

SR 403

Proust, Samuel Beckett

(Grave Press: New York, 1931)

1-21.

like Proust
is also the
means of writing
the novel is making

long 7 remember

BECKETT
PROUST

Beckett

THE Proustian equation is never simple. The unknown, choosing its weapons from a hoard of values, is also the unknowable. And the quality of its action falls under two signatures. In Proust each spear may be a spear of Telephus. This dualism in multiplicity will be examined more closely in relation to Proust's 'perspectivism'. For the purposes of this synthesis it is convenient to adopt the inner chronology of the Proustian demonstration, and to examine in the first place that double-headed monster of damnation and salvation—Time.

The scaffolding of his structure is revealed to the narrator in the library of the Princesse de Guermantes (one time Mme. Verdurin), and the nature of its materials in the matinée that follows. His book takes form in his mind. He is aware of the many concessions required of the literary artist by the shortcomings of the literary convention. As a writer he is not altogether at liberty to detach effect from cause. It will be necessary, for example, to interrupt (disfigure) the luminous projection of subject desire with the comic relief of features. It will be impossible to prepare the hundreds of masks that

X = -X

600 = 08 p 16
M. A. S. = 1000

form = 5000
Proust = 1000 (has many things)
Echigo (has many things)

Gifts = (over 1000000)

rightly belong to the objects of even his most disinterested scrutiny. He accepts regretfully the sacred ruler and compass of literary geometry. But he will refuse to extend his submission to spatial scales, for he will refuse to measure the length and weight of man in terms of his body instead of in terms of his years. In the closing words of his book he states his position: 'But were I granted time to accomplish my work, I would not fail to stamp it with the seal of that Time, now so forcibly present to my mind, and in it I would describe men, even at the risk of giving them the appearance of monstrous beings, as occupying in Time a much greater place than that so sparingly conceded to them in Space, a place indeed extended beyond measure, because, like giants plunged in the years, they touch at once those periods of their lives—separated by so many days—so far apart in Time.'

Proust's creatures, then, are victims of this predominating condition and circumstance—Time; victims as lower organisms, conscious only of two dimensions and suddenly confronted with the mystery of height, are victims: victims and prisoners. There is no escape from the hours and the days. Neither from to-morrow nor from yesterday. There is no escape from yesterday because yesterday has deformed us, or been deformed by us. The mood is of no importance. Deformation has taken place.

cause or effect

Yesterday is not a milestone that has been passed, but a daystone on the beaten track of the years, and irremediably part of us, within us, heavy and dangerous. We are not merely more weary because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday. A calamitous day, but calamitous not necessarily in content. The good or evil disposition of the object has neither reality nor significance. The immediate joys and sorrows of the body and the intelligence are so many superfections. Such as it was, it has been assimilated to the only world that has reality and significance, the world of our own latent consciousness, and its cosmography has suffered a dislocation. So that we are rather in the position of Tantalus, with this difference, that we allow ourselves to be tantalised. And possibly the perpetuum mobile of our disillusion is subject to more variety. The aspirations of yesterday were valid for yesterday's ego, not for to-day's. We are disappointed at the nullity of what we are pleased to call attainment. But what is attainment? The identification of the subject with the object of his desire. The subject has died—and perhaps many times—on the way. For subject B to be disappointed by the banality of an object chosen by subject A is as illogical as to expect one's hunger to be dissipated by the spectacle of Uncle eating his dinner. Even suppose that by one of those

Ab, yesterday (today)
Krop's text
Crisis in mind
I can't think of them as memory
1930 makes 1 February?

hanging up

trials
new in circle
Proust's
makes events
clear system
(vs. Xeos)

2

spatial time
no time
Toward
Sartre's
oblivion
centuries

rare miracles of coincidence, when the calendar of facts runs parallel to the calendar of feelings, realisation takes place, that the object of desire (in the strictest sense of that malady) is achieved by the subject, then the congruence is so perfect, the time-state of attainment eliminates so accurately the time-state of aspiration, that the actual seems the inevitable, and, all conscious intellectual effort to reconstitute the invisible and unthinkable as a reality being fruitless, we are incapable of appreciating our joy by comparing it with our sorrow. Voluntary memory (Proust repeats it ad nauseam) is of no value as an instrument of evocation, and provides an image as far removed from the real as the myth of our imagination or the caricature furnished by direct perception. There is only one real impression and one adequate mode of evocation. Over neither have we the least control. That reality and that mode will be discussed in their proper place.

