Proust Curious 7: "Time Regained"

HW: Hello and welcome to *Proust Curious*, a podcast in partnership with *Public Books*. I'm Hannah Weaver, an Assistant Professor of Medieval Literature at Columbia University and Fellow at the Institute for Ideas and Imagination.

EC: And I'm Emma Claussen, an Early Modernist at Trinity College, Cambridge. *Proust Curious* is a podcast about the experience of reading *À la Recherche du temps perdu*, all seven volumes. Written between 1906 and 1922, published between 1913 and 1927, Marcel Proust's cultural touchstone is an object of enduring fascination and, let's face it, intimidation.

HW: We're not Proust experts, but we do study literature for a living, so we feel both under- and over-qualified to tackle this. Join us as we search for lost time.

EC: ... and remember things Proust.

HW: Today we're discussing the seventh and final volume, final volume of *À la Recherche du temps perdu*, *Le Temps retrouvé*, or *Time Regained*. This volume starts with a narrator visiting his friend Gilberte de Saint-Loup at her country home near Combray and reflecting on his long friendship with her and her husband Robert, who is off chasing men. Then the First World War breaks out and Robert de Saint-Loup is among the millions who go off to fight. The narrator, on the other hand, remains sickly and spends much of the war in a convalescent home of some kind, returning to Paris only a few times to observe the city in the shadow of war and to stumble upon a brothel run by the former tailor Jupien. At Jupien's *hôtel*, he once again spies on Monsieur Charlus, who is paying to be whipped, and reflects further on desire and habit before the shock of Saint-Loup's death in battle makes him take to his bed again.

EC: We then move forward a few years to a moment after the war when the narrator returns to Paris and attends a gathering at the Princesse de Guermantes, who, by the way, is now Madame Verdurin that was. That's a surprise that Hannah signalled, I think, in one of our first episodes. Her social climbing has really peaked.

So he goes to this gathering, he's feeling bleak and uninspired, but then as he arrives, he trips on uneven paving stones in the courtyard, triggering a sequence of remembered impressions that enable him to understand how time can be regained and therefore both the purpose of art and what his writing project is going to be, i.e. it's the one we've been reading. But before he can go ahead and write it, a servant tells him he can enter the party. He goes in. He is stunned to find that everyone he knows has aged several decades over the several decades that he's known them. But ultimately, this shock is converted into further crystallization of his sense of the relationship between art and time.

HW: Or put more simply, he figures out whom, what, where, when, and why to write.

EC: At last.

HW: At last.

But before we get into it, Emma, it's time for our question from the Proust questionnaire, which Proust answered twice at ages 13 and 20. We always link to the questionnaire in our show notes. Emma, this week our question is 'who is your favourite heroine?'

And I did assume literary heroine, right? Yes, me too. Well, you assumed literary heroine because Proust answered 'Bérénice'.

Who is Bérénice, Emma?

EC: Bérénice is a queen of the classical canon, but I presume, although he didn't say, that Proust meant Racine's Bérénice. She's the heroine of one of Racine's best known plays. We know that Proust loved Racine and he mentions *Phèdre* several times. So it's interesting that his favourite heroine was Bérénice, who is probably best summarized as somebody who takes a breakup extremely well.

HW: Which is maybe the opposite of at least the narrator. I'm not going to speak.

EC: And the opposite of Phèdre, right?

HW: Yes, that's right.

EC: The thing about Bérénice is that it's very famous in the canon of tragedies because nobody dies. Racine set himself the challenge of writing a tragedy that provokes what he called *tristesse majestueuse*, so really profound sadness, without blood and violence. Essentially, that sadness is simply the fact that Bérénice and Titus, her lover, or maybe Bérénice and this other guy, who's the third wheel in the play, can't be together. So it's about thwarted love and the dignity that Bérénice displays in the play.

HW: So really a figure of dignity is his favourite heroine.

EC: Yeah, I guess you could say that.

Who's yours? Who's your favourite? You tell me yours.

Who's your favourite heroine, Hannah? Okay.

HW: Well, I answered this question by looking at my shelves and having a think about who was in these books. And first of all, I was sort of appalled to realize that most of them have heroes and not heroines. But I decided to play to type. And my favourite heroine is Énide from Chrétien de Troyes, *Érec et Énide*, a medieval romance. And I like her because she defies every stereotype that people have about medieval women. And therefore, she is just delightful because she's spunky in her own person, but also a very useful tool for teaching. So rude. What a rude reason to like someone. Anyway, who is yours, Emma?

EC: Well, I think, in all honesty, my favorite heroine is probably Anne Elliot from Jane Austen's Persuasion. Oh my gosh, I almost said Elinor Dashwood.

HW: But I was like, I can't just choose a Jane Austen character. But I'm really happy you did, because I feel like she has all the best heroines, no?

EC: Yeah, I think I love Anne Elliot the most, probably because I just love that book so much. And also, I think that her mode of being kind of silly, but also like, really struggling, is very affecting. And I love the ending.

HW: So, a figure of dignity?

EC: Yeah, I was thinking that she does have something in common with Bérénice. But also what I love about her is that, I mean, honestly, I read this book, basically every time I get ill. Because I find it so enjoyable. And every time she's a bit different. So I think that's also something that makes me appreciate Anne Elliot.

HW: Wonderful.

EC: So, Hannah, what did you notice about the final volume of *À la Recherche*?

