooks*, Thomas Mann gives us little Toni stumbling over her catechism with three generations of the family surrounding her, no one yet knowing that she will be the only one of them still alive on the last page. Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, meanwhile, begins by somewhat presumptuously eavesdropping on a conversation already in progress, so that we overhear Mrs Ramsey make her promise to James that he can go, on the following day, to the lighthouse. And while it's true that on the first page of *Anna Karenina* someone *is* asleep, it's already morning, and he's asleep only so that he can wake up and thus make explicit his entry (or rather reentry) into the circumstances of the novel: Stiva, dwelling on a pleasant dream, suddenly remembers that he's been sleeping in the study because his household is in shambles over his affair with the governess, and he feels quite miserable.

Stiva's awakening on the first page of *Anna Karenina* is emblematic of the experience of reading a nineteenth-century novel. On the first page we open our eyes as if out of a long sleep and find everyone else has been up and about for many hours. We are suddenly and completely engulfed in plans for marriage or divorce, the uproar of servants and masters, ambitions for social advancement and financial gain, furnishings and journeys and debts.

How strange, then, for Proust's novel to start in the bedroom – and not as the sunlight filters through the windows or as a lover is just leaving, but rather in the very moment when consciousness is about to be obliterated, and, even more important, when the narrator is about to be cut off by his closing eyelids from all companionship, to enter that state of being when the obligations of family and friends and society ladies in their salons are all temporarily suspended. (The editor Marc Humblot rejected the manuscript saying, “I cannot understand how monsieur could spend thirty pages describing how he tosses and turns in his bed before falling asleep.”) If such a move has antecedents, they come not from the novel but from the medieval dream-vision. Books that begin with

the protagonist falling asleep include the *Romance of the Rose*, the *House of Fame*, *Piers Plowman*, and their direct descendent, *The Pilgrim's Progress* – allegorical works which leave the world of bodies behind in order to lend body and shape to ideas and emotions.

Proust's novel may not be explicitly allegorical, but it does make a clear move in its opening pages away from the outside world to the phenomenal one, from one of physical forms to mutable, metamorphic ones:

For a long time, I went to bed early. Sometimes, when I had to put out my candle, my eyes would close so quickly that I had not even time to say to myself: "I'm falling asleep." And half an hour later the thought that it was time to go to sleep would awaken me; I would make as if to put away the book which I imagined was still in my hands, and to blow out the light; I had gone on thinking, while I was asleep, about what I had just been reading, but these thoughts had taken a rather peculiar turn; it seemed to me that I myself was the immediate subject of my book: a church, a quartet, the rivalry between François I and Charles V. This impression would persist for some moments after I awoke; it did not offend my reason, but lay like scales upon my eyes and prevented them from registering the fact that the candle was no longer burning. [trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin]

Falling asleep radically severs the narrator's connection to the waking world, and transposes him onto a plane governed by a set of foreign ontological rules, the ontological rules of dreaming. No longer does one merely perceive objects, or think them; one *becomes* the church, the string quartet, the rivalry. The three objects are presented in a crescendo of the difficult-to-imagine-yourself-in, each more conceptually confounding than the last. We can picture with relative ease what it might be like to be a church: the body its walls, the mouth its door, the eyes rose windows with stained-glass irises. We might also be able to imagine what it's like to be a string quartet, though it depends on how we understand that word – as a group of players, as a set of instruments, as a printed score, or as a series of musical notes, for example those

from Beethoven's beautiful opus 132. So what has the narrator *become*? Four people bobbing and bowing in evening dress? An elegant spatter of semiquavers recumbent on ledger lines? Or is he a richly textured four-part sonic rising and falling, his existence re-corporealized as a sequence of sound waves? But the string quartet is not the end of our problems, for what do we make of *being* a rivalry (not two people in a rivalry, but the rivalry itself), a state of existence that is nearly impossible to conceptualize? How much does a rivalry weigh? What does it look like? Can it think? Perhaps it rises into the air like a hot-air balloon about to explode from the tension of its own self-importance.

By the end of this sequence the narrator has become a physical embodiment of an abstraction, and he's done so with exceptional ease. In the Proustian imaginarium, turning into a rivalry doesn't require pain or anxiety: to become an abstraction might be a catastrophe in Kafka or a polemic in Marx, but here it's simply one more back-flip amid the acrobatics of nocturnal thought. It is emblematic of the ontological ease of the dream, in which anything can become anything (how far we are from the social humiliation of dreams in Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, or the Nighttown travesties of *Ulysses*!). Sweetly, generously, the narrator says that none of this "offends" his reason. When he wakes for a moment, he says, these experiences hang "like scales" on his eyes: in the dream-state, perception and imagination are tied together, inseparable and inescapable.

The audacity of the scene is augmented by the central presence of the act of reading. On the first page of one of the longest and most demanding reading experiences in the Western canon, the author seems to suggest that we should have done with reading and move straight through to hallucination. For this opening passage is nothing short of a lesson in the reading (perhaps envisioning) of *In Search of Lost Time*. To enter into this book, Proust announces, you must be able not so much to read it as to dream it; you must be able to become it, to study it in your sleep, move over its pages with the single-mindedness of a somnambulist, wear it like a mask or cloak, have it soak through and re-form you.