But the poisonous ingenuity of Time in the science of affliction is not limited to its action on the subject, that action, as has been shown, resulting in an unceasing modification of his personality, whose permanent reality, if any, can only be apprehended as a retrospective hypothesis. The individual is the seat of a constant process of decantation, decantation from the vessel containing the fluid of future time, sluggish, pale and monochrome, to the vessel containing the

Beckett explains his book / is situated in the future / (surreal operation)

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In voluntary memory - the Poisons of Time

(The show is that what is always shown in the film - brownish)

transformed into the most horrible anxiety by a simple remark addressed by her to her aunt or to a friend: 'To-morrow, then, at half-past eight.' The tacit understanding that the future can be controlled is destroyed. The future event cannot be focussed, its implications cannot be seized, until it is definitely situated and a date assigned to it. When Albertine was his prisoner, the possibility of her escape did not seriously disturb him, because it was indistinct and abstract, like the possibility of death. Whatever opinion we may be pleased to hold on the subject of death, we may be sure that it is meaningless and valueless. Death has not required us to keep a day free. The art of publicity has been revolutionised by a similar consideration. Thus I am exhorted, not merely to try the aperient of the Shepherd, but to try it at seven o'clock.

experience Time Sees B low the to - Carlos BA Time has

So far we have considered a mobile subject before an ideal object, immutable and incorruptible. But our vulgar perception is not concerned with other than vulgar phenomena. Exemption from intrinsic flux in a given object does not change the fact that it is the correlative of a subject that does not enjoy such immunity. The observer infects the observed with his own mobility. Moreover, when it is a case of human intercourse, we are faced by the problem of an object whose mobility is not merely a function of the subject's, but independent and personal: two

we change a memory (4) by our perception of it, or a memory is a relationship, a memory. (but the you and I have changed)

fluid of past time, agitated and multicoloured by the phenomena of its hours. Generally speaking, the former is innocuous, amorphous, without character, without any Borgian virtue. Lazily considered in anticipation and in the haze of our smug will to live, of our pernicous and incurable optimism, it seems exempt from the bitterness of fatality: in store for us, not in store in us. On occasions, however, it is capable of supplementing the labours of its colleague. It is only necessary for its surface to be broken by a date, by any temporal specification allowing us to measure the days that separate us from a menace—or a promise. Swann, for example, contemplates with doleful resignation the months that he must spend away from Odette during the summer. One day Odette says: 'Forcheville (her lover, and, after the death of Swann, her husband) is going to Egypt at Pentecost.' Swann translates: 'I am going with Forcheville to Egypt at Pentecost.' The fluid of future time freezes, and poor Swann, face to face with the future reality of Odette and Forcheville in Egypt, suffers more grievously than even at the misery of his present condition. The narrator's desire to see La Berna in *Phèdre* is stimulated more violently by the announcement 'Doors closed at two o'clock' than by the mystery of Bergotte's 'Jansenist pallor and solar myth.' His indifference at parting from Albertine at the end of the day in Balbec is

separate and immanent dynamisms related by no system of synchronisation. So that whatever the object, our thirst for possession is, by definition, insatiable. At the best, all that is realised in Time (all Time produce), whether in Art or Life, can only be possessed successively, by a series of partial annexations—and never integrally and at once. The tragedy of the Marcel-Albertine liaison is the type-tragedy of the human relationship whose failure is preordained. My analysis of that central catastrophe will clarify this too abstract and arbitrary statement of Proust's pessimism. But for every ~~you~~ ^{sculpture} ~~sculpture~~ ^{sculpture} and a compass. Memory and Habit are attributes of the Time cancer. They control the most simple Proustian episode, and an understanding of their mechanical application. They are the flying buttresses of the temple raised to commemorate the wisdom of the architect that is also the wisdom of all the sages, from Brahma to Leopardi, the wisdom that consists not in the satisfaction but in the ablation of desire:

(sculpture) (sculpture) (to modern sculpture)

non che la speme, il desiderio è spento.