HW: I really feel like this whole episode is going to be just a parade of what did we notice, but I've picked out something in particular. But I also just want to say before I say those things, that I truly feel like I marked every other page in this volume. I basically did the thing that students do where they highlight the entire text, making it sort of meaning the highlight is meaningless. That's how I felt about this volume. But for my what did I notice, I just want to mention some of the ways he talks about the past and time some of the adjectives he gives to the past. At one point, he calls it slippery, sad and sweet. He calls it innumerable, faraway unfurled. And all of these adjectives I find just so evocative for modifying the word the past. And I thought, this is not so much of just a simple adjectival modifier. But at the very end of the book, he also speaks of time as a burden that people are carrying around with them. So, he writes, 'at all events, I should not fail [in his book] to depict there in man as having the extension not of his body, but of his years as being forced to the cumulatively heavy task, which finally crushes him of dragging them with him wherever he goes.' I that's just such an amazing way of talking about really dying of old age, that old age is a is a burden that you're bearing upon yourself as you move around and you're eventually crushed by it. I found that really remarkable. So that's really an image of someone being under time. But he just pages later turns around and says, 'I had a feeling of intense fatigue when I realized that all this span of time had not only been lived, thought, secreted by me, uninterruptedly' Insane to think of time coming out of a person, right? 'secreted by me uninterruptedly, that it was my life, that it was myself. But more still, because I had it every moment to keep it attached to myself, that it bore me up'. So wait, he's having to like hold it to him. And it is carrying him, which seemed contradictory, then continuing 'that I was poised on its dizzy summit, that I could not move without taking it with me.' It's just these massive paradoxes that deal with time, it is always something huge. But whether it is external to the person internal to the person, carrying the person, being dragged by the person, a peak that you're upon a burden that you're beneath, then so it's sort of like that it's ineffable. And it's ineffability, I think Proust is approaching through this sequence of paradoxes.

EC: He's making it this incredibly material, almost physical object.

HW: Yeah, right. But a physical object that has all kinds of contradictory qualities that no physical object could ever have.

EC: Yeah, it's almost impossible to imagine.

HW: Right, right.

EC: But yet tangible,

HW: But yet tangible. Emma, what did you notice this time?

EC: I was really struck by the contrast between the long section that's about Paris at war. And, you know, what happens to society, the diversity of the city, of all the soldiers there, and then the, I guess, second half or so of the book, which is more about, you know, time and art. And I think we're going to be spending more time on that half. Almost that we might just forget that this mini war novel, that's almost extractable in itself, happens as well. But there are these scenes in the Paris at war section. I think some of the descriptions of Paris during the war are really interesting. And sometimes lyrical, sometimes quite odd. And those things combine in the description of the blackout, for example, that happens when Paris is under bombardment. And the narrator just happens, just innocently happens to be there to notice all kinds of like sexual creeping that happens under the cover of darkness, like down in the catacombs. So there's all this evocation of the shadow life of society and humanity, and what is possible in the dark in that part of the text, interspersed with the kind of the light from the planes. And then that, I feel, is in interesting contrast to the really striking luminosity of the second half, which is very present in the vocabulary where he talks about like recognising things about art and life as bolts of lightning, or a new light that has illuminated his life and given it value. He says this quite explicitly. He says, 'the idea of time was a value to me for yet another reason. It told me that it was time to begin if I wish to attain to what I had sometimes perceived in the course of my life, in brief lightning flashes, on the Guermantes way and in my drives in the carriage of Madame de Villeparisis, at those moments of perception, which have made me think that life was worth living. How much more worth living did it appear to me now, now that I seem to see that this life that we live in half-darkness can be illumined.' I think that the French is much more poetic actually, because instead of lightning flashes and illumined, we get *éclair* and *éclairci*, so kind of ...

HW: 'lightening-ed', as it were.

EC: Yeah, we get these echoes. So in sum, I suppose I noticed the light and the shade.

HW: How wonderful, how poetic. No, but I'm really glad that you brought up the sort of symbiosis of the first and second halves, because I don't think it's immediately apparent. And I think that's a really insightful reading that you've offered of how they tie together. It's almost like he's coming through the valley of the shadow of death and into the light.

EC: Yeah, I've been really interested in war throughout this reading, which I think we don't have time to go into too much. But there's lots of interesting contrasts between love and war, and those things also echo through the second half.

HW: But really, we must continue.

EC: But really, what this volume is best known for isn't the war. It's the way that he finally grasps what he has been reaching for.

HW: Yeah, and glimpsing, right? He's had moments of flashes or lightning flashes of insight, but he hasn't been able to analyse them profoundly until this time.

EC: And therefore, he hasn't been able to write. So just after the war, he's all sad because he's like, 'oh, I still have no literary talent. I don't even care about it anymore. I don't even enjoy my life. What am I even doing?' And then he trips on a paving stone.

HW: And that paving stone recalls to him a paving stone in Venice. And all of a sudden, this Venice vacation, which he felt like he had nearly forgotten, comes back intact in the same way that his childhood in Combray had come back intact when he had dipped the madeleine into tea at the beginning of the book. So he calls this moment, at one point, he calls it '*une sensation transposée*', 'a transposed sensation', where something physical, a bodily experience, echoes so strongly a past bodily experience that past and present come together and sort of collapse, and you have access to things that seemed gone forever.

EC: Right, so we start to see how time might be regained.

HW: Right. So, he goes through this process and leads us through his analysis of those moments. And the first thing he does is he sort of makes a resolution, right? He's like, these things keep happening. And this time, I'm quoting now, 'I vowed that I should not resign myself to ignoring why without any fresh reasoning, without any definite hypothesis, the insoluble difficulties of the previous instant have lost all importance, as was the case when I tasted the madeleine'.

