The letter that Proust wrote to Alfred Agostinelli on the day that the young aviator drowned when his plane crashed into the sea:

You can compare the letter below to the one Marcel writes to Albertine in the novel. See *The Fugitive 5: 612-15*. This letter was annotated and published by Philip Kolb. For Kolb’s notes, see Marcel Proust: *Selected Letters in English, 1910-1917*, vol. 3, edited by Philip Kolb, translated with an introduction by Terence Kilmartin, London: Collins, 1989, 256-58-59

To Alfred Agostinelli

Saturday, 30 May 1914

My dear Alfred,

Thank you very much for your letter—one sentence was ravishing (crepuscular etc.)—and for your preliminary telegram which was an additional kindness. If I don’t send you one it’s because it’s a bit late, the letter having been taken away while I was asleep etc. Since it (yours) gave me pleasure, mine wasn’t completely useless. But for the rest (you’re going to tell me again that I don’t know what I want) it was. For I felt on reflection that it would be very indecent on my part to accept a favor of that kind from you, so I want to try to obtain what I ask by myself. I won’t explain why I should find it indecent; I should probably make you angry again and that it what I most want to avoid. I might have thought of this before but it only occurred to me after having written to you. In any case I think it’s bound to resolve itself in the end.

As regards the aeroplane it’s more complicated for the same reason as with Grasset recently, you remember when he wrote to me: “I release you from all contractual obligations; do whatever you like”; there was only one thing I could do: what he desired. I went back to see M. Collin the day before yesterday, at night, in the rain, before going
to the Ballets Russes. He was extremely nice and as it were gave me my freedom, which I now hardly dare to take advantage of. However I shall see. But don’t imagine that he himself has any interest whatsoever in these sales. He won’t get a single centime of the 27,000 francs the machine will cost. In any case if I keep it (which I rather doubt), since it will probably remain in the stable, I shall have engraved on (I don’t know what the part is called and I don’t want to commit a heresy in front of an airman) those lines of Mallarmé which you know: it’s the poem that you loved even though you found it obscure, which begins:

Le vierge le vivace et le bel Aujourd’hui.

Alas, “today” is neither “virgin” nor “vivacious” nor ‘beautiful.’”

Above all, to finish once and for all with this aeroplane business, I earnestly beg you to believe that my remarks contain not the slightest imputation of reproach, however hidden. That would be idiotic. I have enough justifiable reasons for reproaching you, and you know that I don’t hesitate to do so. But really it would be too absurd to make you responsible (I mean morally) for the futility of a purchase of which you knew nothing.

[Proust inserts some news items here about Paris scandals and a murder trial before resuming remarks directed at Agostinelli.]

Since you are interested in Swann, and in sport, I enclose an article on Swann that appeared in a sporting journal. I’m sorry it isn’t Aero (but perhaps that will come!). What I’d like to be able to send you, but it’s twenty pages long, is the letter from the author of the article apologizing to me for having quoted my book so carelessly.

I asked you to send back my letter to you, you failed to do so. I asked you to put plenty of seals on your envelope; you didn’t do that either . . . not lie around so you might send back this one and the other together, heavily sealed. No need to tire yourself by writing to me since you’re working so hard; just put them in an envelope. With a friendly handshake, Marcel Proust

[The thee dots in the last paragraph represent a half-page that was torn off the original.]

Excellent people
This portrait of Aimé reminds me of Albert Le Cuziat, a former valet who became the proprietor of a male brothel that Proust used to visit. Le Cuziat supplied him with information that Proust used to describe homosexual scenes in the novel. Proust was among those arrested once in a police raid on the establishment. For more details, see *Proust in Love*.

I wondered who I could best send down to make inquiries on the spot, at Balbec. Aimé seemed to me a suitable person. Apart from his thorough knowledge of the place, he belonged to that category of working-class people who have a keen eye to their own advantage, are loyal to those they serve and indifferent to any form of morality, and of whom—because, if we pay them well, they prove themselves, in their obedience to our will, as incapable of indiscretion, lethargy or dishonesty as they are devoid of scruples—we say: “They are excellent people.” —*The Fugitive* 5: 664

We exist alone.

John Donne’s poem is a good literary contrast or rebuttal for Proust’s statement that we exist alone. After comparing them, which do you believe is closer to the truth?

The bonds between ourselves and another person exist only in our minds. Memory as it grows fainter loosens them, and notwithstanding the illusion by which we want to be duped and with which, out of love, friendship, politeness, deference, duty, we dupe other people, we exist alone. Man is the creature who cannot escape from himself, who knows other people only in himself, and when he asserts the contrary, he is lying. —*The Fugitive* 5: 607

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee.

—John Donne [1572-1631], *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* [1624]