



## PHILOSOPHY AND CULTURE: THE TEMPORAL CONTEXT



### Philosophy and Literature



## On Philosophical Themes in Marcel Proust's Works

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### Summary

Marcel Proust's works contain a lot of ideas consonant with the ideas that were actively discussed by philosophers of his time. Many philosophers focused on the issues of perception, memory, will, freedom, personal identity, etc., which constituted an important part of academic curriculum. Proust familiarized himself with the issues studying philosophy at the Lyceum (he was taught by Alphonse Darlu) and at the Sorbonne. In his novel *In Search of Lost Time*, Proust describes an existential experience of his character viewing these issues from a particular perspective, through the prism of the main character's lifelong search of his calling. He gradually proceeds from philosophical psychology exploring the interaction of memories and impressions in a particular perception, to philosophy proper, to metaphysics aimed at understanding the truth, at going beyond time. The article traces some moments of this transition, shows that for Proust it is not just the work of memory that is important but the emphasis on those states of consciousness where the present and the past coincide, merge, and thereby we go beyond time, to eternity. The author analyzes some images and signs that accompanied the character of the novel on the way to the realization of his calling. Particular attention is paid to the Proustian interpretation of the role of art in changing and enriching the perception of the world, as well as the importance in human life of a habit in which positive and negative aspects are highlighted. Proust himself believed that a work of art is an optical instrument through which the readers begin to discern in themselves what they would otherwise fail to see. His own novel was such an instrument.

**Keywords:** Marcel Proust, memory, impression, time, timeless, habit.

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### Introduction

The book by Marcel Proust *In Search of Lost Time* is referred to as an Bildungsroman, or an apprenticeship novel. Proust really continues the tradition, employing new artistic means that introduce a different perspective into literature, providing another dimension. Proust's hero also goes through the process of growing up, socialization, but the author's focus is now on the character's inner life, on the work of his consciousness. The development of a personality is described as the enhancement of self-awareness. And yet Proust's book cannot be called a purely psychological novel. It contains a whole number of layers. We get acquainted with human types and unique, memorable characters, we observe the life of high society and ordinary people in France in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, we get an opportunity to appreciate Proust's humorous and ironic depiction of various life situations [Gopnik, Kohler 2013, 114]. The pages of the novel contain both a "human comedy" – if we recall Balzac – and a human tragedy. The very process of its creation is also dramatic. After all, it was written by a very sick man (since his childhood, Proust suffered from asthma), and although he managed to complete the writing, he was unable to finalize it.

Lots of books are written about Proust. Many authors have written about Proust's understanding of time and memory, have explored philosophical messages of his novel [cf., for example, Perrier 2009; Loehr 2012]. And since Proust's philosophical messages are numerous, there can be various interpretations. Thus, M.K. Mamardashvili speaks

about “the philosophy of Proust” as “some spiritual search performed by Proust at his own risk as a vital task, not as reasoning, but as an aesthetic or philosophical concept, as a task which would be called ‘salvation’ by ancients” [Mamardashvili 1995, 11]. Mamardashvili argues that in Proust’s novel, we come across ontological or existential experience, as philosophy labels it [Mamardashvili 1995, 13]. Paul Ricœur believes that in *In Search of Lost Time* there is a “story about time”, various meanings of which are analyzed in his book *Time and Narrative* [Ricœur 2000, 137–158]. According to Gilles Deleuze, the main accent in Proust’s novel is laid not on memory or time, but on the sign and the truth: “...first of all in *In Search of Lost Time* there is a search for truth, which explains the ‘philosophical’ significance of Proust’s work and competes with philosophy. Attacking the most essential aspects of classical rationalism, Proust promotes an opposite way of thinking” [Deleuze 1999, 122].

