

Proust on Desire Satisfaction

Robbie Kubala

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Abstract: For a certain ordinary class of desires, Marcel Proust's thoughts on their satisfaction can be summed up in one word: don't. Don't satisfy your desires; doing so will fail to satisfy you. Should you therefore seek to eliminate desire? Absolutely not: desiring itself sustains you. The disappointment of attaining what you desire is one of Proust's most persistent themes, elaborated in the florid unfolding of *À la recherche du temps perdu* but already expressed succinctly in an early story from *Les plaisirs et les jours*: "Desire makes all things blossom; possession wilts them." If you believed this, what should you do? Best to aim not to satisfy your desires at all. This paper is a development and limited defense of these baldly stated claims, and includes discussions of the role of the imagination in the formation of desire, the distinction between the hypothetical imagination and the imaginativeness that is involved in the perception of beauty, and the relationship between desire, desire satisfaction, and agent satisfaction.

For a certain ordinary class of desires, Proust's thoughts on their satisfaction can be summed up in one word: don't. Don't satisfy your desires; doing so will fail to satisfy you. Should you therefore seek to eliminate desire? Absolutely not: desiring itself sustains you. The disappointment of attaining what you desire is one of Proust's most persistent themes, elaborated in the florid unfolding of the *Recherche* but already expressed succinctly in an early story from *Les plaisirs et les jours*, apparently written when he was only 18: "Desire makes all

things blossom; possession wilts them” (2001: 115).¹ If you believed this, what should you do? Best to aim not to satisfy your desires at all.

This paper is a development and limited defense of these baldly stated claims. The defense is limited in two respects. First, we have to restrict the class of desires in question to desires for completing one’s long-term projects, which I call ‘project-based desires’. Second, we have to restrict the scope of the subjects to whom these claims apply. Although my primary goal is to explore what rationally follows from a line of thought in Proust’s work, and not to argue, on textual and biographical grounds, for the attribution of this line of thought to the historical author, I do think that Proust himself intended to express something general about human psychology, and not merely to delineate the contingent tics and quirks of one fictional character’s personality. Nevertheless, while I will suggest that these ideas are more general in their application, they may not hold universally.

In section 1, I discuss the view of desire that emerges in the *Recherche*, on which desire is bound up with the imagination. Section 2 explains why desire satisfaction fails to satisfy us, and section 3 argues that the novel does not ultimately endorse the view that we should aim to eliminate our desires. In section 4, I argue for the alternative strategy of prolonging the pursuit of our desires, both as a matter of interpretation and on substantive grounds, before concluding in section 5.

A note on methodology: I follow standard interpretive practice in distinguishing the narrator of the *Recherche*, Marcel (C, 91; III 583), from its author, Proust. Some contexts require

¹ Although *Les plaisirs et les jours* was published in 1896, Benjamin Taylor notes that this particular story was first published in *Le Banquet*, a literary review Proust co-founded, in July 1892 (2015: 25). It is Adam Phillips (2016) who reports that Proust was 18 when he wrote it, not 20, as Taylor’s dates would suggest, but I have been unable to verify this in Tadié (2000) or elsewhere. The present paper might be thought of as a development of Phillips’ claim that the *Recherche* is fundamentally “about the ways our objects of desire sustain us by failing to satisfy us.”

an additional distinction between the narrator Marcel and the younger self he describes. I also follow the past half-century or so of scholarship in registering a general caution against assuming, of any of Marcel's maxims, that Proust endorses it. For one thing, the novel is full of contradictions between maxims, and contradictions between maxims and depicted events. For another, many of the maxims are asserted ironically, such that we do better to infer that Proust is actually denying them. It is also customary to cite the notorious 1914 letter Proust wrote to the literary critic Jacques Rivière: "I did not want to analyze this evolution of a belief system abstractly, but rather to recreate it, to bring it to life. I am therefore obliged to depict errors, without feeling compelled to say that I consider them to be errors; too bad for me if the reader believes I take them for the truth" (*Corr.* XIII, 99-100). If we assume that at least some 'errors' are not contradicted elsewhere in the novel, then we get a quick argument against a revised interpretive principle that would permit us to attribute all uncontradicted and de-ironized maxims to Proust: some uncontradicted maxims are asserted unironically but are considered by Proust to be false, and the reader must judge which are which.² All this is prefatory to noting that while I will speak of Proust's views, this should always be understood as an *interpretation*, where an interpretation entails not only the attempt to account for internal inconsistencies and to explain the employment of irony but also some larger organizing framework that can, among other things, sort errors from (what Proust takes to be) the truth.

Walter Benjamin memorably writes of "Proust's blind, senseless, frenzied quest for happiness" (2019 [1929]: 152). On my reading, the *Recherche* is indeed a quest for happiness.

² Here I am in partial disagreement with Joshua Landy, whose methodology is to "proceed on the assumption that Marcel speaks for Proust *until and unless there is reason to think otherwise*. 'Reason' here means *internal contradiction*, a discrepancy either between one maxim and another ... or between a given maxim and the events depicted in the narrative" (2004: 35, emphasis original). I agree with the first sentence, but disagree with narrowing the reasons in question to facts about internal contradictions only.

