The airplane seen at Balbec and recalled at the airfield near Paris

(This is a shorter version of a passage on airplanes in Proust’s novel from my book, *The Proustian Quest*).

The incident that inspired this passage is in no way related to Alfred Agostinelli, who served for a while, first, as Proust’s driver, and later, as his secretary, but instead has as its source another young man, Marcel Plantevignes, in whom Proust had taken an interest during the summers he spent at Cabourg in 1908-10, where the youth vacationed with his family. In his memoirs, *Avec Marcel Proust*, Plantevignes relates two episodes that Proust combined to create the scene where the Narrator sees his first airplane. (This passage was only published in 1966, was hence unavailable to George D. Painter and was ignored by J. E. Rivers and Margaret Mein, who mistakenly attributed the source of the incident to Proust’s experience with Agostinelli). Below are the pertinent passages from Plantevignes’s memoirs. (*Avec Marcel Proust*, Paris: Nizet, 1966, 350-53). We cannot tell, of course, whether Plantevignes exaggerated the role he played in Proust’s fascination with airplanes.

Plantevignes describes his horseback rides at Cabourg and Houlgate, including an incident that occurred when he was riding one of his favorite horses, a steady, reliable mare named Serpolette. As he was ambling peacefully along, suddenly an airplane appeared out of nowhere. It was this incident that Proust developed into the Narrator’s sighting of his first airplane. In fact, in one of the notebooks where Albertine’s name occurs for the first time, Proust refers to the horseback ride and the encounter of the aviator as “an outing . . . already written.” Here is the passage from Plantevignes’s memoirs:
Tout à coup un avion surgi de l’horizon des arbres, volant très bas... fonçait vers nous avec un bruit d’enfer... Ma jument prise de terreur... sursauta sur ses jambes... puis faisant un grand bond en avant, partit à travers champs, au triple galop. ...

[Suddenly an airplane, bursting forth just above the tree line, flying very low... dipped towards us with an infernal noise. My mare seized with terror... reared and then leaping forward, took off across the field at full speed. . .]

All his efforts to calm the panic-stricken horse proved useless since the airplane continued to follow them and, as Plantevignes points out, planes flew very low and slowly at the time. The machine stayed right above the rider and his frantic horse. Once the plane finally relented and flew off, Plantevignes was obliged to walk the shaken horse back to the stables. As soon as he saw Proust that evening, he told the writer of his adventure and narrow escape:

Proust, frappé en effet par la nouveauté de cette impression de peur tombant du ciel me demanda la permission de s’en approprier la description comme étant arrivé à lui et d’y faire allusion dans ses écrits... Et en effet dans Sodome et Gomorrhe, Proust parle de cet incident... comme arrivé à lui... .

[Proust, impressed by the novelty of the impression of fear falling from the sky, asked my permission to use the description as something that had happened to him and to allude to it in his writings... And indeed in Sodom and Gomorrah, Proust [the Narrator] speaks of this incident as having happened to him...]

The passage describing how the Narrator burst into tears on seeing his first airplane was based on another incident described to Proust by Plantevignes:

C’est également à moi... qu’il fait allusion, lorsque dans les lignes suivantes, il décrit qu’il a pleuré en voyant volé [sic]... un avion... durant une promenade en auto avec mes parents... je m’étais soudain pris à pleurer d’émotion en repensant à mon grand’père qui... eût été si curieux, si intéressé, et si surpris et saisi par cette merveilleuse et inoubliable nouveauté en voyant soudain apparaître... le monoplan de Latham... .

Proust, qui m’avait deviné, dit combien il comprenait cette émotion, et m’en avait même vivement félicité par rapport au souvenir de mon grand’père, me demanda également la permission de relater cette émotion comme arrivée à lui.
He also alludes to me, when he says in the following lines, that he wept on seeing an airplane in flight . . . [This occurred] during an automobile excursion that I took with my parents . . . I had suddenly started crying on thinking of my grandfather . . . who would have been so curious, so interested and surprised and amazed by this marvelous and unforgettable novelty on seeing the monoplane of Latham suddenly appear.

Proust, who has guessed the source of my tears, told me how well he understood this emotion, and had even thanked me for having thought of my grandfather, and again asked my permission to relate this emotional outburst as having been his own.