He has often been compared with different philosophers: first, of course, with Bergson, but also with Plato, Spinoza, Kierkegaard (1). As is well known, Proust was never alien to philosophy as a discipline. He studied philosophy in 1888–1889 in the Lycée Condorcet, with Alphonse Darlu as the lecturer, whom he highly esteemed and appreciated [cf. Bonnet 1960, 191–197], and later in 1893–1895 at the Sorbonne, where lectures delivered by Élie Rabier (one of the best lecturers in philosophy of the time) were considered to be one of the main philosophy textbooks [cf. Verneuil 2006]. Both of them were proponents of spiritualism, which then held the dominant positions in education, and opponents of materialism and positivism. Darlu was remembered by his students (among them there were Léon Brunschvicg, *Élie Halévy*, and Xavier Léon, the future founders of the famous philosophical journal *Revue de Métaphysique et de morale*) as a talented teacher who discussed philosophical issues in a poetic language. According to André Maurois, who wrote the intellectual biography of Proust, Darlu had a “profound and lasting influence” on the future writer. “Later Proust read Renouvier, *Boutroux* and Bergson, but he always considered Darlu his teacher, and it was Darlu who gave impetus to Proust’s long reflections on the unreality of the sensual world, on memory and time...” [Maurois 2018, 37]. It is noteworthy that in his unfinished novel *Jean Santeuil*, which

is also autobiographical, like *In Search of Lost Time* (2), Proust characterizes a philosophy professor Mr. Beulier, whose prototype was Darlu, in the following way: "Since at the time materialism and skepticism were refuted in the mind of Jean by spiritual teachings appreciated by the extraordinary mind of Mr. Beulier,... it was idealism that occupied Jean's most refined thoughts" [cit. ex: Brée 1960, 202]. The issues of will, perception, memory, personal identity, freedom, etc., which would later occupy an important place in Proust's work, were discussed both at the lessons in the lyceum, and at the lectures at the Sorbonne. In his novel, we sometimes come across names of philosophers, such as Plotinus, Descartes, Bergson and his predecessor, the spiritualist Lachelier, you can also find there references to Augustine. Philosophical ideas perceived by Proust in his youth, evidently, determined the direction of Proust's spiritual interests to some extent and influenced his mentality, his own unique philosophy, which manifests itself in the novel.

It is noteworthy that the character of *In Search of Lost Time* Marcel, who as a child dreamed of becoming a writer, "was looking for a philosophical theme for a major work" [Proust 1973, 202]. Proust found this theme, even a whole complex of interwoven themes: time, memory, the essence of creativity. We do not call Proust a philosopher, he saw his task and vocation in another sphere and is significant for us primarily as a writer. According to André Maurois, "as an adolescent fascinated by Darlu, he believed that he had been created for philosophical studies, but he quickly abandoned an abstract dictionary, which separated the thought from the surrounding world, and felt that he could better present his ideas concerning specific things in a symbolic manner. This does not prevent us from recognizing in his work all the elements of classical philosophy. Perceptions, representations, memory, the self, the reality of the external world, space and time – each theme of Darlu's course is poetically represented in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*" [Maurois 2018, 200–201].

Proust's novel is often attributed to the stream-of-consciousness narrative technique, which, to some extent, is based on the ideas of Bergson and William James. James himself used the term in his works on psychology; it can also be found in Bergson's works, it has

long entered the lexicon of literary scholars. But A.D. Mikhailov in his book *Proust's Poetics* argues that this term cannot be considered precise when referring to the French writer's works [Mikhailov 2012, 92]. The fact is that in his novel, the character and the narrator are not always consistent with one another: the narrator, remembering the character's childhood and youth, talks about things which cannot be known to the character living his life in a chronological order, for these events occur later than the moment which is currently described. Such "foreshadowing" references or the narrator's remarks on what happens later are especially numerous in the first volume, but we come across them in other volumes as well. The author introduces them with the words: "as we will later see", "as it turns out later". Thus, in the novel, you can only find elements of the stream of consciousness; you can find an extremely complex interplay of different times: past, present and future.

From the very beginning, Proust was often compared with Bergson, so the writer had to refute this influence. In later works, Proust and Bergson are compared more minutely to investigate similarities and differences between them (3). There is no doubt that both authors are interested in problems of time, perception and memory. When it concerns reality, truth and its search, both are gradually shifting from philosophical and psychological ideas to the realm of philosophy, metaphysics.

In this article, without claiming to present a new interpretation of Proust, I will confine myself to a modest task of tracing some aspects of the writer's philosophical psychology and the moments when he plunges into philosophical discourse.