The opening of Proust's vast novel might be considered a sequence of overtures nested within one another. "Combray," his title for the first two hundred pages, contains a comprehensive

distillation of all the novel's main themes – the appreciation of beauty, the desire to make art, the conniptions of jealousy, the resignation to illness, the fascination with homosexuality, the continuous reappraisal of the character of others, the epic pursuit of time lost and found. But the untitled introductory section of “Combray” – a short preliminary chapter of fifty pages containing many of the most famous scenes in the novel, including the dream opening, the encounter with the magic lantern, the fateful good-night kiss, and, at the end, the discovery of involuntary memory in the *petite madeleine* – is a smaller overture, a more condensed presentation of the same themes which will be elaborated over the following two hundred pages (the rest of “Combray”), and then again over the following four hundred (*Swann's Way*), and again over the following three thousand (*In Search of Lost Time*). But at the beginning of this smaller overture there is yet a smaller prelude, so condensed and pure as to be almost the untrammelled essence of the work, dissolved into (as Captain Ahab would say) “one small, compendious vertebra.” And this opening section, which spans about nine pages, consists solely of a dream and sleep sequence, in which the many declensions of consciousness in the narrator's nighttime world are given free play to alternate with the occasional disorientations born from waking in the darkness.

Many students of this novel, eager to reach the more familiar ground of the goodnight kiss or the *petite madeleine*, pass over this sequence in silence. But that's a grave error, because this little meditation on the sleeping mind has a complex logic and presents a complete ontological mode – one which, we will see, is crucial for understanding the entirety of this unparalleled novel and its author's twinned visions of consciousness and art.

The Qualities of the Proustian Dream

There are at least four phenomenological qualities native to Proust's dream-world, which constitute, in aggregate, a kind of dream-physics, a definition of the properties of the dream-cosmos. In this phenomenological approach Proust shows his radical departure from that other fin-de-siècle dream connoisseur, Freud. For Freud the *language* of dream is paramount: What does it say,

and how does it speak? For Proust, on the contrary, the *reality* of dream is paramount. What does it look like? How does it feel? What is the nature of dream-experience? Meaning is to be found in the domain not of dream symbolism but in the realm of dream-feeling and dream-touch, dream-motion and dream-looking. Proust is concerned not with what to know but how to be, not what we learn, but how, in the oneiric mode, we *are*.

The first and most important feature of Proustian dream-experience is what might be described as thinking-as-world, or thinking in three dimensions. To think a thought in the dream-state is not to express it in language; it is not even to render it as a picture or a symbol; it is to *become* the thing, to realize it as a full, three-dimensional object, existing on its own spatiotemporal plane. We must presume that the church which the narrator becomes rests upon a ground and under a sky, that the rivalry is ready to float through space (perhaps rivalries, especially those between kings, loom overhead like zeppelins; perhaps, on the other hand, they skulk in the darkness).

The transition from the thinking-as-language-of-waking to the thinking-as-world-of-dreaming is made literal here. What begins in the waking world as signs on a page (a book about a rivalry) transforms, at the threshold of sleep, into an animate being, or rather a three-dimensional manifestation of the animate being of the narrator. This is what the neuroscientists Nir and Tononi describe as the dream's ability to "show that the human brain, disconnected from the environment, can generate an entire world of conscious experiences by itself." In an essay called "Dream and Existence" (Traum und Existenz), Ludwig Binswanger, the founder of the phenomenological school of psychiatry, wrote that waking and dreaming are two modes of life. Waking is *Leben als Geschichte*, life as history or story; while dreaming is *Leben als Funktion*, life as function, or process. What he seems to be suggesting is that in waking life our experience is structured narratively: as we move through the world we register each event as part of a larger arc of experience, or several arcs, each with its own beginning and end (birth and death, sunrise and sunset, convocation and commencement, being hired and being fired). When we dream, in contrast, we live life in a non-narrative structure, one in

which action and existence coincide, so that we find ourselves pursued or loved or aroused without having to enclose these sensations within a larger framework. Instead, each individual experience immediately provides its own framework, its own structure of justification; the dream rearranges itself around each new stimulus (for example: *I am running from a murderer but then I escape him and meet my brother who wishes to race me across a pool filled with jellyfish and, the murderer forgotten, all my energy is seamlessly redirected toward reaching the end and avoiding the sting of the ethereal medusas*). This difference is only underlined by the fact that when we try to carry a dream over from sleep into waking life we have no choice but to narrativize it, to tell it as a story; otherwise it would be incomprehensible. It is a testament to how poorly dreams fit the narrative structure of waking life that listening to them proves, for most people, to be so dull (this resistance to dream narratives may also, incidentally, be one of the reasons why Proust's dreaming has gone relatively unnoticed by even his devoted readers).

A second dream quality, closely related to this one, follows on its heels. This is the fact that in dreaming, the perceived world and the perceiving subject are shackled together. By this I mean that they seem to move as one – to see something is also to be something – and this, though perhaps it may sound strange, is in fact so self-evident as to be almost banal: everything that we see in a dream is a part of the dreamer; the objects as well as the subject in a dream are made up of a single person's mental tissue.

How much closer to the perceiver a dream is than reality is something Proust announces only a few paragraphs into his novel, in the first introduction of the love theme in this dream overture:

Sometimes, as Eve was created from a rib of Adam, a woman would be born during my sleep from some strain in the position of my thighs. Conceived from the pleasure I was on the point of consummating, she it was, I imagined, who offered me the pleasure. My body, conscious that its own warmth was permeating hers, would strive to become one with her, and I would awake. The rest of humanity seemed very remote in comparison with this woman whose company I had left but a moment ago; my cheek was still warm from her kiss, my body ached beneath the weight of hers.