But the search is not blind, senseless, or frenzied. On the contrary, the novel suggests a route that can be pursued clear-sightedly, reasonably, and deliberately.

1. “Desire makes all things blossom”

In order to fix ideas, it is helpful to briefly review some largely uncontroversial claims about desire, with which Proust’s views are compatible. Desire is not a contentless sensation, like a headache, but an intentional attitude: desire is ‘for’ something, such as an outcome or state of affairs (e.g., that Mme de Stermaria come to dinner), an object or person (e.g., Albertine), or an action of one’s own (e.g., to write a novel). Since desire is a relation between a desiring subject and an intentional object, the term ‘desire’ can be ambiguous between referring to the subject’s attitude and referring to the object (Shaw 2020). In the sentence ‘Marcel’s desire is all-consuming’, ‘desire’ refers to a psychological attitude or state of mind, while in the sentence ‘Marcel’s desire is unattainable’, ‘desire’ refers to the object at which the desire aims. To avoid confusion, I will use the term ‘desiring’ in referring to the psychological attitudes of the person who desires.

A second ambiguity concerns the relation between desire and action. Whenever we act intentionally, we can be said to have a ‘pro-attitude’ to what we do, in the sense that we are motivated to carry it out. But it is possible to act intentionally in ways that we don’t really want to act, as when the young Marcel intentionally climbs the staircase after dinner, leaving his beloved mother below. When it comes to desires to perform actions, then, we should distinguish ‘desiring’ in the broad sense of having a pro-attitude from the subset of ‘desiring’ proper that consists what we really feel like doing (Schueler 1995; Scanlon 1998). It is the latter sense that will be of interest here.

How does desire make all things blossom? In the *Recherche*, desiring tends to be bound up with what I will call the ‘hypothetical imagination’. The hypothetical imagination is a faculty that combines impressions from the senses and memory to create new mental objects: “In order to picture to itself an unknown situation the imagination borrows elements that are already familiar” (*F*, 570; IV 8). The imagination is distinct not only from the senses and memory but also from the will, the faculty that makes decisions. When Marcel’s friend Saint-Loup entices him with the mention of two beautiful women whom Marcel has not met, he notes that while Saint-Loup “had set my imagination a heavy task, he had at the same time procured an appreciable relaxation, a prolonged rest for my will” (*SG*, 167; III 121), because Marcel has decided not to pursue the women yet. So while the new mental objects that the hypothetical imagination creates can be produced for immediate practical purposes relating to the will, as when we predict where the people on the street in front of us will walk next, and move accordingly, these mental objects can also be produced solely for the purpose of day-dreaming or fantasizing. Proust studied philosophy at the Lycée Condorcet—his allusions suggest that he was familiar with the faculty psychology of Descartes and Kant—and while his usage is not wholly consistent, he tends to model the mind in terms of distinct faculties such as sensibility and will (Jones 1975: 149; Landy 2004: 103-4).

Not all desire is produced by the hypothetical imagination: Proust’s characters retain bodily desires such as hunger and sleepiness, which do not depend on the mediation of imagination for their existence. But the hypothetical imagination is capable of both producing and sustaining desire. Often, we experience something pleasurable and then form a desire to experience it further. But we can also form a desire by *imagining* something pleasurable, i.e., by

combining impressions that represent states of affairs in which we are pleased.³ Although I've never written a novel, I can imagine myself writing one. In the content of what I imagine, I might enjoy writing the novel, or I might find it frustrating; I'm not likely to form a desire to write a novel if I imagine myself not enjoying any feature of doing so.

The hypothetical imagination sustains desire not just by imagining a pleasant state of affairs, but by imagining it in a pleasing way. The valence of the manner and content of what I imagine can come apart: I might be horrified that I imagine myself delighting in the failure of a rival. But sometimes both the content and the manner of the hypothetical imagination are pleasurable, in which case there can be a kind of positive feedback loop: the fact that it is pleasurable to imagine something produces my desire for it, where that desire in turn motivates further imaginative acts. I then imagine more pleasant details in the content of what I imagine—my novel receives various awards, people praise me lavishly—which leads me to get more pleasure from the act of imagining all this, and to continue to develop the content of what I imagine.⁴

What is distinctive in Proust emerges not in the mere suggestion that the activity of the hypothetical imagination can be intensely pleasurable, but in two further claims. First, the desiring imagination plays a more significant role in mental life than many believe: “Even from the simplest, the most realistic point of view, the countries which we long for occupy, at any given moment, a far larger place in our actual life than the country in which we happen to be” (*SW*, 555; I 383). Second, and as the next section will elaborate, the pleasures of

³ Proust is not so far from Aristotle here, for whom *phantasia* plays a similar role. As Jessica Moss writes, “pleasurable *phantasia* induces desire and pursuit, just as would the actual pleasurable perception. *Phantasia*'s key contribution to action is its pleasurable representation of an object not presently perceived, which thereby becomes desired as a goal” (2012: 62).