### **Proust's philosophical observations. The path to vocation and the mystery of perception. Images and signs**

The title of the novel is polysemantic. *In Search of Lost Time* is a first-person narrative of the character's life, his memories, to which he resorts hoping to "reverse" time. One cannot stop the lapse of relentless time, but one can plunge into one's memory to revive it. It also has another meaning. Being a child, the character wants to become a writer; all through the novel he suffers from his inability to become one, he finds all sorts of reasons not to take up his pen,

squandering himself in other occupations or in idleness. He loses time and is only able to make up for it closer to the end of the novel, in the part titled *Time Regained*. But you can hardly say that the time is completely lost – after all, all the stages, all the paths he takes lead him to becoming someone who can share his ideas with others, lead him to becoming a writer. A third meaning is this: finally making a decision to write a novel, the character in a certain sense “conquers” the time, because only in an artistic work can one describe, he believes, those states of consciousness when the present and the past coincide and merge opening a way to eternity.

Proust's novel extended the notion of possibilities of human self-perception and self-description. Having absorbed many features of the author, Proust's character is a neurotic who has been suffering from insomnia since childhood, who is prone to introspection and is inclined to plunge into a stream of memories interwoven with the impressions of the current life. In each of us, Proust writes, there are many personalities, and each of them is “called into light” by an impression, a complex perception or even a mere sensation. This happens when we see old, familiar things that immediately plunge us into a different situation, remind us of something, and resurrect the forgotten aspect of our “self”, which, according to Proust, is such a “personality”. In communication, we reveal special aspects of ourselves, dealing with different people, we behave differently. This is clearly seen in such strong feelings as love and jealousy, which play a significant role in Proust's novel. Here is how he writes about the character's early love for his childhood friend Gilberte Swann: “Often (for our life is not chronological and huge numbers of anachronisms disrupt an ordinary course of events!) I did not live in yesterday or the day before yesterday, but in one of those olden days, when I had loved Gilberte. ... My former “self”, which had been in love with her and which was almost superseded by another, was ready to be awakened by even the most insignificant provocation” [Proust 1992b, 188]. This former “derelict self” was still lurking below the surface and would live as long as the character lived. Numerous “selves”, numerous “personalities”, however, do not disrupt one's sense of self-identity: “Ultimately, however much we change the environment and our way of life, our memory, holding the thread of our self-identity,

completes it with our reminiscences, no matter how many years have passed since then” [Proust 1999, 255].

The interwoven impressions of the present and the past shape out perception of the world, and this perception, according to Proust, is not a “photograph” of the present time. From this point of view, it is noteworthy to consider an episode described in *The Guermentes Way*, where the character, who is very fond of his grandmother, is for some time separated from her, having to go to a military unit to visit his friend Saint-Loup. When he returns to Paris and sees his grandmother again, he for a moment sees her as if in a photograph which ruthlessly depicts her illness and her old age: “We always see people dear to us in their animated entirety washed by the continuous flow of our love, which merges their real appearance perceived through our eyes with our memories of them, our ideas about them and only then allows our consciousness to start its work” [Proust 1993, 121]. But if even for a moment we lose the ideal image created by our memory and love, if we cease to see “through the prism of layered memories adjoining to one another” [Proust 1993, 122], our eyes see a photograph, which minutely depicts the reality. Reading Proust, we often see similar remarks.

The way of the character of *In Search of Lost Time* to his vocation turns out to be very long and unhurried: the very extent of the way symbolizes the time lived by the character and other characters of the novel, which leaves an indelible mark on them. This way, as Deleuze writes, is marked by sensual signs of two types. Signs of the first type are connected with material objects, or, rather, with the impressions received from them. Throughout the book, we see the character’s favorite images, symbolizing the moments when the character felt happy; many of them are associated with the character’s childhood, with the town of Combray. These moments keep surfacing in the character’s memory. They are few: the church at Combray, the Martinville belfries, the hawthorn, the blossoming apple trees.... According to the character, these images “are deep down, immersed in the past and instantly find access to one’s heart” [Proust 1973, 208]. In everything he saw, heard, perceived, he discerned something hidden, implied: “...suddenly the roof of a building, a beam of sunlight on a stone or the smell of the road gave me such pleasure and