In the dream-state, subject and object are inseparable: in fact, they generate each other in a continuous cycle. Bert O. States, in his book *Dreaming and Storytelling*, calls this phenomenon the “single-mindedness” of dreams, or, as he says quoting Allan Rechtschaffen, the “nonimaginative” quality of dreaming. By this he means that the dream-world is extremely limited in counterfactuals. Very often what we think in a dream becomes our reality (though, it’s worth saying, not always). Our thoughts rarely stray far from the matter at hand. If the dreamer is taking a test, then she doesn’t find herself suddenly wondering what kind of ice cream she’d like to eat when it’s over – unless, of course, she then finds herself transported to the ice cream parlor or, more likely, obsessing over the inability to get ice cream (or something far less innocent). Another way of saying this: of all the states we can inhabit in a dream – fear, arousal, shock, frustration, anger, pleasure, nostalgia – it’s impossible to be bored. You might also say that it’s impossible to be distracted, except that if we are distracted, then the world realigns itself to look like the very thing that was distracting us from our surroundings.

The vocabulary of boredom – one of the great enemies in Proust’s novel – beckons to the language of its opposite: attention. Another formulation for this second attribute of the Proustian dream – it may also be an attribute of dreaming in general – is *complete and radical attention*. There is no looking away in a dream, for everywhere you look, the dream is still there. Furthermore, dream-attention looks, in a certain sense, exactly like waking *distraction*. For when we are awake, our minds might pass through a long flowing train of thoughts independent of the goings-on in the physical world around us. We might for all intents and purposes forget where we are in order to pursue thoughts about the need to do the laundry and call Mother and read those medieval poems to the Virgin Mother and the time we lost our own virginity and wondering where that first lover is now and thinking, *I hope he (or she) is happy* but secretly thinking, in a chasm below the reach of language, *I hope he (or she) is miserable*. The sum of these inklings, which are the common matter of the state of being we aptly call *daydreaming*, is defined in contrast to whatever continuous and fixed experience is going on outside the body, in the physical world. If you were to say “Pay attention!” to a person riding this

train of thoughts, you would not mean pay more attention to your musings on medieval poetry and sexual initiation but, rather, focus on whatever it is in front of you: a concert, a lecture, a business meeting, saying “I do” when the priest tells you to.

In a dream, on the other hand, to *pay attention* is to wander in just this way over the landscape of cognition, to follow the progress of thoughts as they gradually lead the dreamer over an (often literal) path. When we wake this progress seems to have been disjointed, but that’s precisely because during sleep it’s perfectly coherent, heedless of the restrictions imposed by plausibility or logic. The leaps of thought – maybe incoherent but still seamless, unbroken, in the oneiric state – become the structuring mechanism for the perceptual reality of the dream, taking us from place to place, person to person, adventure to adventure.

The fluid and metamorphic nature of dream-attention is beautifully described in a passage from *Sodom and Gomorrah*, added to the novel in 1921–22, when Proust, ill and addicted to sleeping medication, was approaching death. He died in November 1922: sleep and dreams were among the first things to materialize into Proust’s book; they were also among the last.

I entered the realm of sleep, which is like a second dwelling into which we move for that one person. It has noises of its own and we are sometimes violently awakened by the sound of bells, perfectly heard by our ears, although nobody has rung. It has its servants, its special visitors who call to take us out, so that we are ready to get up when we are compelled to realize, by our almost immediate transmigration into the other dwelling, our waking one, that the room is empty, that nobody has called. The race that inhabits it, like that of our first human ancestors, is androgynous. A man in it appears a moment later in the form of a woman. Things in it show a tendency to turn into men, men into friends and enemies.

Dream-attention is complete and yet also discursive. We engage deeply with the dream-state, but in doing so we don’t narrow it down or render it more precise. Instead, the thing we are dreaming evolves, mutates, expands, embraces its opposite and all variations thereupon. A kind of psychological Heisenberg principle is invoked; to lavish your attention on a dream-object is to engender

its alteration, elaboration, in some cases total transformation. This is true even of external stimuli: if we hear a sound or smell a perfume while asleep, it acquires a profound and sophisticated existence within the mind, made the origin point for a whole reality, given a weight it would never possess in waking life. In *The Guermandes Way* Proust will call it “this particular state of attention that enfolds our slumbers, acts upon them, modifies them, brings them into line with this or that series of past impressions.”

A third Proustian dream quality is made manifest in the passage above. The dream-state establishes a magnificent continuity across time, and especially across the interruptions of consciousness – the immediate “transmigration” into the waking world does not rid us entirely of the dream-state, for the dream lingers beyond its own borders, so much so that Proust favors the vocabulary of reincarnation to describe waking; he feels that dreams carry over as if from previous lives. (The neuroscientist Allan Hobson writes that the shift between wake-state and dream-state is rarely seamless, and that the one can easily spill into the other.)

Not only can the dream continue past itself, it can restore parts of waking life that have long been lost. Again from the opening of the novel:

Or else while sleeping I had drifted back to an earlier stage in my life, now for ever outgrown, and had come under the thrall of one of my childish terrors, such as that old terror of my great-uncle’s pulling my curls which was effectually dispelled on the day – the dawn of a new era to me – when they were finally cropped from my head. I had forgotten that event during my sleep, but I remembered it again immediately as I had succeeded in waking myself up to escape my great-uncle’s fingers, and as a measure of precaution I would bury the whole of my head in the pillow before returning to the world of dreams.