The laws of memory are subject to the more general laws of habit. Habit is a compromise effected between the individual and his environment, or between

* * *

tween the individual and his own organic eccentricities, the guarantee of a dull inviolability, the lightning-conductor of his existence. Habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit. Breathing is habit. Life is habit. Or rather life is a succession of habits, since the individual is a succession of individuals; the world being a projection of the individual's consciousness (an objectivation of the individual's will, Schopenhauer would say), the pact must be continually renewed, the letter of safe-conduct brought up to date. The creation of the world did not take place once and for all time, but takes place every day. Habit then is the generic term for the countless treaties concluded between the countless subjects that constitute the individual and their countless correlative objects. The periods of transition that separate consecutive adaptations (because by no expedient of macabre transubstantiation can the grave-sheets serve as swaddling-clothes) represent the perilous zones in the life of the individual, dangerous, precarious, painful, mysterious and fertile, when for a moment the boredom of living is replaced by the suffering of being. (At this point, and with a heavy heart and for the satisfaction or disgruntlement of Gideans, semi and integral, I am inspired to concede a brief parenthesis to all the apologetic, who are capable of interpreting the 'Live dangerously,' that victorious hiccough in vacuo, as the

fugitive experience may or may not be exempt from pain. It does not inaugurate a period of transition. But the first and major mode is inseparable from suffering and anxiety—the suffering of the dying and the jealous anxiety of the ousted. The old ego dies hard. Such as it was, a minister of dulness, it was also an agent of security. When it ceases to perform that second function, when it is opposed by a phenomenon that it cannot reduce to the condition of a comfortable and familiar concept, when, in a word, it betrays its trust as a screen to spare its victim the spectacle of reality, it disappears, and the victim, now an ex-victim, for a moment free, is exposed to that reality—an exposure that has its advantages and its disadvantages. It disappears—with wailing and gnashing of teeth. The mortal microcosm cannot survive the relative immortality of the macrocosm. The whisky bears a grudge against the decanter. The narrator cannot sleep in a strange room, is tortured by a high ceiling, being used to a low ceiling. What is taking place? The old pact is out of date. It contained no clause treating of high ceilings. The habit of friendship for the low ceiling is ineffectual, must die in order that a habit of friendship for the high ceiling may be born. Between this death and that birth, reality, intolerable, absorbed feverishly by his consciousness at the extreme limit of its intensity, by his total consciousness organised to avert the

Dams

B.S. - return

to work

to work

Gide - things written

B.S. -

B.S. - 5

B.S. - Dean

Dean

Dean

Dean

Dean

Dean

Dean

Dean

Dean

Dean

Dean

national anthem of the true ego exiled in habit. The Gideans advocate a habit of living—and look for an epithet. A nonsensical bastard phrase. They imply a hierarchy of habits, as though it were valid to speak of good habits and bad habits. An automatic adjustment of the human organism to the conditions of its existence has as little moral significance as the casting of a clout when May is or is not out; and the exhortation to cultivate a habit as little sense as an exhortation to cultivate a coryza. The suffering of being: that is, the free play of every faculty. Be-cause the pernicious devotion of habit paralyses our attention, drugs those handmaidens of perception whose co-operation is not absolutely essential. Habit is like François, the immortal cook of the Proust household, who knows what has to be done, and will slave all day and all night rather than tolerate any redundant activity in the kitchen. But our current habit of living is as incapable of dealing with the mystery of a strange sky or a strange room, with any circumstance unforeseen in her curriculum, as François of conceiving or realising the full horror of a Duval omelette. Then the atrophied faculties come to the rescue, and the maximum value of our being is restored. But less drastic circumstances may produce this tense and provisional lucidity in the nervous system. Habit may not be dead (or as good as dead, doomed to die) but sleeping. This second and more

