

An Analysis of Marcel Proust's Process of Memory

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Neuroaesthetics

Before his death, Marcel Proust worked on his novel, *In Search of Lost Time*, with the goal of embodying the process of memory in life. Memory itself is a complex brain function, in which some basic concepts can be explained by neuroscience, but with a large remainder still left undiscovered. The process of memory is documented throughout Proust's work, and that in itself creates a new narrative of meaning. Marcel Proust's exploration on memory and his life in his novel, *In Search of Lost Time* suggest the complexity and malleability in the process of one's recognition and reflection on the past through his in-depth writing on his personal experience, alongside evidence provided by neurological claims.

Marcel Proust's excerpt, "Overture," begins with a short analysis of his childhood at home stemming from insomniac thoughts at night. The conversation then diverts to memory and any reliance to such falsities. Proust recalls multiple different memories in his life, both voluntary and involuntary, and then denies the fact of memory in the conclusion of "Overture." Proust states, "But since the facts which I should then have recalled would have been prompted only by an exercise of the will, by my intellectual memory, and since the pictures which that kind of memory shews us of the past preserve nothing of the past itself, I should never have had any wish to ponder over this residue of Combray. To me it was in reality all dead."¹ Here, Proust regards the memory in which one calls upon themselves and attempt to distinguish the details of said memory. However, since Proust believed that memory had a tendency to falter, one could not rely on their past experiences to be the ultimate truth of that moment. Therefore, he states that such a reality is dead to him, as it technically no longer exists in its true form within his mind and immediate thoughts. Proust believed these memories to be untrustworthy, as these

¹ Proust, Marcel. "Overture." in *In Search of Lost Time*.
<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/proust/marcel/p96s/chapter1.html>

memories constantly changed, proving to be incapable of preserving the past. Proust later regards the concept of an involuntary memory: “The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) which we do not suspect. And as for that object, it depends on chance whether we come upon it or not before we ourselves must die.”² Involuntary memories such as Proust describes, are entirely based on chance. A moment or object has to instigate a sudden recollection of some time in the past. “Overture” experiences both of these contrasting types of memory. Proust initiates his novel with a brief overview of his childhood at Combray, memories that he had released from within his own knowledge. Towards the end, Proust’s experience of the consumption of the petites madeleines exemplifies the involuntary aspect of memory. Although fleeting as memory is, Proust assigns much value to all of the experiences that he recounted in his novel. Later, he states a sentence which embodies this idea: “I put down my cup and examine my own mind. It is for it to discover the truth. But how? ...Seek? More than that: create. It is face to face with something which does not so far exist, to which it alone can give reality and substance, which it alone can bring into the light of day.” From here, Proust begins to analyze his memory of the petites madeleines. All that Proust can take away from the moment in which he indulged in petites madeleines was that he was in a happy state of being. Upon forced recollection of the same memory, Proust fails to gauge similar feelings and emotions of such a state, and is left feeling empty from a once-known experience.

Jonah Lehrer dissects this need Proust has to try to obtain memories from his past, and determine their accuracy. In Lehrer’s *Proust was a Neuroscientist*, Proust’s extensive curiosity with memory is realized through Lehrer’s judgement: “Deprived of a real life...Proust made art

² Ibid.

out of the only thing he had: his memory...Proust knew that every time he lost himself in a recollection he also lost track of time...It was there, in his own memory, that he would live forever. His past would become a masterpiece. (76)”³ Proust sought out meaning for his memories, and therefore, consumed himself in his past world in order to better understand it. Such a process is especially complicated since according to Proust, one cannot look back into one's own memories and clearly view the past as it was. In this way, memories would become skewed and unrecognizable if returned to on multiple occasions. Yet, Lehrer makes an interesting point in the chapter “Coda,” in which he states, “Only the artist can explore the ineffable without offering us an answer, for sometimes there is no answer...Keats realized that just because something can't be solved, or reduced into the laws of physics, doesn't mean it isn't real. When we venture beyond the edge of our knowledge, all we have is art. (5)”⁴ In relation to neuroscience, art is a complex subject which may not always be adequately explained in the form of science. Just so, memory cannot be entirely explained. What is widely apparent, however, is the meaning one can create through the use of these mediums. Marcel Proust does so through his memory, in the hopes of discovering a hidden truth. Proust strongly believed in the power of art to help describe the true realities of life. His writing process was quite reflective of the content he was studying. Lehrer states: “Clearly, Proust believed in the writing process. He never outlined his stories first. He thought that the novel, like the memories it unfaithfully described, must unfurl naturally.(87)”⁵ Proust's writing process reflected that of an involuntary memory process in which he allowed the ideas to take hold of him and his work. Similarly, he often went back to

³ Jonah Lehrer, "Proust: The Matter of Memory." In *Proust Was a Neuroscientist*.