What was forgotten is recalled; what was destroyed by the passage of time is restored; intervening facts, until now taken for granted, are obliterated. In the dream-state, the curls live on forever, even across the fact of their having been shorn, and their existence once

again resumes when the narrator sinks back into dreams, hiding them in the pillow.

Proustian dreaming, in other words, effects a remarkable process of *continuity across interruption*, so different from waking life, in which the interruptions of memory are the source of constant melancholy for the narrator. In dreams the experience of time is made continuous rather than fragmentary; each moment is gifted with its own complete history. This is rapidly obliterated by the act of waking, but what is recalled upon waking is the plenitude of that continuity, so vast as to have seemed an entire life. Hence, when being the rivalry between François and Charles becomes unintelligible to the re-awoken narrator, he says, again using the language of reincarnation, it remained “as the thoughts of a former existence must be to a reincarnate spirit; the subject of my book would separate itself from me, leaving me free to apply myself to it or not.” Waking is the separation of self and world, the return of an illusory free will and the attendant danger of inattention – it is the end of the magnificent continuity. (Elsewhere Proust will remind his readers that waking has its own continuity, the gift of resuming after each night of sleep, but we pay a high price for this resumption.) In Proust’s novel, dreaming is the first site for the recovery of the fullness of time, and waking is the first template for the consciousness of its loss.

To dream, then, is to live three things, all interconnected: to have thoughts shaped like a world; to be in a state of non-negotiable attention to that world; and to perceive in that world a remarkable continuity across interruption, a continuous and self-organizing equilibrium. (Allan Hobson and the mathematician David Kahn once published a paper speculating that the dream-state is characterized by a self-organizing equilibrium, by which each new thought that enters the field of the dreamer’s awareness is integrated coherently into all the thoughts that preceded it.) Dreaming also stands in contrast to the onrush of waking, in which these three things are obliterated. “When I awoke in the middle of the night, not knowing where I was, I could not even be sure at first who I was; I had only the most rudimentary sense of existence, such as may lurk and shiver in the depths of an animal’s consciousness; I was more destitute than the cave-dweller.” The

dream is a vast plenitude hovering over a complete absence; it is a state of existence in which a being can be anything in the world; as a necessary corollary, that being risks losing him- or herself as soon as that world disappears.

These three qualities – thinking as world, non-negotiable attention, and continuity across interruption – produce, together, a fourth quality, what might be termed the *cosmic expansiveness* of the dream, its mimesis of infinite time and space. To dream is to exist in a spatial and temporal matrix of unencumbered extension. Though he admired Bergson, Proust vehemently disliked one of his books: *The Dream* (*Le rêve*), in which Bergson had argued that the continuous and even flow of human time, its *durée*, included the dream. Proust thought that dreaming, that other life, that metempsychotic adventure, had its own temporal rules, and that these were capricious and frankly godlike. Spinoza said that God is infinite extension in the infinite modes of being; that he is the universe itself. The unending multiplicity of dreaming is Spinozist in structure even if the dreamer is sometimes restricted within its unrestricted boundaries. In sleep the mind builds a universe of incomprehensible size and dimension, and even though consciousness can seem but a small part of it, actually the *self* has been expressed all the way out to the farthest corners of existence. In a dream you can seem to live forever, survive death or die many times, bring loved ones back from the dead, travel to the stars and back. “I have always said – and proved by experience – that the most powerful soporific is sleep itself. After having slept profoundly for two hours, having fought with so many giants, and formed so many lifelong friendships, it is far more difficult to awake than after taking several grammes of veronal.” Elsewhere: “We wake up, look at our watch and see ‘four o’clock’; it is only four o’clock in the morning, but we imagine that the whole day has gone by, so vividly does this unsolicited nap of a few minutes appear to have come down to us from heaven, by virtue of some divine right, huge and solid as an Emperor’s orb of gold.”

Not only does this expansiveness dilate outward; it also moves backward. Dreaming allows us to reclaim our earliest memories and, in some cases, to touch something deeper, the biological memory of the species, the deep awareness of our status as organisms in the parade of life. Charles Swann has a dream featuring

Napoleon III in which one of the characters turns out to be a copy of himself, a double. In this moment he enjoys, the narrator says, “such a creative power that he was able to reproduce himself by a simple act of division, like certain lower organisms.” The comparison is splendid because it announces the oddly primordial, even Edenic quality of dreaming. Though it is full of simulacra of the complexities of waking life, it seems to lift into them an atavistic energy, the pure self-containment of the earliest stages of existence, before consciousness, before sexual reproduction, before even death as we know it. In dreaming Proust represents to himself a version of his complex contemporaneous world shot through with the naked vitality of primal existence. When the narrator wakes in the middle of the night and says he has lost all of his personhood except for the animal shiver of being, he is saying something about the effect of dream-consciousness, which is to bring that animal shiver to the fore, to point the way back toward the originary experience of being alive.