⁴ Uku Tooming (2019), in the course of arguing for the claim that we can actively shape our desires by controlling how we imagine their contents, provides a helpful review of the empirical evidence that imagining can strengthen or weaken our desires.

anticipating desired outcomes in imagination are, for Proust, much greater than the pleasures of possessing what we desire. The remainder of this section clarifies the role that the experience of sensible reality plays with respect to the hypothetical imagination.

Above, I used a quotation from *The Fugitive* to introduce Proust's conception of the hypothetical imagination. That quotation continues: "In order to picture to itself an unknown situation the imagination borrows elements that are already familiar and, for that reason, cannot picture it. But the sensibility ... receives ... the original and for long indelible imprint of the novel event" (*F*, 570; IV 8). This passage makes it sound as though imagination's connection to reality is tenuous: the hypothetical imagination can never picture an unknown reality using familiar materials, except perhaps by some lucky accident. But this is compatible with the plausible idea that the hypothetical imagination, though it cannot yield knowledge of unfamiliar sensible reality, can yield other kinds of knowledge, such as mathematical or moral knowledge—via the manipulation of shapes or the formation of judgments about counterfactual ethical situations—and indeed knowledge of *familiar* reality. Although sometimes "life gives us something which we were very far from imagining" (*F*, 675; IV 82), much of our experience is habitual, and experienced reality often not surprising, so we can use the hypothetical imagination to predict, for instance, who is likely to appear at the *salon*, what they are likely to say, etc.

A different author might hold that the hypothetical imagination is a faculty of pure fantasy, unconstrained by the laws of nature and logic. But for Proust, not only is our imaginative desiring not wildly disconnected from reality, but the experience of sensible reality can strengthen it, as when Mme de Stermaria stands Marcel up for dinner: "Now my disappointment, my rage, my desperate desire to recapture her who had just refused me, were able, by bringing my sensibility into play, to make definite the possible love which until then my

imagination alone had—though more feebly—offered me” (G, 538; II 687). Marcel has, for days, been picturing to himself the pleasure of dining with Mme de Stermaria on the island in the Bois du Boulogne, though largely as a way of realizing his generic “dreams of a young feudal maiden on a misty island” (G, 538; II 687). In experiencing, through his sensibility, the shock and then disappointment of receiving her card canceling their date, Marcel’s desire for Mme de Stermaria in particular is heightened, nearly to the point of love: “it was enough now, in order to love her, for me to see her again so that I might refresh those impressions” (G, 538; II 687). Another instance of reality intensifying his desiring, in this case through the activity of the hypothetical imagination, occurs when Marcel first meets the Duchesse de Guermantes in person: “this Mme de Guermantes of whom I had so often dreamed, now that I could see that she had a real existence independent of myself, acquired an even greater power over my imagination” (SW, 247-8; I 173). In sum, desiring makes things blossom through the exercise of the hypothetical imagination, which represents pleasant states of affairs, informed by knowledge of reality. And the activity of desiring, as distinct from imagining any particular object of desire, is an additional source of pleasure: anticipating a possible pleasure can be highly pleasurable in itself.

2. “Possession wilts them”

So far, this all sounds like great news for the pleasure-seeker (and Marcel is “so passionately fond of pleasure” (C, 96; III 586)). The problem is that, for Proust, actually *possessing* what one desires—that is, satisfying the desire by attaining its object—is rarely as wonderful as we imagine. Again, there is a scope restriction on the class of desires to which the claim applies. It’s not the case that all desires are such that their satisfaction is disappointing, that possession ‘wilts’ their objects. In particular, the claim does not apply to bodily needs (as

mentioned previously), fleeting whims and unexpected pleasures (which are not anticipated at all), and states of affairs for which we are not primarily responsible. As examples of the last group, we learn that Marcel can desire the well-being of his grandmother, and other characters can desire various political outcomes, without necessarily being disappointed. And, as I will explain shortly, the claim need not apply to our desire for beauty in encounters with the arts and nature. The claim applies paradigmatically to project-based desires: desires for long-term self-involving projects whose realization can be *anticipated*. These projects are exemplified by certain of Marcel's pursuits, notably his erotic relationships with Gilberte and Albertine, entering the high society of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, and writing a novel. So we can take Proust to be exaggerating for emphasis when he says that desire makes *all* things blossom and implies that possession wilts *all* things.

The aim of this section is to explain what occasions these disappointments, when they occur. The narrator's explanation comes to him during the revelatory episode of the paving stones before the *matinée Guermantes*:

So often, in the course of my life, reality had disappointed me because at the instant when my senses perceived it my imagination, which was the only organ that I possessed for the enjoyment of beauty, could not apply itself to it, in virtue of that ineluctable law which ordains that we can only imagine what is absent. And now, suddenly, the effect of this harsh law had been neutralised, temporarily annulled, by a marvellous expedient of nature which had caused a sensation—the noise made both by the spoon and by the hammer, for instance—to be mirrored at one and the same time in the past, so that my imagination was permitted to savour it, and in the present, where the actual shock to my senses of the noise, the touch of the

linen napkin, or whatever it might be, had added to the dreams of the imagination the concept of “existence” which they usually lack... (*TR*, 263-4; IV 450-1)