EC: Yeah, because it is this involuntary thing, like he was really sad and totally uninspired. And then suddenly, he's full of joy and clarity of vision. And he didn't try, it just happened kind of physically, but also mentally. And the result is that he becomes what he calls extratemporal. So he suddenly is able to perceive outside of time. So, he's very clear that although you might read the madeleine scene and think, okay, this is just about the past coming back, it's just about seeing it as from a distance. It's not just the past returning. It may be something that is common to both the past and to the present, and I'm quoting now,' and is much more essential than either of them'.

HW: And what's so interesting about this is that it is like a sensory experience for him. It's not just an intellectual experience. It's distinctly embodied. It's really a conjunction of intellect and body that make all of this possible. And he talks even about events as themselves being physical spaces, which

again, it's that paradoxical thing where events are occurrences in time, right? But he talks about them as vessels and images in this very physical way.

EC: Yeah, as you read this, you can really feel Proust interlinking all the different senses as well, like sound and touch and smell.

HW: It is really synesthetic.

EC: Yeah. So he writes, 'The slightest word we have spoken at a particular period of our life, the most insignificant gesture to which we have given vent, were surrounded, bore upon them the reflection of things which logically were unconnected with them, were indeed isolated from them by the intelligence which did not need them for reasoning purposes, but in the midst of which, here, the pink evening glow upon the floral wall decoration of a rustic restaurant, a feeling of hunger, sexual desire, enjoyment of luxury. There, curling waves beneath the blue of a morning sky, enveloping musical phrases, which partly emerge like mermaids' shoulders. The most simple act or gesture remains enclosed as though in a thousand jars of which each would be filled with things of different colours, odours and temperature, not to mention that those vases placed at intervals during the growing years throughout which we ceaselessly change, if only in dream or in thought, are situated at completely different levels and produce the impression of strangely varying climates.

HW: I love this idea of sort of a collection of vials of sensory information that themselves are, as he says, insignificant and slight, that when you access them, again, it's like the teacup and the madeleine, it's like the uneven paving zone, it's like also the sound of a spoon against a saucer, that these little vials get opened, and I guess not to make another weird simile, but it's like Pandora's box, and then after the box is opened, everything is rushed out of them.

EC: Yeah, it doesn't matter what the thing is, it doesn't matter that you've forgotten it.

HW: Right, and it doesn't matter that the thing itself might not be worth remembering, because what it does is it allows you access to everything.

EC: It's a container for your perceptions that you can find pleasure in.

HW: Right, it's kind of a defence of the insignificant, really. It's saying that the small things are the big things. It's just extraordinary. I'm sorry, I'm almost like chortling because I find this so remarkable. So these transposed sensations are really the key to how to find lost time, right? The whole thing has been in search of lost time. And finally, we learn how to find it.

EC: Yeah, and I told you this before, but I was extremely thrilled that it's findable, whether it's true or not, but I love the theory that it's findable.

HW: When you're reading it, he is so convinced of what he's writing, that it's convincing. It's like listening to someone who, first of all, is so smart, has really thought it through, and is just like, this is it. And you can't help but be borne along on that wave of feeling like, of course, this is how time can be recovered. Of course, time is recoverable. And here we go. Just as a little teaser, tomorrow, we'll

be back with a bonus episode about some reactions that will include analysis and reactions to this theory. So, just to say that it's not actually as open and shut as he makes it feel when you're reading it.

EC: Yeah, absolutely.

HW: But he writes that, so what you're supposed to do is you look inside yourself for these transposed sensations, your own madeleine moments, and then try, quote, 'to interpret them as symbols of so many laws and ideas, by trying to think, that is, by trying to adduce my sensation from its obscurity and convert it into an intellectual equivalent. And what other means were open to me than the creation of a work of art?'

EC: Tell me about it, Marcel.

HW: Having your memory jogged, remembering something from the past might be the key to understanding the foundational laws of the universe.

EC: Yeah, I mean… It's like pretty intense.

HW: But he's completely convinced that this is true.

EC: Yeah. To go back to our first episode, this is also a little bit like psychedelic, right? Suddenly, he's on this trip, and he's like, 'oh, I've understood the meaning of the universe.' He actually trips. He is tripping.

HW: So even though this is a lot like the madeleine scene, there are important differences.

EC: Yeah, and that also kind of answers the question that you may have, dear listener, as to why read all the way to this point.

HW: When there was already the madeleine scene, like 30 pages in, why didn't we just stop there?

EC: Yeah, and I think what's really compelling about this scene is that he refers back to the madeleine scene as having become memory itself and a kind of anxious memory, because it's already happened. He's had that moment where Combray emerges out of the teacup. And then he's not really understood it. He's not metabolized it. He's not been able to return to it. It has just become one more of those moments of inspiration that he's not been able to do anything with, and is just in contrast with the banal flow of the rest of life. Whereas now, he's like, 'oh, I get it. I understand what caused that. I understand how to interpret this. I'm converting this into ideas or something intellectual. And therefore, I can write. I can finally do the thing that I always wanted to, but for various reasons, never could'. So he can create art now. That's the difference, I think. What do you think?

HW: Yeah, no, I think that's right. I think that before it was almost like a premonition. Or for me to go back to the first episode, it was the type and now we're at the fulfilment.

EC: Beautiful.