“The power of the memory is prodigious, my God,” writes St. Augustine. “It is a vast, immeasurable sanctuary. Who can plumb its depths? And yet it is a faculty of my soul. Although it is part of my nature, I cannot understand all that I am. This means, then, that the mind is too narrow to contain itself entirely. But where is that part of it which it does not itself contain? Is it somewhere outside itself and not within it? How, then, can it be part of it, if it is not contained in it?” Proust’s first answer (twenty pages before the *petite madeleine*) to Augustine’s astonishing query is that the vastness of the mind is to be found not in memory but in dream: here is where the domain of memory is observed in all its plenitude, and even surpassed. For in our dreams we live our lives again, and live a thousand lives we’ve never seen before. The perfective tense of the opening sentence, that enigmatic “*je me suis couché*,” is perhaps here explained: though going to sleep is a habitual action, each journey into the night-world is absolutely singular.

Proust as Dream-Philosopher

If dreams are the key to *In Search of Lost Time*, why are there not more of them? The first answer to this question is that there are

many, many more than most readers recall. Not only is the opening a consummate description of the transition from wake-state to dream-state; not only are the dream passages of *Sodom and Gomorrah* one of the last additions to the novel. There are dreams described in nearly every volume – in some places, a description of sleep and dreaming appears practically every tenth page, sometimes as only a few lines, sometimes as a sprawling paragraph. Most belong to the narrator, but two belong to Swann. In *The Captive*, Marcel makes a magnificent description of Albertine asleep, the inaccessibility of her dream-life serving as a powerful sign for the complete inaccessibility of her interior.

Dreams also play an explicit role in Proust's metaphysics. In the final volume, *Time Regained*, he writes: "It was scarcely ever except in my dreams, while I was asleep, that a place could lie spread before me wrought in that pure matter which is entirely distinct from the matter of the common things that we see and touch but of which, when I had imagined these common things without ever having seen them, they too had seemed to me to be composed." Dreaming, he tells us, is the last bastion of enchantment in a disenchanted world, the place where a person can have an originary relation – like Adam to his newly named creation – with a world that is already created. Dreaming is the place where teacups and salons and Venetian paintings are fully restored to a state of innocent wonder, to the splendor with which the innocent mind endows them. Dreaming (and, it should be added, sleep) forces us to encounter objects afresh, without any of the comforts or bromides of our intellectual and cognitive prejudices. So it is that in the opening sequence, having just woken from a dream and found himself but a denuded animal shiver, the narrator has license to speculate that "perhaps the immobility of the things that surround us is forced upon them by our conviction that they are themselves and not anything else, by the immobility of our conception of them. For it always happened that when I awoke like this, and my mind struggled in an unsuccessful attempt to discover where I was, everything revolved round me through the darkness: things, places, years."

Dreaming is for Proust what Tahiti was for Gaugin, Walden for Thoreau: the possibility of the rebirth of the world, a shaking up of all preconceptions, a chance to reassemble the mosaic from

scratch. For Proust this comes with a clear moral injunction. You cannot run from the world you were born into in order to find another one. You cannot give up the duchess's teacups and the Balbec trains for palm trees and bean rows. But you can learn, from your dreams, how to see them *as if* they were the primitive world, as if they had no weight of history upon them: "The only thing a little sad about sleeping in Eulalie's room was that, because of the proximity of the viaduct, you heard at night the bellows of the trains. But as I knew these were bellows produced by machines under human control, they did not terrify me, as in a prehistoric age, I might have been terrified by the ululations of a neighbouring mammoth taking a free and uncoordinated stroll." The power of dream-thinking is to make the mammoth inhere in the train; to carry dream-thinking into waking life is to safely enjoy the emotional intensity of imagining a mammoth without actually having to run from a mammoth.

In the midst of the key philosophical meditation which takes place as the narrator sits in the library of the Guermantes in the final volume, Proust tells us that dreams seem to be, though they are not quite, "un des modes pour retrouver le Temps perdu" – one of the modes of rediscovering Lost Time – surely one of the only times that the title of the entire work is so explicitly referenced. And here he means both the lost time of life, and the lost time of the world, the whole vast cycle of existence:

And it was perhaps also because of the extraordinary effects which they achieve with Time that dreams had fascinated me. Have we not often seen in a single night, in a single minute of a night, remote periods, relegated to those enormous distances at which we can no longer distinguish anything of the sentiments which we felt in them, come rushing upon us with almost the speed of light as though they were giant aeroplanes instead of the pale stars which we had supposed them to be, blinding us with their brilliance and bringing back to our vision all that they had once contained for us, giving us the emotion, the shock, the brilliance of their immediate proximity, only, once we are awake, to resume their position on the far side of the gulf which they had miraculously traversed, so that we are tempted to believe –

wrongly, however – that they are one of the modes of re-discovering Lost Time?

Dreams are not coded transmissions from the unconscious; they do not reveal something lurking underneath. Instead, they are messages from a distant star in time, its light reaching us not vaguely but gloriously, with a full, reality-dominating, attention-arresting luminosity. If Proust says that they only make us *believe*, and wrongly, that they can regain lost time, this is because in waking we lose them, and because in fact no time lost can ever truly be recaptured. Dreams – and involuntary memory, which also comes forth upon a person unbidden – are as close as we can get.

How to Dream While Awake and How to Share This Gift

I have said that there are many more dreams in this novel than most readers remember. Still, they are dwarfed by the thousands of pages on which no dream appears. But in fact it's in the waking world that the real importance of the Proustian dream is to be found. For Proust's dream sequences are above all templates for the reading of the novel, sites of instruction and remonstrance in which the reader is taught how to approach this staggering and unusual work.