I include the second sentence as further evidence for the powers of the imagination, because it is striking that the explanation for the *moments bienheureux* of involuntary memory—the “sudden shudder of happiness” that Marcel experiences so fruitfully toward the end of the novel (*TR*, 264; IV 451)—turns on the hypothetical imagination, which is permitted to work on an occurrently experienced sensation, but only because it is simultaneously a *past* sensation. Leaving the difficulties with this second sentence for another occasion, my interest is in the argument in the first sentence. ‘Reality’ here seems to refer to ‘sensible reality’, that which can be perceived by the senses. And in order to justify the claim, which the passage suggests, that sensible reality is not satisfying in general, we should understand ‘the enjoyment of beauty’ to refer to ‘enjoyment’ more generally. Then the argument appears to run like this: Pleasurable states of affairs are enjoyable only when they are the object of imagination. But what the senses offer us cannot, as such, be the object of imagination. Therefore, we cannot experience pleasurable states of affairs through the senses.

There are at least three problems with interpreting the passage in this way, however. The first is that it is implausible to claim, as the strict distinction between the imagination and the senses implies, that we can never experience pleasure through the senses. The passage, as I’ve interpreted it thus far, claims that we can imagine only what is absent, and that we can experience pleasure only through the imagination. And I take it as a background assumption

that the senses experience only what is present.⁵ Yet Marcel himself experiences sensory pleasure at various points throughout the novel, notably in his erotic wrestling with Gilberte, a pleasure he “could not even pause for a moment to analyse” (*BG*, 90; I 485). So the conclusion of the argument, as stated, would be contradicted by events depicted elsewhere in the text.

The second problem is that there appear to be two distinct conceptions of the imagination in this passage. It is true of what I called the ‘hypothetical imagination’ that we can imagine only what is absent, since the hypothetical imagination represents absent states of affairs. But it is not true of the hypothetical imagination that it is the only organ we possess for the enjoyment of beauty, since beauty is something we can experience not only in absent states of affairs, as when we imagine something beautiful, but in *present* states of affairs, as when we perceive something beautiful. There is, however, a second conception of the imagination, which I will call ‘imaginativeness’, that is necessary for the enjoyment of beauty, if not helpfully characterized as the ‘only organ’ we possess for the enjoyment of beauty. Imaginativeness here is meant in roughly the Kantian sense—the free play of imagination and understanding—in which the imagination is required for all experiences of beauty.⁶ And beauty is, so often in the novel, *not* disappointing: Marcel’s encounters with Vinteuil’s septet, Bergotte’s novels, Elstir’s

⁵ Tom Stern points out that Proust frequently troubles this strict distinction between the senses and the hypothetical imagination, in the many passages where the hypothetical imagination seems to infuse what is occurrently perceived with features that it has effectively made up, particularly in the context of perceiving the beloved. Like the philosophical ‘wisdom’ I discuss in section 3, however, this kind of imaginative projection is something the novel flirts with but, as I have argued elsewhere (Kubala 2016), ultimately rejects.

⁶ The only other commentator I know who recognizes two conceptions of the imagination in Proust is John Porter Houston, who writes only that “there is a sharp division between the satisfying higher imagination, which properly focuses on art, and the often frustrating lower imagination, which exercises itself in life” (1982: 20). I borrow the term ‘imaginativeness’ from Richard Moran, who draws attention to its employment in our encounters with the arts and distinguishes it from imagining something to be the case: “the ability to make *connections* between various things, to notice and respond to the network of associations that make up the mood or emotional tone of a work” (1994: 86). But I follow Kant in broadening the extension of the term to encompass experiences of natural as well as artistic beauty.

paintings, the Combray hawthorns, and the trees at Hudimesnil are all occasions of deep aesthetic satisfaction, even when they are anticipated by the hypothetical imagination. In his unfinished essay *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, often considered a draft of the *Recherche*, Proust writes that “a pleasure of the imagination ... [is] one of the rare moments that bring no disillusionment in their train ... this is Beauty” (1984: 78-9). So the argument equivocates on two distinct senses of ‘imagination’.

The third problem with the argument as formulated is that it does not actually explain what it purports to explain, namely how sensible reality can be *disappointing*. Something can be bad without being disappointing (if it were expected to be bad), and something can be disappointing without being very bad (if it were expected to be excellent but is merely good). To disappoint is to fail to live up to expectations, to let down. Thus, an experienced state of affairs can be disappointing only if it fails to meet some prior evaluative standard. A better argument, then, would add the premise that the hypothetical imagination sets an evaluative standard that sensible reality fails to meet.⁷ This premise is illustrated by any number of episodes in Marcel’s experience of society, art, and love. The pleasures of imagining the exalted names of the Guermantes are replaced by what he refers to as “the disappointments of my pilgrimage to and arrival in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, so different from what I had imagined it to be” (*G*, 679; II 786). Marcel’s conversations with school friends all concern “actors, whose art, although as yet I had no experience of it, was the first of all its numberless forms in which Art itself allowed me to anticipate its enjoyment” (*SW*, 101; I 73). But his first experience of the actress La Berma is “a bitter disappointment” (*BG*, 20-1; I 437) when “the two actresses whom I had been admiring for

⁷ Leo Bersani claims that for Proust, “External reality is disappointing *because* it is different [from what we imagine], because it does not send back to us the material equivalents of our dreams” (1965: 21). But this fails to explain why mere difference is bad.

some minutes bore not the least resemblance to her whom I had come to hear” (*BG*, 26; I 440).⁸

The paradigmatic instance of this premise is the scene of the goodnight kiss, when Marcel forms “a resolution to abandon all attempts to go to sleep without seeing Mamma” (*SW*, 42; I 32).