had such a mysterious appearance, as if they concealed something inaccessible to my sight, as if they were ready to reveal something to me, if only I could grasp it. But I couldn't and the mystery made me stop involuntarily. <...> I tried to capture in my memory the outline of the roof, the color of the stone, for to me, for some unknown reason, it seemed that they were overwhelmed by the desire to reveal something for which they served as a mere shell" [Proust 1973, 202]. This thought is not infrequent in the novel: the appearance of objects is a shell through which one must penetrate and objects themselves are longing for it. Once, having written down immediately his fresh impressions of the belfries of Martinville church, the character felt relief, as if weight had been lifted, he felt happy. Much later did he realize the cause of his elation.

There is one more special image addressed by Proust in his book *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, and then developed in *In Search of Lost Time*. The image is that of three trees near the resort town of Balbec. Seeing them once during a walk, the character experienced the same pleasure the sight of the Martinville belfries had given him. But he notes "his happiness was incomplete" [Proust 1992b, 249]. And then there are two amazing pages which describe the experiences of the character, who is eager to comprehend why these trees evoke such feelings in him what they want to tell him. Do they remind him of something from his childhood? Are they merely a dream? Do they conceal a new image? "Staying behind, the trees desperately waved their branches, saying, 'What you have not heard from us today, you will never hear. If you do not help us out of this quagmire, from where we appeal to you, then a part of your 'self', which could be our gift to you, will forever sink into oblivion'" [Proust 1992b, 251]. The character sadly states that it did happen. We will come across the image of the trees a few more times in the pages of the novel, but Marcel will never be able to solve their mystery. Failing to recognize them, finding no clue in his memory, he lost a part of his "self". It happens every time when you forget some impressions, especially if these impressions are important. And along with this part, the time when it still existed, lived in the personality of the character of *In Search of Lost Time*, was irretrievably gone. In any case, the search in this direction did not lead to anything.



Signs of the second type can be found in very well-known descriptions, when different versions of one observation: a fleeting impression, a fact, a minor event evoke the past in one's memory, literally plunge one into the past, making one's memories astonishingly bright (Proust often underlines the spontaneous and uncontrollable character of memory). The best known piece describes the character, who is already a grown-up, soaking a madeleine cookie in linden tea, having taken a bite. The character is immediately mentally transferred to his favorite places in Combray. It is interesting that *Contre Sainte-Beuve* starts with a similar episode (the book contains fragments in which the author reveals the process of planning his future novel). The last book of the series *Time Regained* serves as a culmination. The character comes to Prince de Guermantes' reception, and experiences a whole number of things: stumbling over a cobblestone in the square, he mentally finds himself in Venice, where he once experienced a similar sensation; a footman clinking a spoon against a saucer makes him remember another episode, etc. Such an abundance of similar impressions, invariably evoking the character's joy and even delight, the cause of which he has been seeking to unravel throughout the novel, though unsuccessfully, now prompts him to bring this inner search to its end. In the library of the palace of the Prince de Guermantes, on the "finest day" of his life, the mystery finally succumbs to his perseverance, the spiritual efforts he has made. Here is how it is described: "And I guessed the reason by comparing different kinds of bliss. The common between them was that I experienced them both in the present moment and in the past, and eventually the past filled the present, I hesitated, not knowing, in which of the two times I lived; and the creature enjoying in me these impressions experienced them both in past and present environments, in something timeless. The creature could be seen when the present and the past coincided, and then, being in its only habitat, where it could breathe freely, absorbing the essence of being independent of time" [Proust 1999, 170]. Thus, both for the character and for Proust, neither memory, nor spontaneous reminiscences, nor even past events evoked by them are of great significance. What is really important is the coincidence of the present and the past which transcends time.

Incidentally, this makes Proust's works different from those of Bergson, who provided a detailed description of the interaction, the interpenetration of perceptions and memories in *Matter and Memory*. But for him this interpenetration is not completely independent of time, it can be characterized by duration. Proust, obviously, means chronological time, measured by a clock. For Bergson, the coincidence of the present and the past in a perception is not restricted in time either. However, what is "timeless delight" for Proust, is "delight" experienced in duration for Bergson.