At the end of the opening dream sequence, Proust moves directly into another famous set-piece, the detailed description of the magic lantern projections playing on the walls of his bedroom in the late afternoon, "long before the time when I should have to go to bed and lie there, unsleeping." The invocation of the hour of restless half-dreams is absolutely intentional, for suddenly the wicked Golo, the lovely Geneviève de Brabant, and their enchanted kingdom are projected oneirically by the magic lantern onto the walls of the room. The narrator is enthralled and upset, for his neurasthenia has only just been calmed by the reassuring feeling that at least he is in his bedroom, comfortable, in familiar surroundings. Now the entire space has been transformed into a fairy tale, and a rupture opens in his thoughts, pushing them toward the dream:

If the lantern were moved I could still distinguish Golo's horse advancing across the window-curtains, swelling out with their curves and diving into their folds. The body of Golo himself, being of the same supernatural substance as his steed's, overcame every material obstacle – everything that seemed to bar his way – by taking it as an ossature and embodying it in himself: even the doorhandle, for instance, over which, adapting itself at once, would float irresistibly his red cloak or his pale face, which never lost its nobility or its melancholy, never betrayed the least concern at this transver-
tebration.

Just as Marcel has earlier become the string quartet and rivalry; just as the dream-thinking has rearranged and scrambled all of the things in his home; just as the dream-curly continue through time and space even though they've been cut; so Golo creates a continuous and uninterrupted unity of time and space. He absorbs the world into himself, slowly, inevitably annexing every surface to his kingdom, becoming doorknobs and window curtains. He is the world, and the world is him. By an old definition this is the very nature of the epic mode in literature, where the world and those who inhabit it are in harmony with one another, where deeds are commensurate with the men and women who act them out. Georg Lukács claims that the epic world “is wide and yet it is like a home, for the fire that burns in the soul is of the same essential nature as the stars; the world and the self, the light and the fire, are sharply distinct, yet they never become permanent strangers to one another, for fire is the soul of all light and all fire clothes itself in light.” Lukács might be speaking, with unintended literalness, about Golo himself: an emanation of light projected by fire, absorbing the wide world and regally treating it like his home.

The magic lantern is the transitional instrument between sleep and waking, the figuration by which the qualities of dream-life come to be *projected* onto the reality we all share in common. It becomes possible to engage the dream-mode, to lay it over the normal mode of perception, so that the two experiences unfurl at once. The narrator lives in two simultaneous realities: the room at

Combray with all of its stuffy bourgeois furniture, and the kingdom of Brabant with all of its romance layered directly on top. Importantly, the one does not occlude the other: instead they coexist, the dream absorbing the curtains and door handles of waking perception into itself, much as the raw material of perceptual memory – the images we see every day – are given a new guise, revealed yet renamed, in dreams.

It is highly probable that Proust came to think of the dream as a malleable instrument of the imagination by reading Léon Hervey de Saint-Denys, society aristocrat, professor of Chinese at the Collège de France, first Western translator of the Tang Dynasty poets, and heroic dreamer. While still an adolescent Hervey began a detailed dream journal, supplementing his entries with little watercolor paintings (as he was a marquis, one presumes his mornings were in general leisurely, translations of Chinese poetry notwithstanding). The journal would eventually comprise twenty-two volumes and contain a record of some 1,946 nights of dreaming. So fierce was his attention and care that he gradually became what we would now call a lucid dreamer – someone capable of regularly becoming aware that he is dreaming and even controlling his dreams. At night he would carry out empirical dream experiments. In the lucid state he would ask himself research questions such as What does a leaf feel like in a dream? Is it more or less vivid than a leaf in real life? Where does an image come from in a dream? What are all of the possible ways in which it can combine with other images? What do my dreams look like when I'm on hashish? What do they look like when I'm hungry? When I sleep during the day?

Though Hervey de Saint-Denys died in 1892, when Proust was only twenty-two, it is very likely the younger dreamer knew of Hervey's treatise *Dreams and How to Guide Them* (Les rêves et les moyens de les diriger). Madame Hervey, the marquis's widow (and illegitimate daughter of the last reigning prince of Parma), was a socialite whom Proust befriended at a party given by Robert de Montesquiou, the model for Charlus, in 1894. Even more startling, Hervey himself is mentioned by name in the novel: "How it all comes back to me, Mémé," says the Duke of Guermantes to his brother Charlus, "and the old Chinese vase Hervey de Saint-Denys brought back for you. You used to threaten us that you would go

and spend your life in China, you were so enamoured of that country.”

Hervey de Saint-Denys is an emissary from both the Far East and the far reaches of the nocturnal brain. Their extent is illustrated by this phantasma from his book:

I could not begin to characterize the fantastical world, or rather, the chaos in which I believed myself to be that night. An unknown force rapidly carried me across spaces peopled with enormous things – things almost impossible to name, which flew through the void with me. It seemed to me that they were small planets in space, and yet they had the bodies of monstrous animals. I feared that, at any instant, I would crash into one of them as they flew toward me; but then, instead, I found myself penetrating through them as if they were mere shadows, without suffering even the smallest shock, without any sensation beyond a momentary sense of obscurity, during which time I imagined myself passing through the interior of these strange meteorites. [trans. by author]

This world is lyrical and strange, beholden to the same principles of thinking as being, of immersion and absorption, so cherished by Proust (who, incidentally, also wrote down his dreams and even sometimes sketched them). On another night Hervey dreamt of a cat that, once dipped in a magical solution, was rendered translucent. Astonished, he watched the invisible outline of the cat delicately swim and dance within the solution, every one of its internal organs visible to the naked eye. He then watched a translucent mouse being devoured and digested “in the transparent stomach of his ferocious enemy.”