When he not only receives the kiss, but his mother spends the night in his room, Marcel remains unsatisfied: “I ought to have been happy; I was not” (*SW*, 51; I 38). The nature of the evaluative gap is different in these cases—in the first two, someone else’s actions fail to meet his expectations, while in the last, the bad outcome is an unexpected consequence of his own actions—but in each, the state of affairs represented by the hypothetical imagination is more satisfying than the state of affairs experienced by the senses.

Is this revised argument plausible? It probably depends on the nature of the subject in question, and on their capacities for hypothetical imagination as well as the quality of their experience; this empirical variation is the main reason to restrict the scope of the subjects to which this view of desire satisfaction applies, in addition to restricting the class of desires in question. But suppose that an agent with full Proustian imaginative capacities *could* lower their expectations for sensible reality—should they? The *Recherche* suggests they should not:

And yet, whatever the inevitable disappointments that it must bring in its train, this movement towards what we have only glimpsed, what we have been free to dwell upon and imagine at our leisure, this movement is the only one that is wholesome for the senses, that whets their appetite. How drearily monotonous must be the lives of people who, from indolence or timidity, drive in their carriages straight to the doors of friends whom they

⁸ The La Berma episode in particular is one reason why I do not accept Roger Shattuck’s explanation of reality’s disappointment in terms of what he calls, following Montaigne, ‘soul error’: “the incapacity to give full value or status to one’s own life and experience,” precisely because it is one’s *own* life and experience (2000: 84-5). There is no suggestion that, for Marcel, La Berma cannot be good because *he* gets to appreciate her, or that the Faubourg is tainted, Groucho Marx-style, because it will admit *him*.

have got to know without having first dreamed of knowing them... (*BG*, 620; II 229)

In sum, possession wilts things because sensible reality, when it comes to the satisfaction of desires of the class in question, is never as wonderful as we imagine. In the remaining sections of the paper, I will take this point for granted and ask how we ought to respond.

3. “Almost a medical philosophy”

A certain bit of philosophical “wisdom” (*BG*, 401; II 74) running throughout the text suggests that we should limit our imaginative desiring—with its lofty evaluative expectations—rather than open ourselves to the disappointments of experienced reality.⁹ In a moment of reflection on Swann’s relationship with Odette, the narrator writes that

Swann had reached an age whose philosophy—encouraged, in his case, by the current philosophy of the day, as well as by that of the circle in which he had spent much of his life, ... —is no longer that of youth, but a positive, almost a medical philosophy, the philosophy of men who, instead of exteriorising the objects of their aspirations, endeavour to extract from the accumulation of the years already spent a fixed residue of habits and passions which they can regard as characteristic and permanent, and with which they will deliberately arrange, before anything else, that the kind of existence they choose to adopt shall not prove inharmonious. (*SW*, 396-7; I 275)

⁹ My discussion in this section is greatly indebted to Richard Moran’s essay on “Swann’s Medical Philosophy” (forthcoming), particularly his references to Schopenhauer, Russell, and Wittgenstein.

There are two distinct claims suggested by the ‘medical philosophy’, one about the nature of desire and the other about the best agential strategy for managing desire. As I interpret what it is to ‘exteriorise’ the object of desire, the object of desire is the state of affairs at which it aims, such that a desire counts as satisfied if and only if that state of affairs is realized. The first claim, which I will call ‘Russell’s claim’, denies this view. As Russell wrote in *The Analysis of Mind*, “A hungry animal is restless until it finds food; then it becomes quiescent. The thing which will bring a restless condition to an end is said to be what is desired” (1921: 32). Russell’s claim is that the object of desire is *anything* that brings the desire to an end, such that a desire can also be satisfied if it is eliminated. This ‘interiorises’ the object of desire by understanding it as anything that will causally quell the internal state of an organism, including but not limited to the external object at which desire aims.

The second claim, which I will call ‘Schopenhauer’s claim’, is that desiring itself is ‘inharmonious’ and thus ought to be limited. The activity of desiring is inharmonious because desiring implies a state of lack, which is painful. And even when we achieve our desires, we immediately find ourselves with new ones. Schopenhauer therefore holds that we should aim to eliminate desiring, or at least, if full elimination is not psychologically plausible, to limit it, just as the ‘medical philosophy’ has it that we should endeavor to achieve tranquility by developing a ‘fixed residue of habits’ instead of forming new desires. One could accept Russell’s claim but not have any views about how to respond to the ‘restlessness’ of desire. And one could accept Schopenhauer’s claim while denying Russell’s, as, indeed, Schopenhauer himself would have: although he believes that the satisfaction of a desire “can never be more than deliverance from a pain” (1958 [1859]: 319), he nonetheless allows that desires can take states of affairs as their intentional objects, such that they are not necessarily ‘satisfied’ just because desiring ceases. The medical philosophy, then, is the conjunction of both claims.