HW: But the thing about his conception of art that I think is really fascinating is that for him, it's not really creativity, like inventing whole cloth things, but it's rather a process of discovery or *inventio* in the Latin sense, right? *Inventio* used to just mean finding something or discovering something. And it is through art that he finds lost time. So, art is sort of a mechanism of discovery, but also a mechanism of transcription of that discovery.

EC: Yeah, like registering the lightning bolt that otherwise only lasts a second.

HW: Right. He writes, 'Thus, I had already reached the conclusion that we are in no wise free in the presence of a work of art, that we do not create it as we please, but that it pre-exists in us, and we are compelled as though it were a law of nature to discover it because it is at once hidden from us and necessary. But is not that discovery which art may enable us to make most precious to us, a discovery of that which for most of us remains forever unknown, our true life, reality as we have ourselves felt it, and which differs so much from that which we had believed, that we are filled with delight when chance brings us an authentic revelation of it?'

EC: Yeah, and that delight is what we've been talking about, isn't it? That joy that this part of the work is suffused with.

HW: I think what's so fascinating here is that he really does suggest that there are two realities, right? There's the reality as we ourselves have felt it, and the reality that we had believed. I'm paraphrasing from what I just read. The reality which we had believed is the one that should be discarded in favour of the inner reality, which is art. So, art is reality, and a properly lived life is literature, and vice versa, right? Like literature is life. Reality is art. It's just this amazing manifesto.

EC: And it's what makes life worth living.

HW: And there's a real danger, right? There's a danger that convention and habit might erase life itself because you stop perceiving these critical moments as critical because they're smoothed over by habit. So habit is actually the big villain in the book.

EC: Yeah, and it's the disruption to the routine of the trip that enables all of this to unfurl.

HW: Right. If he hadn't stumbled in the courtyard, if he had just walked smoothly across the courtyard, this may have never happened.

EC: Yeah, and he reflects on how this has happened on his way to a party when actually what he then decides to do in order to write his major work that he now knows how to write, what he needs to do is withdraw from society and not be in these kind of frivolous, meaningless spaces with other people, engaging in friendships that are pointless. So I find that quite striking that the humdrum of other people is both necessary and deleterious to art.

HW: This whole thing is really a theory that's founded on paradox after paradox after paradox.

EC: Yeah, yeah, because it's so lonely, this perspective, it's all very inward. And yet he writes as well that he's writing for others. He's trying to give this gift to the world that he sincerely believes in and that lots of people think he's succeeded in giving.

HW: And that he thinks that the book, the point of the book will be for the reader to find themselves in the book to find their own true experience in it, that it's not just his true experience that it's supposed to be some sort of universal, universal, true experience that it's for many, not for just one.

EC: So it's so antisocial and yet profoundly social.

HW: And so this experience and these reflections lead him to commit himself to the production of this work of art. And yeah, absolutely. He's gonna do it. He borderline wants to leave the party, but ends up not working. It ends up not working and he ends up going to the party. And he thinks that someone is trolling him.

EC: This is one of the funniest and most horrifying passages in the whole seven volumes, I'm just gonna say.

HW: And we should say too, this is what's known as the *bal des têtes*. It's one of the passages, it's very famous, it has its own name. So it's like the ball of faces, I guess.

EC: And I think what a *bal des têtes* is, is a costume party, but where you only put a costume on your face.

HW: And so he's entered the costume party of faces. But actually, what has happened is just that he's been away for a few decades. And during that time, time passed for everyone. So people have aged by several decades.

EC: And he realizes that he's aged too. And you get pages and pages and pages. So he's like, and this person, they got old too. This person got old.

HW: I hardly recognize this person. This other person had forgotten their grudge against me.

EC: This person went gray and then white and the gray was better. It's relentless. I can't say more than that. It's horrifying and funny. I laughed, I cringed.

HW: He says at one point that the people in the party were puppets bathed in the immaterial colours of the years. Puppets which exteriorized time.

EC: Yeah, 'time which by habit is made invisible and to become visible seeks bodies which where it finds them it seizes upon to display its magic lantern upon them'. So again, like harking back to volume one. So, it's another way that time is kind of materialized. But apart from being a gallery of grotesques and a very unfair way of describing the aged body. But this ultimately feeds and you see it in what we just quoted. This understanding of how time works and how time works in relation to art. And he reflects on the balance between the body that is art and the human body. And he evokes this cruel law of art which is that art is vital and keeps growing and has this kind of other temporal dimension in contrast to the life of an individual whether moral or physical. And certainly in contrast to individual bodies. So he cites this line from Victor Hugo that's something like 'children die and grass keeps growing'. And people are the children. He interprets this in this way and art is the grass that just won't stop. And then he projects forward to future generations who just delightfully enjoy the grass that they don't realize has grown through the efforts of people who died long ago. And

thinking about future appreciators of art and literature who are just enjoying their *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, *Lunch on The Grass*. And that is a very famous painting by Édouard Manet that you can see in Paris if you ever go. And I was just absolutely stunned by this reference to that painting which I'd never thought of in those ways. I mean it's a weird painting because it's like these people having a picnic and it's like naked women and men fully clothed just looking at the painter or the viewer.

HW: Which I would say is not unlike Proust's book, to be honest.

EC: Yeah. That's why it's so apt because I was like 'oh that's a picture of readers.' There we are having our lunch on the grass you know.

HW: Yeah, of the 20th century.