It is here that we go beyond the scope of philosophical psychology, because we are already in the realm of philosophy proper, in the realm of metaphysics. The discovery made by Proust's character in the library eventually leads him to the idea that it is through such timeless moments that he discovers the "eternal essence of things" [Proust 1999, 171]. And, as Proust puts it, to understand the essence of things, to grasp those special impressions, "to approach them closely, one should try to investigate them more closely where they are, i.e. within oneself, to investigate them very carefully and thoroughly" [Proust 1999, 175]. Through this investigation, one can grasp the reality, which is an interconnection between sensations and memories and has nothing to do with a cinematic vision. The writer believes that the authenticity of this reality is confirmed by the fact that these important impressions are rather spontaneous and even involuntary. All the unexpected sounds, smells, and bodily sensations are spontaneous: "I was not looking for two uneven tiles in the yard, where I stumbled. However, the coincidence and inevitability associated with the sensation, testified to the authenticity of the evoked past and images surfacing from my memory. Discovering reality, we feel elated as if approaching light" [Proust 1999, 177]. The spontaneity of memory also guarantees authenticity.

When reading Proust's words about the contemplation of the essence of things, our own philosophical, or, more accurately, historical and philosophical memory refers to well-known teachings, recalls Plato, Husserl, and French spiritualists, whose ideas were comprehended by the future writer with the help of his teacher Darlu. Plunging into the depths of consciousness in order to comprehend reality is an idea shared both by a spiritualist philosopher Ravaisson and Bergson. It

is not accidental that in *Time Regained* we come across the word “spirit” more often than in other books of the cycle [cf. Brée 1960]. Thus, Proust writes about the world of desires which can only be perceived spiritually through our impressions and sensations if our spirit is free; about the impulse of “spiritual life” [Proust 1999, 174, 176, 214]. Mind the expression “universal spirit” [Proust 1999, 194]. The famous scene in the library, which, according to Ricœur, provides a “hermeneutic key” to the whole novel, explains the character’s experiences described in the first volume and provoked by the hawthorn, the Martinville belfries, and other things appealing to the character, willing to reveal their essence, their soul to him. This, Proust believes, can only be performed through a work of art. Therefore, there are two types of signs: immediate impressions from objects and impressions evoking past memories. Both types of signs indicate what Proust calls timeless. He, like Ravaisson and Bergson, believes that art possesses a philosophical significance: an artist is capable of comprehending the true reality.

### **On the extension of perception and the role of art**

As we see, the interaction of immediate impressions and memories, according to Proust, gives rise to a real perception, which is not identical to a photograph but has its own depth and is endowed with a special meaning or a whole set of meanings. Gradually, all this inner work leads to the expansion of perception itself. Bergson was interested in this process, showing this through the work of artists who, discovering new sides of the world, of life, of consciousness, teach us to see the world in a new way [Bergson 2017]. Proust illustrates it in his own way and using his own means. These illustrations are especially numerous in the second book of the novel *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, where they are mostly associated with the work of the artist Elstir. In general, as you remember, Proust’s novel presents three main masters of art: the writer Bergotte, the composer Vinteuil, and the artist Elstir. This “disposition” makes it possible for Proust to make judgments about these different spheres of creativity. But the leitmotif related to Elstir is this: after looking at the artist’s pictures, the character begins to see nature through these works, discovering in nature something he has never noticed

before. Enjoy a description of his impressions in the artist's studio: "... I was completely happy, because at the sight of sketches surrounding me I felt that I could rise to the delightful sensation of beauty in its diverse forms that I had not separated from the general picture of life before. I looked at Elstir's workshop as if it were a laboratory of some new universe ..." [Proust 1992b, 345–346]. Here is another interesting example: admiring the sea in Balbec in the morning or in the evening, the character realizes that in his perception, the sea merges with the sky, and then the border between the sea and the sky "is quickly restored in his mind" [Proust 1992b, 346]. In Elstir's paintings, however, there was no border. Proust notes on this occasion: "Elstir painted those rare moments when we perceive nature as it is, i.e. in a poetic way" [Proust 1992b, 346]. And what does it mean to perceive nature poetically? The author speaks of metaphors used in poetry. For Elstir, a metaphor is to erase boundaries between the sky and the sea, and on the whole between different elements. Having learned to see it in pictures, the character learns to see it in nature. Therefore, it is Elstir's work that "prepares" such a perception. Of course, impressionists' lessons are very important for Proust, for they have significantly changed his view of the world, making the world colorful and artistic.