Although Proust does not employ the term regularly, variants of the ‘medical philosophy,’ and other bits of spurious philosophical wisdom, run through the *Recherche* as a kind of countermelody. They are part of the intellectual milieu not only of Swann’s circle, but of Marcel’s, although often ironized: the Duchesse de Guermantes causally tosses off the laziest epistemological skepticism before “proceed[ing] at once to violate it” (*G*, 306; II 525); the Turkish Ambassadress is familiar with “any of the most recent German publications,” whether on “political economy, mental aberrations, the various forms of onanism, or the philosophy of Epicurus” (*G*, 732; II 823); Mme de Cambremer’s “entirely spurious culture” notably includes “idealist philosophy” (*SG*, 467; III 335); and Brichot can knowingly declare that “Balzac is all the rage this year, as pessimism was last” (*SG*, 611; III 438). Addressing Marcel in one of these salons years later, Swann is still speaking of his jealous love as a “disease” that can be treated by seeking to cease loving the beloved (*SG*, 139; III 101). Marcel himself often flirts with the medical philosophy, both by seeing his desire as directed not at a particular woman but as a purely internal state of lack, and by attempting therefore to eliminate his desires: already with Gilberte he thinks, “There is nothing for it but to try to eradicate little by little our desire” (*BG*, 274; I 613), and this thought is echoed repeatedly with respect to Albertine, e.g., “if happiness, or at least the absence of suffering, can be found, it is not the satisfaction, but the gradual reduction and the eventual extinction of desire that one should seek” (*F*, 607; IV 34).

Neither claim of the medical philosophy, however, is ultimately endorsed by the narrator. Russell’s claim is, quite independently of Proust, widely recognized to be false. As Wittgenstein wrote in his *Philosophical Remarks*, “I believe Russell’s theory amounts to the following: ... If I wanted to eat an apple and someone punched me in the stomach, taking away my appetite, then it was the punch I originally wanted” (1975 [1930]: 64). One crucial distinction, in the theory of desire, is that between the logical satisfaction of *desire* and the psychological

satisfaction of the *agent* (de Sousa 1998; Lycan 2012). But there is a significant psychological difference between failing to be satisfied by the apple you eat and failing to be satisfied by the punch you receive. In order to even articulate the claim that attaining the objects of your desire can disappoint you, we need the right account of what the intentional object of desire *is*.

Proust's narrator, as any number of moments in the text illustrate, is committed to denying Russell's claim and to respecting the relevant distinction between desire satisfaction and agent satisfaction. The youthful Marcel already recognizes, of certain desires, "that their fulfilment would have afforded me no pleasure" (*SW*, 258; I 180-1), thus distinguishing logical attainment from psychological satisfaction. Again, he later recognizes that his desire to travel to Balbec "was a desire which I had attained without any satisfaction" (*C*, 558; III 915), and that his desire to befriend Saint-Loup "had been realised beyond the limits of what I should ever have thought possible, without, however, at the time giving me more than a very slight pleasure" (*TR*, 227; IV 426). As Richard Moran notes, on Russell's view, "we would have to count the long periods of discouragement when the Narrator abandons any hope of embarking on a literary career as satisfactions of that ambition" (forthcoming: 18).

It is striking that, for all Marcel's attraction to forms of skepticism—about the external world, about the possibility of knowability by others—he so rarely seems troubled by an inability to know the intentional objects of his *own* desires. He really does want to receive that goodnight kiss, to see La Berma, to meet the Duchesse de Guermantes, to dine with Mme de Stermaria. What he doesn't know, at least initially, is whether attaining his desires will satisfy *him*. On Russell's view, it is an empirical question which object will actually eliminate a particular desire. On Proust's view, it is an empirical question only which instances of desire satisfaction will actually satisfy *us*.

While less unpopular than Russell's claim, Schopenhauer's claim is also considered false by the narrator. This is more controversial, since many interpreters have emphasized Proust's similarities to Schopenhauer (Beckett 1931; Henry 2000; May 2011). But Schopenhauer writes of desire: "its attainment of the goal ... we call *satisfaction*, well-being, happiness" (1958 [1859]: 309). Although Schopenhauer believes that desiring, because it continues restlessly on, always causes more suffering than pleasure, he does appear to hold that the satisfaction of a desire is always, to that extent at least, the satisfaction of the agent.¹⁰ But I have already argued, in section 2, that this is false for Proust.

On balance, the medical philosophy is seen to be not only theoretically inadequate but also practically unhelpful. While the narrator finds "a certain wisdom in the philosophers who recommend us to set a limit to our desires" (*BG*, 400; II 74), he goes on to say, returning to the vegetal metaphor of desire's blossoming, "I was inclined to regard this wisdom as incomplete, for I told myself that these encounters made me find even more beautiful a world which thus caused to grow along all the country roads flowers at once rare and common" (*BG*, 401; II 74). Later in the same volume, the narrator describes another "one of the systems of mental hygiene among which we are at liberty to choose our own, a system which is perhaps not to be recommended too strongly, but gives us a certain tranquillity ... with which to resign ourselves to death" (*BG*, 721; II 300). The idea that death is the logical terminus of the medical philosophy is repeated later in the novel, when death, it is claimed, "will cure us of the desire for immortality" (*F*, 874; IV 224) and, indeed, of all desire.