EC: Yeah, the grass of the 20th century. Almost a hundred years after Proust died just around the final drafting of this book. So yeah this is our podcast *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*. We should have called it that.

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EC: Okay, Hannah, so we have elaborated so far how he gets to figure out why writing is so meaningful, what he's going to write and how he's going to write it. And interwoven also in this volume are more meta-reflections of the kind that we've discussed before about his writing project.

HW: Right, and how exactly his art will relate to himself as the writer and also to life as it is lived by his audience. So, one of the astonishing things that he does here is he brings back this obsession with optics which we've discussed in past episodes. He thinks about books as optic instruments through which readers read themselves and that if a reader isn't understanding a book perhaps that just means that it's the wrong lens for them. He thinks of the party with all his aged friends as a panopticon of years as though time is being viewed from a sort of central viewing point through these people's aging process.

EC: I do think that's a very real observation by the way. Like just occasionally you know I have some friends I've had since I was like 11 years old and yes we're only in our 30s now but just occasionally I look around the group and I do see a kind of panopticon of years.

HW: Yeah, I hear that, I hear that. But I think maybe the most astonishing of his optical metaphors shall we say for his writing process is about the difference between microscopes and telescopes. So, he writes, 'even those who sympathized with my perception of the truth I meant later to engrave upon my temple' aka who thought that his theory of art was correct and that he was right to sort of enshrine it as it were. So even those who are sympathetic to that project 'congratulated me on having discovered it with a microscope when to the contrary I had used a telescope to perceive things which were indeed very small because they were far away but every one of them a world.'

EC: I love this. I also think I'm guilty of having considered Proust to be microscopic. I think we've talked about minutiae, haven't we?

HW: Yeah. Can we try to understand this? Is that okay? Can we be like very literal minded for a second? We and many others apparently thought that he had taken something minute and put it under a magnifying device and what he's saying is that he took something really quite large but distant and looked at it through a magnifying device.

EC: Like the way that you look at a planet.

HW: Right, and every one of them a world. But what makes these distant? Is it that they are just that other people are always fundamentally distant? Is it that they're distant in time?

EC: Yeah, I think it's both and every one of them is a world because every one of them is a life.

HW: Right and every life is its own universe.

EC: Yeah that has the capacity for all these things that I guess we shouldn't based on this injunction call these kind of small or micro but is made up of all of these different potential things that we've been talking about like sunsets and desires and hunger and bizarre images passing through the mind. That's the universe that every person I guess contains. Do you think? Does that end up being too sentimental as a reading of this?

HW: Well, I think the thing is I think this theory is sort of sentimental. It's just not expressed in a sentimental way. In a way this this novel is profoundly unsentimental. Right, like it's scornful. It has a laugh at the expense of others. It's clear-eyed about people's shortcomings and failures but there's something about life and death and about life and death but there's something about this last sort of swell of excitement and theory really that is somehow quite a bit more sentimental. All along we thought he's sneering at the people he's encountering on many occasions and feeling sort of superior and it turns out that those people were, in some fundamental way, art.

EC: Yeah, I suppose we should also say it's not just people because we hop back to plants for example.

HW: Don't forget the plants if there's one thing you take from this podcast.

EC: I've been obsessed with throughout. I mean you're just lucky that I haven't like read out my list of places where he's a plant or somebody else is a plant.

HW: I'll look forward to your think piece on the topic.

EC: Yeah, open for commissions. So, people, and plants, and pathways, and restaurants, and seasides they're all worlds. They're all scenes. They're all the things that Proust has his telescope trained upon and in some ways we talked about distance. We've talked a lot about disconnection, failure to connect. We've talked a lot about or I've certainly thought a lot about isolation and the ways in which people don't manage to be together in these texts. But in fact all these worlds do collide and intersect and that's also what we've been reading, isn't it?

HW: Proust is a very careful architect and more than once in this book he refers to his work as a cathedral and that's been taken as the title of various collections about Proust. He's very explicit about thinking of it as a great work of art that takes so long that it may never be finished. But I thought that the passage that was maybe most revealing about the structure of the book was not one of these evocations of a cathedral but rather the sort of cartographical conception of the characters in the book. He is in the party and he's going to be introduced to Gilberte's daughter mademoiselle de Saint-Loup. Gilberte goes to fetch her and he writes, 'the surprise and pleasure caused me by Gilberte's words were quickly replaced while madame de Saint-Loup disappeared into another room by the idea of past time which mademoiselle de Saint-Loup had brought back to me in her particular way without my even having seen her. In common with most human beings was she not like the centre of crossroads in a forest, the point where roads converge from many directions? Those which ended in mademoiselle de Saint-Loup were many and branched out from every side of her. I just love thinking of her as the obelisk in the centre of Étoile in Paris. He goes on to enumerate all the way like you know her father is Robert de Saint-Loup, Gilberte is her mother. Those are the two *côtés* outside of Cambrai that he used to walk on, right? The *Côté de Méséglise* and the *Côté de chez Swann* are represented by those two figures. It was because of those connections that he ended up ever being at Balbec, and then at Balbec he met Robert and then he ends up getting somehow to Morel and Vinteuil and Albertine. It's almost like a character web that he maps out. It's a cartography of the structure of the novel. And then at the end of this incredible development, which is very spatial, he switches metaphors. 'Certainly if only our hearts were in question, the poet was right when he spoke of the mysterious threads which life breaks. But it is still truer that life is ceaselessly weaving them between beings, between events, that it crosses those threads, that it doubles them to thicken the woof with such industry that between the smallest point in our past and all the rest, the store of memories is so rich that only the choice of communications remains.'