Another example can be found in the second part of the first volume of *In Search of Lost Time*, which constitutes a "novel in the novel" (*Swann in Love*). When Charles Swann, one of Proust's most important characters, first met his future wife Odette, whose love would dramatically change his whole life, he believed that she was not a woman he could admire. He saw many defects in her appearance, until he suddenly realized that she reminded him of Zipporah portrayed by Botticelli in a fresco of the Sistine Chapel. This influenced his perception of Odette, provoking completely new feelings. So art merges with life, creates an opportunity for change, deepens perception, and transforms impressions. The feeling for Odette was reinforced by a famous musical theme from Vinteuil's sonata, which Swann was inclined to listen to tirelessly when dating Odette. By the way, the power of such musical associations is well known. Hearing a certain melody, a person is suddenly transferred to a past event associated with it, and experiences his previous

impressions. This again proves the deep connection of time, memory and music, as described by various philosophers, including Bergson. The art of literary descriptions was mastered by Proust to its fullest extent. Thanks to him, Vinteuil's sonata started to symbolize certain states of consciousness.

Proust's hero Marcel believed that Vinteuil's music was more truthful than all the books he had read: "Sometimes I was inclined to think that this was our immediate perception of life. It didn't take the form of ideas, it was literary, it provided an intellectual interpretation of life, explained and analyzed it, but it didn't create life like music, where sounds reproduce changes occurring in a person, reproduced the extraordinary power of the sensations that lived inside us" [Proust 1992a, 358]. Proust's novel is sometimes compared with a cathedral (it is his own metaphor). But there are also more reasonable, in my opinion, comparisons with a symphony. The novel is permeated with repetitive themes, references to past events, anticipations of the future. It is no accident that there is an abundance of musical images, comparisons, metaphors.

In general, as A. Maurois notes, Proust constantly compares his characters, objects and situations described by him with examples from the sphere of art. The novel is filled, saturated with such comparisons, where art invades real life. They inseparably coexist in the mind of the writer. The richest cultural context in which the author himself (a connoisseur of fine art and literature, a music lover) is immersed constantly declares itself in the pages of his works, opening up special opportunities for describing the world and human consciousness.

Proust's works impress with a deep penetration into the character's consciousness, a minute transfer of finest aspects, changes of the character's mood and some acute perception of the surrounding world, nature, people, objects, and environment. There is much evidence that he had wonderful memory. Some researchers state that these psychic features of the writer are associated with his asthma. As Georges Rivane (with his medical background) puts it, Proust "immediately measures his sensations, evaluates and records them in this hypersensitive memory and stores them deep in his consciousness ..." [Rivane 1945, 82]. A son of a doctor, Proust, often describes the

appearance and inner state of his characters in a medically clear and sometimes even cruelly truthful way. It is especially noticeable in *Time Regained*, in the famous scene of a matinée at Prince de Guermantes, where the character meets his old acquaintances he has not seen for a long time. Speaking about this scene in his book *The Course of Recognition*, P. Ricœur focuses on the problem of recognition and illustrates it with the following example [Ricœur 2010, 66–68]. Proust's character experiences serious problems recognizing people he once knew: Time has changed their features, figures, behavior so greatly, that he has to make a great effort to draw a parallel between their former and present appearances. Describing the signs of aging, Proust minutely and reliably depicts even the smallest details, focusing on even the most trifling aspects. This characteristic feature typical of the author of the *In Search of Lost Time* can be traced throughout the novel.

