

When Place Becomes Art in Proust  
*How we Paint our Lives through the Movements we Repeat*

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Throughout *Swann's Way*, Marcel moves through spatially and temporally isolated places with fluidity. Proust gives the reader the impression of moving through these places alongside Marcel, despite the places lacking a material existence for both the characters in the book and the reader. In doing so, Proust reveals the fragility of the material world and the frailty of place. Through habit, however, places assume metaphysical weight. When the novel's characters repeat their steps and form patterns of their movements, a place becomes more real to them: elevated, stabilized, colored in, layered, complete. A place which assumes these qualities, transcends the laws of the material world, and can be accessed in spite of it – as Marcel can access Combray from his cup of tea (48). In this paper, I establish a parallel between habit and the creation of art. Creating art, like habit, elevates and stabilizes something otherwise fragile; created art is transcendent. With this, I extend a Proustian metaphor: as humans we are fundamentally artists, and habit is the paintbrush with which we paint our world.

To Proust, places alone have fragile existences. Places – and the entire material world – form only an outline for our lives. When remembering the landscape of a long walk through Combray, Marcel illuminates the fragility of place: “the narrow road emerged suddenly...above which rose only the delicate tip of the steeple of Saint-Hilaire, but so thin, so pink, that it seemed merely scratched on the sky by a fingernail which wanted to give this landscape, this exclusively natural picture, that little mark of art, that indication of human presence” (64). Here, place is described as “delicate,” “so thin,” “merely scratched on...by a fingernail.” The sudden emergence of the narrow road suggests that places not only have fragile existences, but also accidental existences. Fragility and accidentality indicate the instability of a place one passed through only once, without making a habit of visiting (like a one-time event, which upon recollecting, one feels they are watching a movie, or peering through a window into a life that could just as easily belong to anyone else).

Habit, Proust reveals, is responsible for a place's assumption of weight – its elevation and stability. Marcel recognizes a difference between the places one passes through and the places one lives in: “[there is] a prosiness that serves as a great reservoir of poetry for one who passes through [a place] without having lived in it” (51). If a place is only a trace, or an outline, a “great reservoir of poetry” invites its completion. In this case, a place is a blank canvas that may remain forever blank, or be elevated by habit. An alternate interpretation might suggest that habit actually corrupts the beauty of a place. In this case, the corrupted beauty is surface-level, frail, and delicate. Habit, then, while numbing one to that frail and delicate beauty, replaces it with stable, elevated kind. Take, for example, the pink hawthorns Marcel passes. When he passes the pink hawthorn, the novelty of its colors, allow Marcel to identify the hawthorn as beautiful. But the beautiful flower, “merely addressing [his] eyes,” vanishes altogether after passing, and becomes inaccessible (143). The white hawthorns, of which Marcel has seen many, pale in comparison; however, these flowers compose a “rustic motif” and Marcel is able “absorb[s] [himself] in the rhythm [of]” their fragrance (141). When one makes a habit of encountering a beautiful object, they become numb to its appearance, they lose access to its isolated surface-visual beauty; yet, instead, the beautiful object has been layered upon by the memories of each walk, stabilized, and given a life of its own that could at any time be revived by a number of associations made unconsciously. When we occupy a place with habit, we begin “not [to] consider a [place as] a spectacle,” having only one existence, material and fragile, “but believe in it as a creature without equivalent” (67). This metamorphosis of place, from spectacle to creature, is dimension-adding: through habit a place becomes “something entirely different from the rest...[more than] an edifice occupying a space [but] with, so to speak, four dimensions – the fourth being Time – extending over the centuries...not only a few yards but epoch after epoch” (62). What is lost in pure, undisturbed visual beauty, is replaced by a deep and transcendent one. Without habit, we merely tread upon the frail material world, unable to truly reside in it: “For without habit our mind, reduced to no more than its own resources, would be powerless to make a lodging habitable” (8).

In *Swann's Way*, art, like habit, adds dimension. To make art of something is to elevate it beyond the material realm – to make what is fragile, stable and complete. Among the greatest art Marcel encounters are the books by Bergotte. While other books, lesser works of art, “[trace] on the surface of [his] mind a purely linear figure,” in reading the passages of Bergotte, Marcel experiences a kind of transcendence (96). As Marcel reads he is lifted beyond the linear text: “I Could not put down the novel of [Bergotte’s] that I was reading, but thought I was interested only in the subject... Then I noticed... through marvelous images which seemed to have awakened this harp song which then arose and to whose accompaniment they gave a sublime quality” (96). Bergotte’s words are layered with “marvelous images,” and those images are layered with music, and the layers pile on in such a way that the work itself is elevated to the highest degree of spiritual value, which we call the “sublime.” In contrast, when reading a narrative text, one merely traces a finger along the lines of text, their mind echoing each word and then losing it to the past – as if walking down a street once and then never again. Marcel expresses his disappointment when Bergotte “resume[s] the thread of narrative” (97). It is only through the incorporation of style, that a narrative thread, thin and fragile, becomes “rich in meaning and beauty” (97). We can identify the incorporation of style as a method of creating art; and thus, with one two-dimensional image, Bergotte makes “beauty explode into [Marcel]” (97).