4. "One ought to seek not to"

¹⁰ Ultimately, this may not be a very great extent, particularly when we add in Schopenhauer's second-order desires to have desires, which are the source of further suffering. Thanks to Lanier Anderson for helpful discussion on this point.

The aim of this section is to consider which agential strategy is best for coping with the disappointments of desire satisfaction, both as a matter of textual interpretation and on substantive philosophical grounds. One strategy is to seek satisfaction in aesthetic experience, and the novel abounds in such moments, the discussion of which deserves fuller treatment elsewhere. Here, I consider only the restricted class of desires I have called project-based desires. I have already argued that Proust rejects the Schopenhauerian view on which we should *eliminate* such desires. Rather, the Proustian view is one on which, for the class of desires in question, we should *prolong* the pursuit of those desires, with the attendant pleasures of the hypothetical imagination.

Above, I quoted a passage from the opening of *The Fugitive*, a section that Ingrid Wassenaar calls “one of the bleakest and most critically resistant parts of the novel” (2000: 173), in which the narrator seems to articulate the Schopenhauerian view: “it is not the satisfaction, but the gradual reduction and the eventual extinction of desire that one should seek” (*F*, 607; IV 34). What follows immediately is more revealing, however: “One seeks to see the beloved object, but one ought to seek not to: forgetfulness alone brings about the ultimate extinction of desire” (*F*, 607; IV 34). As with the narrator’s belief that the endpoint of the medical philosophy is death, I think we can see in the reference to forgetfulness—like death, hardly a desideratum in the novel—another clue that Schopenhauer’s claim is inadequate, one of the errors that Proust is obliged to depict without identifying it as an error. Yet if appropriately disambiguated and reinterpreted, the first part of the sentence offers a succinct formulation of the Proustian strategy: one’s *desire* aims at the beloved object, but one, *qua agent*, ought to seek not to attain it, i.e., the object of desire.

Which intentional objects of desire best lend themselves to prolonged pursuit? I suggest two restrictions: such objects must be regarded by the agent as (i) worthy of pursuit and (ii)

difficult but not impossible to attain. The first restriction is meant to rule out objects of desire that the agent does not care about, and to rule in those objects that are regarded as most worthy. As Proust writes in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, “one must live among desirable desires ... in order to afford one’s soul the sense of having accomplished—though to be disillusioned—the most perfect thing this world can offer and the best matched to the claims of desire” (1984: 81). Although one might object, at least morally, to the way in which Marcel pursues some of his desires—notably the project of ‘possessing’ Albertine—the object of the desire itself, another person, is surely worthy (and indeed, regarding Albertine in particular as so desirable by others is a major cause of the narrator’s jealousy).

In addition to whatever evaluative considerations go into the choice of projects to pursue, the second restriction has to do with factual considerations about difficulty. In general, the more difficult a project, the longer it takes to attain it, though the project can’t be thought wholly unattainable.¹¹ Although Marcel’s desire for Mme de Stermaria is actually strengthened when she stands him up for dinner, he still does not believe that her love could never be attained: “in general the difficulty of attaining the object of a desire enhances that desire (the difficulty, not the impossibility, for that suppresses it altogether)” (*G*, 524; II 678).

To the extent that the realization of one’s projects is under one’s control, the best agential strategy is therefore deferral. Sometimes this is not possible, as when, on a walk with Elstir in Balbec, Marcel happens upon the *jeunes filles en fleurs* whom he had imagined getting to know: “This was not at all the way in which I had so often, on the beach, in my bedroom, imagined myself making the acquaintance of these girls. What was about to happen was a different event, for which I was not prepared. I recognised in it neither my desire nor its object; I

¹¹ Sometimes the narrator speaks as though difficulty is the *only* consideration that sparks desire—e.g., love “comes to rest on the image of a woman simply because that woman will be almost impossible of attainment” (*BG*, 597; II 213)—but surely this is overstated; notice the ‘almost’ qualifier.

regretted almost that I had come out with Elstir” (BG, 594; II 211). Fortunately, the introduction does not take place, and instead the knowledge that what imagination figured can occur in reality heightens Marcel’s pleasure: “I could now set my desire for [the girls] at rest, hold it in reserve, among all those other desires the realisation of which, as soon as I knew it to be possible, I would cheerfully postpone” (BG, 606; II 220). We see deferral at work in the narrator’s relationship with Albertine, where he requests a ‘voucher’ for their first kiss, since “the knowledge that to kiss Albertine’s cheeks was a possible thing was a pleasure perhaps greater even than that of kissing them” (G, 494; II 657); in his pursuit of Andrée (SG, 700; III 498); and most blatantly in his interminable investigation into the possibility of Albertine’s lesbian affairs, both before and after her death. He never does, after all, read the letters in her kimono (C, 89; III 582). Deferral is a strategy employed by the child Marcel even before the *drame du coucher*: “I reached the point of hoping that this good night which I loved so much would come as late as possible, so as to prolong the time of respite during which Mamma would not yet have appeared” (SW, 15; I 13). Given his premises, deferral is a perfectly reasonable strategy.