disaster, to create the new habit that will empty the mystery of its threat—and also of its beauty. 'If Habit,' writes Proust, 'is a second nature, it keeps us in ignorance of the first, and is free of its cruelties and its enchantments.' Our first nature, therefore, corresponding, as we shall see later, to a deeper instinct than the mere animal instinct of self-preservation, is laid bare during these periods of abandonment. And its cruelties and enchantments are the cruelties and enchantments of reality. 'Enchantments of reality' has the air of a paradox. But when the object is perceived as particular and unique and not merely the member of a family, when it appears independent of any general notion and detached from the samity of a cause, isolated and inexplicable in the light of ignorance, then and then only may it be a source of enchantment. Unfortunately Habit has laid its veto on this form of perception, its action being precisely to hide the essence—the Idea—of the object in the haze of conception—preconception. Normally we are in the position of the tourist (the traditional specification would constitute a pleonasm), whose aesthetic experience consists in a series of identifications and for whom Baudelaire is the end rather than the means. Deprived by nature of the faculty of cognition and by upbringing of any acquaintance with the laws of dynamics, a brief inscription immortalises his emotion. The creature of habit turns

Ideas involuntarily

These things are done by H.S.S., to be done or to be done in the same way as the other things

aside from the object that cannot be made to correspond with one or other of his intellectual prejudices, that resists the propositions of his team of syntheses, organised by Habit on labour-saving principles.

Examples of these two modes—the death of Habit and the brief suspension of its vigilance—abound in Proust. I will transcribe two incidents in the life of the narrator. Of these the first, illustrative of the pact renewed, is extremely important as preparing a later incident that I will have occasion to discuss in relation to Proustian memory and Proustian revelation. The second exemplifies the pact waived in the interests of the narrator's *via dolorosa*.

The narrator arrives at Balbec-Plage, a holiday resort in Normandy, for the first time, accompanied by his grandmother. They are staying at the Grand Hotel. He enters his room, feverish and exhausted after his journey. But sleep, in this inferno of unfamiliar objects, is out of the question. All his faculties are on the alert, on the defensive, vigilant and taut, and as painfully incapable of relaxation as the tortured body of La Baluc in his cage, where he could neither stand upright nor sit down. There is no room for his body in this vast and hideous apartment, because his attention has peopled it with gigantic furniture, a storm of sound and an agony of colour. Habit has not had time to silence the ex-

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transformed the individual capable of suffering into a stranger for whom the motives of that suffering are an idle tale, when not only the objects of his affection have vanished, but also that affection itself; and he thinks how absurd is our dream of a Paradise with retention of personality, since our life is a succession of Paradises successively denied, that the only true Paradise is the Paradise that has been lost, and that death will cure many of the desire for immortality.

The second episode that I have chosen as an illustration of the pact waived engages the same two characters, the narrator and his grandmother. He has been staying at Doncières with his friend Saint-Loup. He telephones to his grandmother in Paris. (After reading the description of this telephone call and its hardly less powerful corollary, when, years later, he speaks over the telephone with Albertine on returning home late after his first visit to the Princesse de Guermantes, Cocteau's *Voix Humaine* seems not merely a banality but an unnecessary banality.) After the conventional misunderstanding with the Vigilant Virgins (*sic*) of the central exchange, he hears his grandmother's voice, or what he assumes to be her voice, because he hears it now for the first time, in all its purity and reality, so different from the voice that he had been accustomed to follow on the open score of her face that he does not recognise it as hers. It is a grievous voice, its fragility unmitigated

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visions of the clock, reduce the hostility of the violet curtains, remove the furniture and lower the inaccessible vault of this belvedere. Alone in this room that is not yet a room but a cavern of wild beasts, invested on all sides by the implacable strangers whose privacy he has disturbed, he desires to die. His grandmother comes in, comforts him, checks the stooping gesture that he makes to unbutton his boots, insists on helping him to undress, puts him to bed, and before leaving him makes him promise to knock on the partition that separates her room from his, should he require anything during the night. He knocks, and she comes again to him. But that night and for many nights he suffered. That suffering he interprets as the obscure, organic, humble refusal on the part of those elements that represented all that was best in his life to accept the possibility of a formula in which they would have no part. This reluctance to die, this long and desperate and daily resistance before the perpetual exfoliation of personality, explains also his horror at the idea of ever living without Gilberte Swann, of ever losing his parents, at the idea of his own death. But this terror at the thought of separation—from Gilberte, from his parents, from himself—is dissipated in a greater terror, when he thinks that to the pain of separation will succeed indifference, that the privation will cease to be a privation when the alchemy of Habit has