If art elevates – if art is the metamorphosis of the thin into the multi-dimensional, if art colors in what is otherwise a trace – Proust makes another claim, that its effect is most transcendent when art is not encountered as art at all. In Bergotte’s later books, which Marcel implies have greater artistic value, “if he had found out some great truth... he would give vent to those exaltations... revealed only by the undulations of its surface, even sweeter, perhaps, more harmonious, when they were thus veiled and one could not have pointed out precisely where the murmur rose and where it died” (97). Perhaps when one encounters art, a cognitive awareness that they are in the presence of art, the tendency to unravel symbols and interpret stylistic choices, prevents complete transcendence from the material world. When one encounters art accidentally, there is a “special beauty.... represented, not as a symbol... but as real, as

actually experienced or physically handled” (83). The books of Bergotte or musical compositions fit into this category of art “actually experienced or physically handled,” – as do places. Marcel’s grandmother finds this “special beauty” in the steeple of Saint-Hilaire: “Without really knowing why, my grandmother found in the steeple of Saint-Hilaire that absence of vulgarity, of pretension, of meanness, which made her love and believe rich in beneficent influence not only nature...but works of genius,” “what for her had the highest value in the world” (65). Accidentally, the steeple of Saint-Hilaire becomes real to her, more than a scratch, or a fragile accident; it becomes “a little mark of art” (65).

Proust’s use of words like “compose,” and “paint” to describe place, further associate place with art. Describing himself walking through the streets of Combray, Marcel offers an image of painting: “These streets of Combray...painted in colors so different from those that now coat the world for me” (49). Drawn from our habits at a certain time of life, we “paint” and “coat” our surroundings in certain colors. This parallel between place and art, habit and creating art, leaves us with two hypotheses: first, the places we inhabit are personal and unprecedented; second, by choosing our habits, we have agency in elevating and stabilizing places, and through that agency, we become the artists of our own worlds.

When Marcel speaks of Paris, he views it through a window, which is metaphorically his own perspective. Through that window (Marcel’s perspective), Paris has a unique foreground, middle ground, and composition, which gives Paris a certain character, animating it in a way personal to Marcel (67). When Marcel moves through Paris, he moves through a city he composes himself: a place that is itself, but also many others at once, layered upon by Marcel’s habits of thought and motion, which can never be detached from his, the artist’s, mind, and the symbols it sees and seeks. Similarly, Marcel’s Combray is not the same as his mother’s Combray, or his father’s, or his aunt’s, or anyone else’s. Each character, having moved through the place differently, knows their own and unprecedented Combray.

If places are elevated and stabilized, and made real to us through habit, the way we move through space matters. While Proust’s fluidity in the description of place suggests the fragility of the material

world, he saves us from complete insignificance. Proust reveals that our habits, the patterns we form, the paths we choose to walk down daily, become the substance of our lives; because we can create our habits, we have agency, and are the artists of our lives. Marcel and his family regularly walk two paths: Meseglise Way and Guermantes Way. “By persisting” down these paths regularly, the paths “[assume] depth, a dimension lacking from the others. They add to them, too, a charm, a meaning that is for [Marcel] alone” (190). Meseglise Way becomes love. Guermantes Way, which runs in the opposite direction, becomes social status. Together, love and social status, paint in the outline of his life: “The Meseglise Way with its lilacs, its hawthorns, its cornflowers, its poppies, its apple trees, the Guermantes way with its river full of tadpoles, its water lilies and buttercups, formed for me all time the contours of the countrysides where I would like to live, where I demand above all else” (188).

Proust shows how the paths one chooses to walk daily, the places one repeatedly visits, become the places that are real to them. Without habit, the material world is fragile, always near vanishing. Habit, however, like the creation of art, stabilizes what is otherwise volatile, and elevates it. While the effect of habit on place is accidental, we can domesticate habit, and use it like a paintbrush, by choosing how we move through space. This allows us to create the worlds we inhabit, both sublime and transcendent.

## Works Cited

Proust, Marcel, et al. *Swann's Way*. Penguin Books, 2013.