EC: I just love this so much, that I'm not sure I can even say anything that sensible about it. I find this really affecting, and I know that he goes towards saying that the threads are ultimately between, I guess, yourself and your past self. But life is ceaselessly weaving threads between beings and between events and those threads are crossed and doubled and thickened with such industry. That's very beautiful.

HW: It's beautiful and it's also it's true of our lives and it's true of the book and it's also getting back to the root of textuality, right? The Latin root is that of weaving. So he's really taking the text literally as a piece of weaving and it brings to mind the fates spinning, it brings to mind our actual experience, it illuminates how carefully constructed the sprawling novel was.

EC: Oh yeah, it's incredible.

HW: I end in being tongue-tied because it's just so remarkable.

EC: It's also really given me what I wanted the whole time, which was juxtaposing that question of heartbreak, right? If only our hearts are in question, the poet was right when he spoke of the mysterious threads which life breaks. But it is true still that life is ceaselessly weaving and that is so clever again because that's also what he's juxtaposing in this swell, as you called it, at the end of the

text. The pain of life and the struggles that he's experienced in love against the really tangible joy that he experiences in art, which is also a way of loving, I think. Oh yeah, yeah.

HW: It's really, I have to say, I mean, we know that he died before doing the final revisions on this book. And even so, this has got to be one of the best conclusions in literature, she says boldly. But it is remarkable how he takes so many dispersed threads and brings them back into a tapestry. He remembers everything and there's so many minute callbacks and so many big developments and resolutions and it really is the end of the story of him becoming an artist, right? Like there's one story that is told here and then a million other stories and they're all here too. It is just amazing.

EC: It's amazing. Yeah, it's a true crescendo. Even the last couple of pages, it's just like, bang.

HW: Yes, it ends with a bang. Yes, it doesn't sort of fade out at the end. It's just the last word of the entire book is time. I just, you find time at the end. Time is the last word, you find it. I just, I'm like, I'm just saying.

EC: Ends with a bang. Hannah is banging her desk.

HW: But speaking of ending, we promised that we would come back to that again, really beautiful ending of the first volume and see how it has developed in this final volume. Should we turn to that now?

EC: Yeah. So the last sentence of the first volume or the last couple of sentences.

HW: Which we discussed in episode one.

EC: Yeah, I'll reread it. 'The places we have known do not belong only to the world of space on which we map them for our own convenience. They were only a thin slice held between the contiguous impressions that composed our life at that time. The memory of a particular image is but regret for a particular moment and houses, roads, avenues are as fugitive, alas, as the years.' And Proust said about this sentence, that it would be totally misunderstanding his project to take it as representative thereof. And at the time when we were doing episode one, I was like, yeah, yeah, yeah. Totally not representative. I really didn't understand.

HW: Well, I mean, we kind of had to take him at his word because we hadn't had the whole experience of reading the whole book. It was sort of, it was a lingering curiosity, right? In what way is this not representative? And now I think we're maybe prepared to answer that question.

EC: Would we say that they are fugitive, but also that we've had all these images in this volume of the years stacking up on top of each other, all happening kind of at the same time, that there is chronology and anachronism, that there is this extratemporal possibility that means that, yes, as you live, everything is fugitive, but you can have these moments where things are once again perceivable and therefore findable.

HW: Right. You can recapture a fugitive. So he's saying that, you know, time changes things. That much, I think, that *bal des têtes* gets back to that theme. He's saying now in this volume that even the things that have changed are recoverable. In fact, there's this really famous citation from this

book, one that's often excerpted, that I think if we accept it a little bit more at length than it usually is, is maybe illustrative of what we're talking about, about re-finding things. So there's this famous citation that 'the true paradises are paradises we have lost', right? I feel like we've maybe read that before, heard it before, maybe not realizing that it's Proust.

EC: It's quoted a lot.

HW: Emma, do you want to read the whole citation to put it into context for our listeners?

EC: He writes, 'If a memory, thanks to forgetfulness, has been unable to contract at any tie, to forge any link between itself and the present, if it has remained in its place, of its own date, if it has kept its distance, its isolation in the hollow of a valley or on the peak of a mountain, it makes us suddenly breathe an air new to us, just because it is an air we have formerly breathed, an air purer than that that the poets have vainly called paradisiacal, which offers that deep sense of renewal only because it has been breathed before. In so much as the true paradises are paradises we have lost.'

HW: So, he's saying that these memories that are hidden in pockets that we think are unvisitable can in fact be visited and recovered and we can breathe their air again and then that breathing of the past is an experience akin to visiting paradise.

EC: Right, so you could gloss this very inelegantly as the true paradises are the paradises we have lost and then found again. Or the paradises in the regaining, I guess.

HW: Yeah, yeah, that the breathing again, right? Again, that's so physical, right? That you breathe, that you breathe it in again.

EC: Yeah, this aeration.

HW: Yeah, so something being fugitive and difficult to find is not a cause for lamentation, I think. I think that's maybe another way in which that was a false conclusion of the first volume because it says houses, roads, avenues are as fugitive, *hélas*, as the years, right? And that *hélas* is so moving, which we talked about in episode one, but actually this is not a situation for alas. This is a situation where stumbling back upon them is productive of art, can reveal the makings of reality. We shouldn't be lamenting, we should be excited.