In Hervey’s book, the dream-state is regularly likened to the projections of a magic lantern; the reader is constantly exhorted to pay more attention to dream-life; dream-life is framed not just as a mode of being but as a tool for extending the scope of experience, for deep immersion in the past and in the wonders of the imagination. These lessons it seems Proust thoroughly learned. In fact, Proust’s narrator, like Hervey, carries out his own dream experiments, creating a sequence of artificial dreams like grafted flowers: “By varying the hour and the place in which we go to

sleep, by wooing sleep in an artificial manner, or on the contrary by returning for a day to natural sleep . . . we succeed in producing a thousand times as many varieties of sleep as a gardener could produce of carnations or roses. Gardeners raise flowers akin to delicious dreams, and others that resemble nightmares.”

But more important, Proust carries the lessons of Hervey’s dream agency into waking life: if the magic lantern can transfer the dream onto the surfaces of the world, then the human imagination can do the same. If you can project Golo anywhere, you can induce a lucid dream at any time; you can be Hervey de Saint-Denys with your eyes open. Thus the Proustian eyeballs take on two tasks simultaneously. They take in the world around them and, at the same time, project a dream-world outward onto its surfaces.

Consider the famous underwater fantasy at the opera in *The Guermantes Way*. The narrator hears a person who he thinks is the Prince of Saxony asking to sit in his *baignoire*, a box that abuts the orchestra. But the word also means a bathtub, and this aquatic pun inspires in the narrator’s imagination a huge fantasy in which the opera house is transformed into an underwater grotto, glittering with pearls and lit by bioluminescent fish. The imaginary kingdom begs a technical question: How does one fit this deep-sea Versailles into the Palais Garnier, already so full of its own splendors, already so richly evoked in the narrator’s descriptions? Proust proceeds quickly and quite brilliantly: first he invokes the magic lantern, which he tries to use to project his dream onto the supposed prince (as if to warn us, *This is going to be a Golo situation*). Then he starts to describe the walls as humid and reptilian from their association with the word *baignoire*. Then, a moment later, it seems as though he’s lost interest; the narrator has walked over to his seat and is trying to remember a line from *Phèdre*, but he can’t quite get the syllables to scan. Then he realizes he’s made the line too long, he recovers the right words, and the excess syllables suddenly “floated off with the ease and suppleness of a bubble of air that rises to burst on the surface of the water.” We are ambushed by the fact that the entire time we’ve been moving with the narrator through the opera house, we’ve also been swimming in seawater, and the little bubbles have alerted us to its invisible presence all around us.

Proust is rightly celebrated for the sophistication and precision of his metaphors. But here the metaphors are only a means to an end: that the syllables are like bubbles floating to the surface, that the opera house wall is like a grotto – these are instruments in a process of imaginary world-creation, in the fabrication of a dream. Proust introduces at once two vocabularies: the limit of the imaginably vast (the grotto) and the limit of the imaginably small (the delicate bubble of air). Soon everything in between will be caught as if in a net. The high-society types assembled for the performance turn into a bewildering array of sea creatures. There are mermaids and tritons, monsters of the deep, and a fat marquis who, with his labored breathing, looks like a fish about to lay an egg. The Duchess of Guermantes and her cousin the princess, enthroned in their box, are diaphanous sea goddesses. This world made from metaphors has cut itself free from its original objects of comparison. (The critic Gérard Genette thought this scene a triumph of metonymy, but I think it's more properly called a triumph of world-creation.) It's not merely the case that, considered in isolation, a marquis resembles a fish or a chandelier a coral fan. It is rather that two realities are unfolding simultaneously: the world of the opera house and the world of the grotto. The narrator has slipped into a waking dream in which all things in the opera house are re-placed and re-made. The relationship of the two worlds outranks and governs any individual comparison between aspects of the two.

The wonder of this scene is that Proust manages to depict the complete world his imagination has erected around him without ever losing sight of the other world, which enters his mind through perception. The world we all share and the world created in private are simultaneously accessible to the reader. It is an invitation: Join me in the realm of the nereids! But it's a coy kind of invitation, different from the invitation to go to Narnia or to Middle Earth or other fantasy lands. Because it always says, with a wink: *I know it's just in my head, I can still see the gas lamps and velvet seats, but still, come and share it, be in here too, in this cranium as wide and deep as the ocean itself, until the border between the two starts to blur at the edges.* And the blurring, we learn from Proust, is much more unsettling than jumping clearly from one to the other.

Many of the bravura scenes of imagining in this novel are shaped on this template. An imaginary world is built directly on top of the perceived one, and it is free at any moment to disengage itself from its referent and become a self-sustaining plane of existence. When the narrator first perceives the little band of girls at the boardwalk in Balbec, he begins to imagine them as a comet flying through space. And soon, there are two places at once: the boardwalk with its denizens, and an astral empire, with planets and telescopes and distant fragments of stardust.