This is just the kind of emotion that would have pleased Proust: the memory of a beloved grandparent linked to the young man’s astonishment at witnessing a revolutionary technological achievement and his regret that the grandparent did not live to share the sense of elation. This passage may have been the starting point for the identification of the Narrator’s grandmother with the church steeple of Saint-Hilaire at Combray and other vertical imagery, including the airplane.

The Narrator’s tears are not merely the result of his having witnessed an extraordinary human feat for the first time—man in flight—but the fact that the sight of the free-flying aviator reminds him of his own bondage and failure. The Futurists, for whom the airplane was the ultimate symbol of modern technology, understood very well the sort of elation that could result from the sight of an airplane:


[If we seek the beauty of forms, the suppleness of lines, and the mystery of matter itself, we should, according to Marinette, watch an airplane ready to take off. The flight of airplanes creates new visual sensations and fills us with new feelings. The heroes of “L’Ellisse e la Spirale” weep with joy and voluptuousness during a flight.]
Famed photographer Jacques-Henri Lartigue described his emotion upon seeing an airplane pass directly overhead in 1909. The text is similar to Proust’s not only in terms of the emotional response of the observer but in the conception of the aviator as ascendant visionary. Lartigue identifies so strongly with the pilot that he believes the aviator’s eyes have become his own:

Hier, un aéroplane est passé au-dessus de moi! juste au-dessus de moi! J’ai vu d’en dessous l’homme vivant assis sur son siège, jambes écartées. . . . Et soudain quelque chose de mystérieux s’est produit dans ma tête . . . un peu comme un vertige à l’envers! C’était comme si j’avais vu passer cet homme avec d’autres yeux que les miens, avec les siens!?!? Je l’ai regardé s’éloigner, toujours en l’air. Son moteur faisait un bruit résonnant empli d’air. On a quelquefois des premières émotions uniques, après lesquelles, ensuite, on court sans jamais plus pouvoir les rattraper.

Je me demande comment on peut appeler ce “contraire de la peur” cette “peur joyeuse” qui, d’un coup, était entrée dans ma cervelle . . . et que personne (???) plus tard ne pourra peut-être plus comprendre. (Jacques-Henri Lartigue, Mémoires sans mémoire, Paris: Robert Laffont, 1975, 78. See also Instants de ma vie, under the heading, Mars 1910.

[Yesterday, an airplane flew right over me! Right over me! I saw from below the living man seated on his seat, legs spread apart. . . . And suddenly something mysterious happened in my head . . . a little bit like reverse vertigo! It was as though I had seen this man pass over me with eyes other than my own, with his own!?!? I saw him going off in the distance, still airborne. His motor made a resonating noise filled with air. Sometimes we have new feelings that are unique, after which, from that moment, we run without ever being able to catch them again.

I wonder what one can call this “opposite of fear” this “joyful fear” that, suddenly, entered my brain . . . and that later no one (???) will ever perhaps be able to understand.]

The figure of the aviator is unadulterated in the novel and is never linked to aspects of the horizontal quest because the airplane is the symbol of the creator. Since the only symbolic function the plane serves in the novel is to represent the artist, it is
contrary to Proust’s intention to say that the figure of the aviator is intended as an homage to Agostinelli.

**Does art correspond to some definite spiritual reality?**

Is the quote below a hint that Marcel began writing his book just after the madeleine episode? Or, by “at the beginning of this book,” does he just mean vaguely that he tasted the cake and drank the key not too long after he began writing his book? This is obviously a question that we cannot answer, but contemplating it allows us to review Proust’s themes and structure and his narrative strategy. It also reminds us again that, in spite of his crises of faith in the validity and truth of art, he does come back to his fundamental belief in its transcendent nature:

It is inconceivable that a piece of sculpture or a piece of music which gives us an emotion that we feel to be more exalted, more pure, more true, does not correspond to some definite spiritual reality, or life would be meaningless. Thus nothing resembled more closely than some such phrase of Vinteuil the peculiar pleasure which I had felt at certain moments in my life, when gazing, for instance at the steeples of Martinville, or at certain trees along a road near Balbec, or, more simply, at the beginning of this book, when I tasted a certain cup of tea. —*The Captive* 5: 504-05