⁴ Jonah Lehrer, "Coda." In *Proust Was a Neuroscientist*. Boston & New York: Mariner/Houghton Mifflin, 2007.

⁵ Ibid.

his work to alter and revise his ideas and thoughts. Doing so, reflects the concept of recollection, and how each instance of recollection may not always appear the same as a prior instance.

Marcel Proust embodied the concept of memory through both content and form.

Eric R. Kandel discusses meaning in art derived from memory as well in “Top Down Processing of Information: Using Memory to Find Meaning,” from *The Age of Insight: The Quest to Understand the Unconscious in Art, Mind, and Brain*. Kandel analyzes the importance of memory when viewing art: “Memory is the glue that binds our mental life together, whether in our response to art or to other events in our life we are who we are in large part because of what we learn and what we remember... The human memory system forms abstract internal representations that arise from previous exposure to similar images or experiences.(307)”⁶ In other words, humans create their own meanings and responses to their surroundings based on previous memories. Cathy Treadaway’s writing in “Materiality, Memory and Imagination: Using Empathy to Research Creativity,” provides evidence for this, as Treadaway writes about how one’s lived experience affects their memory. The result of how one experiences the world is a direct cause of how one will process such memories in the future.⁷ Treadaway puts it in a simple statement: “What we perceive is ‘the product of past experience and future expectations.(233)”⁸ Treadaway introduces the process of idea association and perceptual redundancy as the beneficial factors that help one remember certain experiences: “Gombrich contends that the brain uses techniques including perceptual redundancy to cluster visual cues. This filtration and

⁶ Eric R. Kandel. "Top Down Processing of Information: Using Memory to Find Meaning." In *The Age of Insight: The Quest to Understand the Unconscious in Art, Mind, and Brain*. New York, NY: Random House, 2012.

⁷ Cathy Treadaway. "Materiality, Memory and Imagination: Using Empathy to Research Creativity." *Leonardo* 42, no. 3 (2009): 231-03. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20532651>.

⁸ Ibid.

amalgamation of ideas stimulates creative or imaginative thought; the potential to visualize and restructure concepts through sketches, symbols and diagrams generates further ideas.(233)”⁹

Reading Proust’s “Overture,” with this in mind would raise questions as to how Proust's environments affected him. For example, Proust recalled vivid imagery in his memories of eating petites madeleines. Such a simple human experience must have been heightened in some way for Proust to be able to effortlessly recall how he felt as he consumed these pastries. Additionally, Proust’s generated childhood memories of his mother were often recalled in the beginning of “Overture.” The occasional experience of Proust receiving a good night kiss from his mother affected him greatly, especially since his father attempted to cease such actions further into the future. An experience of such joy to receive affection from a parent may have stuck with Proust, and built a solid, good memory because of this association with happiness. Similarly, as Proust recalled the moment in biting into the petites madeleines as a happy feeling, such an emotion may have shaped the entire experience, therefore, sticking itself somewhere in Proust’s consciousness. Treadaway also discusses the importance of intuition in the process of creation, an idea which Proust often utilized during his writing process. As Lehrer stated, Proust did not write from an outline. Instead, he underwent a process that was more spontaneous, as Proust just let his thoughts flow through his hand onto paper. In this way, Proust may have relied on his intuition and past experiences to shape his novel. This writing process reflects that of the process of memory since involuntary memory also relies on spontaneous thought to overcome oneself. In conclusion of Treadaway’s thoughts, she describes how memories are a vital component in the development and execution of a creative thought.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Although memory is heavily relied upon to resurface past experiences and decisions, it is also key in creating meaning for oneself both in life and in art. In fact, memory plays a large role in the creation and overall viewing of art. With Marcel Proust, his life experiences and memories were turned into art, as he tried to make sense of the world he was living in at the time. Memory is the assistive factor in suggesting and creating such meaning. One of the reasons people enjoy viewing and making art is because it provides people with some general context, in which one can determine their own purpose. Therefore, one may use Proust as a reference to help advance their ideas about art and relations to their life. Although memory can be deemed unreliable by Proust, it can be useful then to apply it to one's own world; and just as Proust had done with his novel, turn their life into their own masterpiece.

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