The role of habit in human life is a special theme in Proust's work. It is characteristic that sometimes, emphasizing its significance, he writes this word with a capital letter (like the word "time"). M.K. Mamardashvili correctly noted that the habit is "one of Proust's most important topics" [Mamardashvili 1995, 31]. A habit often rules a person, largely determining their actions, sometimes helping people and sometimes hindering them. Proust writes about positive aspects of habits that allow "to adapt to existence which seems unbearable at first" [Proust 1999, 283]. Thanks to this, for example, excessively acute new sensations gradually subside when the character finds himself in an unusual environment (at the Balbec hotel). But there are also some negative aspects, identical to some inertia, routine. For example, in the character's life with his beloved habit eventually becomes synonymous with boredom, monotony, stagnation. In general, negative aspects of a habit are represented by Proust much more often than positive ones. The habit is opposed to vivid impressions which are so important to the writer, because a spontaneous impression associated with the past gives access to timeless dimensions of reality: "The work of an artist is an attempt to see beyond matter, experience, words. It is something else, something different from our life. When we stop controlling our "selves", our conceit, passions, intellect and habit on top of genuine impressions,

completely blocking them pretending to be real life” [Proust 1999, 193]. It is interesting that the habit was also the theme of Darlu’s lectures attended by Proust. The topic was formulated as follows: “The theory of habit as a middle term between Will and Nature” [see Fraisse 2014, 66]. In fact, this is a quote from Félix Ravaisson’s work “*On Habit*”, which greatly impressed his contemporaries and is still being discussed by philosophers of different countries. It is known that Proust was acquainted with Ravaisson, and the very theme of the habit, it can be assumed, was perceived by him through Darlu’s lectures [see: Bestegui 2013, 113].

### **Conclusion. Novel as an optical instrument**

As I have already noted, the novel, apart from the subtlest psychological notes or long arguments, contains many other layers: descriptions (often ironic) of life of high society, descriptions of nature, sketches of life of various strata of French society, etc. But an artistic description of memory and its work associated with various episodes of life, which has already become a classic depiction of love and jealousy, of “changing feelings”, as the writer puts it, is a sign closely associated in our consciousness with the name of Proust. There are new ways in literature. In any case, reading, for example, Gaito Gazdanov’s novels, especially “*An Evening with Claire*,” we can say: “Well, this is a new Proust!”

Proust himself believed that a work of art is an optical instrument through which the readers begin to discern in themselves what they would otherwise fail to see. The ineffable which we store in our souls only for ourselves and which constitutes a qualitative difference in our sensations and sensations of other people is what we have to leave, as Proust puts it, “on the threshold,” confining ourselves to conversations with others, to general, external contacts. It reveals the art of such masters as Vinteuil and Elstir, expressing the “worlds hidden from our eyes, which we call individuals and which we would never have known without the aid of art” [Proust 1999, 251]. These artists give us an ability to “find other eyes, look at the universe through the eyes of another person, through the eyes of hundreds of other people, see the hundred universes others see” [Proust 1999, 251–252]. This, of course, does not mean that we should all agree with



Proust's observations and judgments, no matter how perceptive they may be. First of all, we rely on personal, existential experience. But Proust really in many ways shows us the way into our consciousness, and along this path we travel as we can. A modern American writer, Daniel Mendelsohn, said in one interview that, in his opinion, Proust's and Joyce's work formally represent the end of the genre of the novel that arose at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and gradually plunged deeper into the psychic life, into the inner world of man. But at the same time this is the beginning – after all, Proust “opened the door to our inner world. It is necessary to read Proust, to teach him, for Proust is useful to the soul. He teaches us to read our life as if it were a novel ... ‘What lesson do you learn from your own existence?’ This is the philosophy that Proust teaches us. ... Reading Proust is also a way of comprehending the world” [Mendelsohn, Kohler 2013, 111–112].

#### NOTES

(1) For example, the article underlines a similarity between Proust and Kierkegaard: [Champigny 1958, 129–135]. At the same time, the author emphasizes that parallels are significant only in the framework of Kierkegaard's “aesthetic stage”, which the Danish thinker, unlike Proust, does not believe to be supreme [see: Champigny 1958, 134–135].

(2) According to a modern researcher, who muses on differences between an autobiography and Proust's novel, “a biographical element is necessary at the beginning, it provides an existential experience that is a key to psychological truth and authenticity of a writer's action. It is the starting point and the foundation, it can even consist in almost literal borrowings ... and yet it is transformed and truly reconstructed” [Milly 1987, 10].

(3) See, for example, a detailed study on this topic: [Megay 1976]. The author shows that in many respects Proust remains much closer to Darlu and Rabier than to Bergson.

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