The truly revolutionary structure of Proust's novel, only beginning to be fully visible a century after its writing in an era on the cusp of virtual reality, is its creation of multiple universes which unfurl simultaneously. The novel presents multiple planes of representation directly on top of one another, such that each page is equal to two, or three, or maybe even seven pages at once. What appears to be *merely* a three-thousand-page novel is in fact several three-thousand-page works hovering, like highly realized ghosts, on top of their textual cousin. In addition to the *physical* plane of the novel – described in such exhaustive and exhausting detail, in cinematic renderings of Combray and Paris and Balbec down to the last hawthorn flower and mackintosh coat – there are also expansive dream-planes, literally thousands of images (and sounds, and smells, and sensations) the narrator invokes which do not ever appear in front of his physical person (if a literary character can be said to have a physical person) and are never seen by his physical eyes. These images comprise a parade of mermaids, deceased princesses, bubbles, reindeer chewing on lichen, tropical insects seducing a flower, statues come to life, trumpet fanfares, the scent of nonexistent roses, names made into objects, and objects made into abstractions. To make a film of Proust's novel that merely takes place in a meticulously realized Belle Époque France would be to miss most of the novel, which unfurls at a level above what can be seen with the eye and heard with the ears, though it is just as present, in many cases even more present, in the mind of the reader.

Once one of these imaginary worlds has been established, it never fully disappears. It hovers in the wings, waiting to rush in on the reader's imagination in all of its plenitude. When, for example,

the narrator casts his eye over high society many years after his visit to the aquatic opera, he vividly invokes the grotto fantasy, even at a moment when its real-world referents have been punctured by disillusionment. Seeing once again the tired old Duchess of Guermantes, he reflects that she “was already nothing more in my eyes than a very ordinary woman . . . who had occasionally invited me, not to descend into the submarine kingdom of the Nereids, but to spend an evening with her in her cousin’s box.” This is one of the most remarkable instances of a dreamlike continuity over interruption in the novel: even as one of the primary instigators of the fantasy is reduced to an ordinary woman, the fantasy itself manages effortlessly to reassert itself. The narrator immediately summons up the far borders of his universe (“the submarine kingdom of the Nereids”), as if to bring rushing in to the reader everything in between those borders. At the same time, he asserts how free-floating this world is: once launched into existence, the kingdom of the Nereids needs no actual Nereid to continue its imaginary existence. It swims around the novel, ready to be summoned back at any moment.

Dreams, then, are the preeminent model for the full extension of subjectivity, for subjectivity as a presence that disseminates out into the entire world. Proust says as much when he writes that dreams taught him that “only an erroneous and crude perception puts everything into the object, while in fact everything is in the mind.” But this realization, though sobering, is not an invitation to solipsism. On the contrary, it is the avenue into a beautiful backdoor utopianism: Proust contends that we are divided because we make the error of believing that we inhabit a single contested reality, the contest for which generates the torment of jealousy and the denial of snobbism. We cannot accept that in fact our common existence is constituted by an infinite number of overlapping dreams. If we could admit we were all dreaming, then we might be able, one day, to invite one another into our dreams, to lay our magic lantern projections directly on top of one another, fighting no longer over whether Golo exists but about where we’d like to see him gallop. Proust says that “existence is of little interest save on days when the dust of realities is mingled with magic sand, when some trivial incident becomes a springboard for

romance. Then a whole promontory of the inaccessible world emerges from the twilight of dream and enters our life, our life in which, like the sleeper awakened, we actually see the people of whom we had come to believe that we should never see them save in our dreams." To embrace the dream of life is actually to touch life and its inhabitants more fully and sincerely than is possible through simple perception.

Proust thought, of course, that the main conduit for the sharing of dreams was art. Which is perhaps why he put the fullest statement of our obligations to dreaming, the Proustian manifesto for dreaming and living simultaneously, in the mouth of the painter Elstir, the most admirable artist in the novel:

When a mind has a tendency toward dreams, it's a mistake to shield it from them, to ration them. So long as you divert your mind from its dreams, it will not know them for what they are; you will be the victim of all sorts of appearances because you will not have grasped their true nature. If a little dreaming is dangerous, the cure for it is not to dream less but to dream more, to dream all the time. One must have a thorough understanding of one's dreams if one is not to be troubled by them; there is a way of separating one's dreams from one's life which so often produces good results that I wonder whether one oughtn't to try it just in case, simply as a preventative, as certain surgeons suggest that, to avoid the risk of appendicitis later on, we ought all to have our appendixes taken out when we're children.

(In this passage, I have modified the Moncrieff-Kilmartin translation, which uses the word "day-dream." Daydreams are perhaps meant here, but Proust uses only the word *rêve*, never *rêverie* or *songe*. The continuity, even confusion, between the two types of dreaming is surely intentional.) The artist must live in two modes at once: awake and in dream, each filling to the brim experience, separate and yet paradoxically cohabitating in the same space.

In its concern for memory, Proust's great novel points backward. Not only backward in the narrator's own life, but also back to a long European tradition of privileging the role of memory in literature, beginning, in its modern form, with Rousseau and

stretching back, perhaps, to Augustine. But in its concern with dreaming, Proust's great novel points elsewhere, either much farther back or very far forward, toward an idea of consciousness and a model of living that may have antecedents only in non-Western societies like the Aborigines of Australia or the Ongee of the Andamans and which might, one day, prepare the way for a most peculiar revolution, which will have to take place – as would have suited Proust very well – in bed rather than on the barricade.