EC: Yeah, it can breathe new life into us and he really is this kind of the sense of his lungs inflating. Poor Proust, the asthmatic, he really knew what it was like to not be able to breathe. You know, he's *gonflé de joie*, he's like full. 'Inflated' isn't a really good translation of that. He's kind of aerated with joy by this. I suppose that, you know, you can keep the alas because not everything can come back.

HW: Yes, but I think that the first volume ends on what I would consider to be an elegiac tone.

EC: Yeah.

HW: And the book itself ends on a real vindication of the power and purpose of art, even though there's an undertone of worry about impending death, about mortality. It's a really joyous,

celebratory feeling in comparison to the elegiac ending of the first. So I almost wonder if it's just tonally the opposite of where he was going.

EC: It's quite grandiose as well. It's a bit like the microscope versus the telescope again, when he says, you know, we'll make of all these small individuals giants who touch each other in time.

HW: Amazing. I mean, oh.

EC: yeah, it's incredible.

HW: So now it's time, I think, for winners and losers. The last time we're going to do this. And I think let's start with the winners and losers of this volume. And then we may share the winners and losers of the book as a whole.

Emma, who was your loser of this volume?

EC: Okay. With regret, I'm awarding loser of this volume to the very aged actress.

HW: She's my loser too! Sorry, I totally interrupted you. Sorry. I think I screamed so loud that our listeners couldn't even hear who she is. Anyway. Okay. Who is the loser? Sorry, Emma. I won't scream again.

EC: Okay, so La Berma is formerly the most celebrated actress of the Parisian theatre scene. The narrator was absolutely desperate to see her act in *Fèdre* earlier on in his life. She also died in volume six. She's resurrected for an absolutely torturous second death in volume seven. I mean, the scene sequence with her death is just absolutely horrifying. She is very unwell. She has this absolutely appalling daughter who the narrator basically says she deserves because she's so egocentric. And she hosts for this spoiled, awful daughter a recital that nobody comes to because everyone's watching or listening to her great rival perform a different piece at the Princesse de Guermantes' house. And so she just sits there miserably. And then her daughter just sneaks off, when she gets the chance. to the other party, leaving her all alone. Which thing the rival actress, Rachel, formerly Saint-Loup's mistress, we don't need to get into that, happens to mention at the theatre when she next sees La Berma and this is thought to have killed her. This final humiliation of her horrible daughter abandoning her. It's so humiliating. So we talked a lot about all these ecstatic moments and we're just totally admiring Proust's writing. But as always, listeners, there is a lot of horrible stuff here too.

HW: And this is that. Which we didn't quite dwell on. So it's good to mention it at the end. That was also my loser and you did a better job explaining it than I did. So, that's fine. Who was your winner?

EC: Okay, so my winner, I went slightly left field and I decided that my winner is the loser that I picked last time, which is Swann.

HW: Oh, okay. I like that. Tell me more.

EC: Well, just because at one point the narrator says, you know, it could all have happened differently, but essentially everything that's happened in my whole life is all down to Swann's prompts initially.

HW: Yeah, yeah, yeah, it's true. Swann ends up taking this really critical role in his ability to become an artist.

EC: Yeah, so it's almost like, you know, there's lots of different artist figures that feature time as an artist. There's painters, there's, I guess, I think actors are definitely artists anyway. But Swann kind of appears here as this master artist of the entire thing that is also a way of illustrating the power of contingency. And it's only a page or so, but I thought, yeah, actually he wins the book in that page.

HW: Or perhaps a muse?

EC: Yeah, yeah. He's like a trigger.

HW: I like trigger.

EC: Who was your winner?

HW: I mean, my, I chose the most obvious winner, which is the narrator. Yeah. Because I mean, obviously like he's finally triumphing over the thing that he had struggled with the whole, like his vocation, which he had struggled with the whole time. It's still, nevertheless, it's not just a pure win because he feels himself growing unwell. We see that by the end he's sort of sequestered and feels very unable really to both maintain communication with anyone and do his art. So it's not an unadulterated win, but still he was working towards a goal and he has achieved the goal. So that makes him a winner.

EC: Yeah. And life has a purpose for him.

HW: Life has a purpose for him. At last. Which is art and art is life. So it's all the same. Who is your loser of the book as a whole?

EC: I struggled with this, honestly. I think all the people I could think of were both winners and losers at the same time. So, my candidates for winning the whole thing are quite differently freighted as well. So I thought that the narrator could be the winner of the whole thing. We see him have his, his struggle, his odyssey, his quest, whatever you want to call it, his kind of survival every day of his thousand and one nights of storytelling, understand his own project at the end of it. But he also ends up extremely isolated and unwell and not believing in love or friendship, which I think is also a huge loss. And it's not how I feel about life. So he could be the winner and the loser. That's one candidate. I also had Odette totally differently.

HW: She was a candidate for winner of book for me too, say this is horrible. She's almost like a cockroach. She's unkillable. And she's just always climbing the walls. Although it's again, you could read her as a loser because she mentions towards the end. She's like, 'Yes, I've spent most of my life sort of cloistered because I'm always with these jealous men who won't let me do anything.' So that's kind dire also, and actually an echo of the narrator being cloistered and away from society.

EC: And she's never understood the resources that she's had at her disposal, he says. Yeah, she's just kind of there. And what I thought she could be the winner in a way, because she's totally unaffected by time, like she looks the same. I think at one point, very implausibly, like she's 85. And she looks exactly as she did when she was 25. But being unaffected by time also seems like losing in the end.

HW: Yeah, because it does seem like the point is to know what time is and and be able to understand it.