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and undisguised by the carefully arranged mask of her features, and this strange real voice is the measure of its owner's suffering. He hears it also as the symbol of her isolation, of their separation, as impalpable as a voice from the dead. The voice stops. His grandmother seems as irretrievably lost as Eurydice among the shades. Alone before the mouthpiece he calls her name in vain. Nothing can persuade him to remain at Doncières. He must see his grandmother. He leaves for Paris. He surprises her reading her beloved Mme. de Sévigné. But he is not there because she does not know that he is there. He is present at his own absence. And, in consequence of his journey and his anxiety, his habit is in abeyance, the habit of his tenderness for his grandmother. His gaze is no longer the necromancy that sees in each precious object a mirror of the past. The notion of what he should see has not had time to interfere in its priam between the eye and its object. His eye functions with the cruel precision of a camera; it photographs the reality of his grandmother. And he realises with horror that his grandmother is dead, long since and many times, that the cherished familiar of his mind, mercifully composed all along the years by the solicitude of habitual memory, exists no longer, that this mad old woman, drowsing over her book, overburdened with years, flushed and coarse and vulgar, is a stranger whom he has never seen.

15

notes
12
escape

6
471 orb
Bunck
3 alle
Dyng
(Stew)
Loving
thead

Sublimely he doesn't
know her, his
recognition is
her fall, he
was content
her reality

7
Film

The respite is brief. 'Of all human plants,' writes Proust, 'Habit requires the least fostering, and is the first to appear on the seeming desolation of the most barren rock.' Brief, and dangerously painful. The fundamental duty of Habit, about which it describes the futile and stupefying arabesques of its supererogations, consists in a perpetual adjustment and readjustment of our organic sensibility to the conditions of its worlds. Suffering represents the omission of that duty, whether through negligence or inefficiency, and boredom its adequate performance. The pendulum oscillates between these two terms: Suffering—that opens a window on the real and is the main condition of the artistic experience, and Boredom—with its host of top-hatted and hygienic ministers, Boredom that must be considered as the most tolerable because the most durable of human evils. Considered as a progression, this endless series of renovations leaves us as indifferent as the heterogeneity of any one of its terms, and the inconsequence of any given me dis- turbs us as little as the comedy of substitution. In- deed, we take as little cognisance of one as of the other, unless, vaguely, after the event, or clearly, when, as in the case of Proust, two birds in the bush are of infinitely greater value than one in the hand, and because—if I may add this nox vomica to an apéritif of metaphors—the heart of the cauliflower or the ideal core of the onion would represent a more

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how; *emphatic*
how *emphatic*

conditioned reflex, in its most primitive manifesta- tions a reaction before a danger-stimulus, and seldom exempt, even in its superior and apparently most disinterested form, from utilitarian considerations. Curiosity is the hair of our habit tending to stand on end. It rarely happens that our attention is not stained in greater or lesser degree by this animal element. Curiosity is the safeguard, not the death, of the cat, whether in skirts or on all fours. The more interested our interest, the more indelible must be its record of impressions. Its booty will always be avail- able, because its aggression was a form of self-defence, i.e. the function of an invariable. In extreme cases memory is so closely related to habit that its word takes flesh, and is not merely available in cases of urgency, but habitually enforced. Thus absence of mind is fortunately compatible with the active pres- ence of our organs of articulation. I repeat that remembrance, in its highest sense, cannot be applied to these extracts of our anxiety. Strictly speaking, we can only remember what has been registered by our extreme inattention and stored in that ultimate and inaccessible dungeon of our being to which Habit does not possess the key, and does not need to, be- cause it contains none of the hideous and useful paraphernalia of war. But here, in that 'gouffre interdit à nos sondes,' is stored the essence of our- selves, the best of our many selves and their concre-

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appropriate tribute to the labours of poetical excava- tion than the crown of bay. I draw the conclusion of this matter from Proust's treasury of nutshell phrases: 'If there were no such thing as Habit, Life would of necessity appear delicious to all those whom Death would threaten at every moment, that is to say, to all Mankind.'