In characterizing project-based desires, I have referred to desires whose objects can be completed, or attained, or possessed. But one might reasonably object that there are some desires that aim not at the completion, but the perpetuation, of one’s projects. Kieran Setiya (2014) makes a distinction between *telic* and *atelic* activities. Telic activities aim at completion, and include in their nature a terminal point: activities like writing a book, traveling to Venice, and being accepted into high society are all telic, since there is a time at which they can be accomplished. Atelic activities have no terminal point: activities like writing in general, traveling in general, loving one’s partner, and being a philosopher are all atelic. The objection claims that it’s not that we should aim to prolong the realization of telic projects *per se*; rather, we should

aim to engage in atelic projects only. If there's nothing to complete, then there's nothing to be disappointed in.

My reply is that you have to engage in at least *some* telic activities in order to count as pursuing the atelic activity at all: you can't be a writer without finishing at least some projects; you can't be a lover without engaging in at least some benevolent acts. As Setiya puts it, "We cannot simply spend time with friends, we have to spend it in some endeavour. We cannot simply do philosophy: we have to read a book, work through a problem, write a paper. There is an ineluctable strain of self-destruction not in atelic ends but in our way of relating to them" (2014: 16). You can't just daydream your life, in part because you need infusions of reality to improve your acts of imagination. Proust doesn't seem to recognize the distinction between telic and atelic activities. But even if he did, it would not solve the problem of reality's disappointments. Completing the telic projects that I have discussed will disappoint you, and to engage in atelic activities requires you to complete at least some telic activities, so deferral remains a rational strategy.¹²

The *Recherche* ends with a famous passage in which Marcel recovers his resolution to write his book, a book that is perhaps identical to the one we are reading:

The idea of Time was of value to me for yet another reason: it was a spur, it told me that it was time to begin if I wished to attain to what I had sometimes perceived in the course of my life, in brief lightning-flashes, on the Guermites way and in my drives in the carriage of Mme de Villeparisis, at those moments of perception which had made me think that

¹² What about desiring *not* to complete one's telic projects? Won't we be disappointed not only when we complete them but also when we don't? My reply points again to the a/telic distinction: not completing one's projects is itself an atelic project, since there is no terminal point at which one has completed not completing all one's projects. Since it won't disappoint one, it's not an inherently self-defeating strategy.

life was worth living. How much more worth living did it appear to me now, now that I seemed to see that this life that we live in half-darkness can be illumined, this life that at every moment we distort can be restored to its true pristine shape, that a life, in short, can be realised within the confines of a book. How happy would he be, I thought, the man who had the power to write such a book! What a task awaited him! (*TR*, 507; *IV* 609)

Many interpreters have commented on this passage, and on the discovery that Marcel makes. As I read it, the happiness here lies not in *completing* the book, or even necessarily in *writing* the book—though certainly the process of writing the book will itself be a spur to further imaginative activity—but in *anticipating* the writing of the book, now that the activity is believed to be both supremely worthwhile and intensely difficult (“he would also have to endure his book like a form of fatigue, to accept it like a discipline” (*TR*, 507; *IV* 609-10)). The project “will no doubt never be completed” (*TR*, 508; *IV* 610)—the final sentence of the novel begins with a conditional, “if I were given long enough to accomplish my work” (*TR*, 531; *IV* 625)—but why should it be? Not finishing the novel, while believing that there is a possibility of finishing it nonetheless, is the best possible state of affairs for achieving not his desire’s satisfaction, but his own.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that, for Proust, the pleasures of the hypothetical imagination tend to be greater than the pleasures of sensible reality. Attaining the objects of our project-based desires fails to satisfy us as agents, but anticipating, in hypothetical imagination, the completion of the most desirable projects is itself satisfying. As such, and contrary to the ‘medical philosophy’, we

should not aim to eliminate those project-based desires, but rather to prolong their pursuit. This is a strategy that can be pursued clear-sightedly, reasonably, and deliberately.

To venture a bolder conclusion: deferral is also an *authorial* strategy for Proust, who conceived the beginning and ending of his novel as early as 1909 but continued adding to it for years, famously scribbling expansive marginal notes that grew the manuscript, almost as if to avoid reaching the episode of the *matinée Guermantes* that he knew in advance would bring his work to a close. Proust pronounced the manuscript finished in the spring of 1922 and is reported then to have declared, “Now I can die” (Albaret 2001 [1973]: 337; Tadié 2000: 762). He died several months later.

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- SW* *Swann’s Way*
- BG* *Within a Budding Grove*
- G* *The Guermantes Way*

- SG *Sodom and Gomorrah*
- C *The Captive*
- F *The Fugitive*
- TR *Time Regained* (translated by Andreas Mayor and Terence Kilmartin, revised by D. J. Enright)

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