EC: And to see it happen to you. Even if it looks horrible.

HW: I see what you mean. You have these bivalent characters.

EC: Okay, but tell me who did you think about as winners and losers of the whole project?

HW: Well, I cheated. I cheated like hugely because I didn't actually choose characters.

EC: Oh, I love this. Tell me.

HW: So, the winner of the book is art. And the loser of the book is death.

EC: Wow.

HW: Do I need to explain?

EC: I don't think you need to explain why the winner is art. Okay, I just want to, if you can just briefly summarize why death is the loser, that would be very handy.

HW: Death is the loser for two reasons. One reason is that when people die in this book, they tend to just sort of wink out. And death is not given the sort of respect that it is often given. And even in the case of the grandmother and Albertine, it is emphasized over and over again, that grief leads to oblivion, and that being forgotten is the inevitable end for any dead person. So that death, in other words, is just like a mechanism of forgetfulness, which means that it has very little impact because when something is forgotten, it is no longer affecting things. But I also think that death is the loser for a different and almost sort of opposite reason, which is that no one dies, because we're still making a podcast about this, that Proust's death, or even Scott Moncrieff, his translator's, death, had no real effect on our ability to learn from and relish and frolic in and sneer at the people and the project of this book. He says at one point, you know, in 100 years, people probably won't be reading my book anymore. How wrong you were, my man. And death has no power over art.

EC: We are sitting on your grass.

HW: We're sitting on your grass. Yes. So loser for two reasons.

EC: Okay. Wow. I love this. I also love it because I was thinking in completely opposite terms as I was finishing this. And I was like, death wins in a way that is okay, in a way. Because you have to really recognise and think through mortality in order to take the time to create and realise that it has to happen today and not tomorrow.

HW: That's true. Death is a pressure that leads to art. So that does kind of make it a winner, no? If art is the winner, then death is its co-winner, I guess.

EC: Yeah, I think so. I just want to make every winner a loser and every loser a winner.

HW: I do think that's true, though. That's maybe what our winners and losers segment has revealed. It's revealed that like, that is no easy question with this book, and that the ways in which it's not easy are actually profoundly interesting. Okay. As our very final note for today, Emma, where are we with the project?

EC: It's over.

HW: It is over. We have read. We read it. We did it. We read all of *À la recherche du temps perdu*. We read it in French. We have recorded all of our episodes. We have seen the journey from elegiac to joyful and every other journey. But what can we tell our listeners about being at this phase of the project?

EC: I mean, it feels like a huge achievement.

HW: Would you recommend it to others?

EC: Definitely. And I would also say that it has been in the interstices of my life for months and months. And that it has also been something that made life great in lots of different ways, maybe during some quite difficult times. So definitely, I would recommend this. And would you, Hannah, think that we can conclude now that we've read the whole thing, that reading the whole thing, one through seven, is worth doing?

HW: Oh, strongly, yes. I mean, I've had people asking me, actually, they're like, oh, like, should I do this? And the thing is, it is a huge commitment of time. We're not trying to hide that. But I think to really feel the feeling, you can tell we were almost in an ecstatic state recording this episode because of how satisfying the end was. And I feel like that kind of satisfaction has to do with the whole road to get there. I think if you just read the first volume and then the last volume, you'd be like, oh, cool theory of art, bro. But you almost feel like you've seen it be enacted almost over the course of the book.

EC: Also, reading the ending would be pretty difficult if you haven't read two to six, because there's so many references to previous plot points.

HW: Yes. And all the characters, you'd just be like, who are these? I don't care about these.

EC: Yeah. You'd be skipping over the detail and just getting the theory. But actually, the theory is enacted in the detail.

HW: Yeah. Right. With his telescope, everything in the world. But I also would just say that when I think about it, it's like, OK, I hope I do reread the whole thing eventually in my life. I hope I do. But if there's not time for that, the volumes that I think I would be quickest to reread are some of the internal volumes. I think I would really love to reread *Le Côté de Guermantes*, volume three. And I

thought *Albertine disparue*, volume six, was just astonishing. Those are ones that I think are frequently skipped, right? So I would say that how would I know that if I hadn't read them all?

EC: Yeah. I pretty much agree with you about rereading those. I also can see myself rereading sections. I don't know if that's not licit, but it's what I think I would do.

HW: Anything is licit. This is our life. We can experience art how we want to experience it.

EC: OK, cool. I think I'd like to reread the Balbec sections together.

HW: Oh, that would be interesting.

EC: Just to see how that works from a kind of literary point of view.

HW: And also, listeners, we just want to let you know that you should come back tomorrow because we do have a bonus episode for you about contemporary writers responding to Proust in the different ways that Proust is often responded to.

EC: Yeah. So finally allowing other voices to say what they thought about Proust. You've heard our opinions. Now let's talk about the broader landscape.

HW: Well, Emma, I think that's it for this episode of *Proust Curious*. We hope we've piqued your curiosity and your desire to give the whole thing a shot. If you liked the podcast, please tell a friend about it.

EC: *Proust Curious* is hosted by Emma Claussen and Hannah Weaver and produced by Michael Goldsmith. You can reach us at proustcurious@gmail.com. We'd also like to thank our partner *Public Books*, an online magazine of ideas, arts and scholarship.

Check it out at publicbooks.org. And join us tomorrow for a special bonus episode about further Proustian reading.

HW: *Au revoir!*

EC: *Au revoir!*

Transcript edited by Duarte Benard da Costa