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Proust had a bad memory—as he had an inefficient habit, because he had an inefficient habit. The man with a good memory does not remember anything because he does not forget anything. His memory is uniform, a creature of routine, at once a condition and function of his impeccable habit, an instrument of reference instead of an instrument of discovery. The pzan of his memory: 'I remember as well as I remember yesterday . . .' is also its epitaph, and gives the precise expression of its value. He cannot remember yesterday any more than he can remember to-morrow. He can contemplate yesterday hung out to dry with the wettest August bank holiday on record a little further down the clothes-line. Because his memory is a clothes-line and the images of his past dirty linen redeemed and the infallibly complacent servants of his reminiscential needs. Memory is obvi- ously conditioned by perception. Curiosity is a non-

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tions that simplists call the world, the best because accumulated slyly and painfully and patiently under the nose of our vulgarity, the fine essence of a smothered divinity whose whispered 'disfazione' is drowned in the healthy bawling of an all-embracing appetite, the pearl that may give the lie to our cara- pace of peace and pewter. May—when we escape into the spacious annexe of mental alienation, in sleep or the rare dispensation of waking madness. From this deep source Proust hoisted his world. His work is not an accident, but its salvage is an accident. The conditions of that accident will be revealed at the peak of this prevision. A second-hand climax is better than none. But no purpose can be served by withholding the name of the diver. Proust calls him 'involuntary memory.' The memory that is not memory, but the application of a concordance to the Old Testament of the individual, he calls 'voluntary memory.' This is the uniform memory of 'Inethi- gence,' and it can be relied on to reproduce for our gratified inspection those impressions of the past that were consciously and intelligently formed. It has no interest in the mysterious element of inatten- tion that colours our most commonplace experiences. It presents the past in monochrome. The images it chooses are as arbitrary as those chosen by imagina- tion, and are equally remote from reality. Its action has been compared by Proust to that of turning the

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leaves of an album of photographs. The material that it furnishes contains nothing of the past, merely a blurred and uniform projection once removed of our anxiety and opportunism—that is to say, nothing. There is no great difference, says Proust, between the memory of a dream and the memory of reality. When the sleeper awakes, this emissary of his habit assures him that his 'personality' has not disappeared with his fatigue. It is possible (for those that take an interest in such speculations) to consider the resurrection of the soul as a final piece of impertinence from the same source. It insists on that most necessary, wholesome and monotonous plagiarism—the plagiarism of oneself. This thoroughgoing democrat makes no distinction between the 'Pensées' of Pascal and a soap advertisement. In fact, if Habit is the Goddess of Dulness, voluntary memory is Shadwell, and of Irish extraction. Involuntary memory is expansive, 'an immediate, total and delicious deflagration.' (It restores, not merely the past object, but the Lazarus that it charmed or tortured, not merely because it abstracts the useful, the opportune, the accidental, because in its flame it has consumed Habit and all its works, and in its brightness revealed what the mock reality of experience never can and never will reveal—the real.) But involuntary memory is an unruly magician and will not be importuned. It

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chooses its own time and place for the performance of its miracle. I do not know how often this miracle occurs in Proust. I think twelve or thirteen times. But the first—the famous episode of the madeleine steeped in tea—would justify the assertion that his entire book is a monument to involuntary memory and the epic of its action. The whole of Proust's world comes out of a teacup, and not merely Combray and his childhood. For Combray brings us to the two 'ways' and to Swann, and to Swann may be related every element of the Proustian experience and consequently its climax in revelation. Swann is behind Balbec, and Balbec is Albertine and Saint-Loup. Directly he involves Odette and Gilberte, the Verdurins and their clan, the music of Vinteuil and the magical prose of Bergotte; indirectly (via Balbec and Saint-Loup) the Guermantes, Oriane and the Duke, the Princease and M. de Charlus. Swann is the corner-stone of the entire structure, and the central figure of the narrator's childhood, a childhood that involuntary memory, stimulated or charmed by the long-forgotten taste of a madeleine steeped in an infusion of tea, conjures in all the relief and colour of its essential significance from the shallow well of a cup's inscrutable banality.

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