CHARACTERS AND THEMES

Characters:

Charlus

How he and other homosexuals must transpose poetry:

The writer must not be indignant if the invert who reads his book gives to his heroines a masculine countenance. For only by the indulgence of this slightly aberrant peculiarity can the invert give to what he is reading its full general import. Racine himself was obliged, as a first step towards giving her universal validity, for a moment to turn the antique figure of Phèdre into a Jansenist; and if M. de Charlus had not bestowed upon the “traitress” for whom Musset weeps in *La Nuit d’Octobre* or *Souvenir* the features of Morel, he would neither have wept nor have understood, since it was only along this path, narrow and indirect, that he had access to the verities of love. For it is only out of habit, a habit contracted from the insincere language of prefaces and dedications, that the writer speaks of “my reader.” —*Time Regained* 6: 321-22

Marcel

Here are some other key passages about Marcel’s discovering his vocation and his esthetic ideas.

On art and literature:

I had arrived then at the conclusion that in fashioning a work of art we are by no means free, that we do not choose how we shall make it but that it pre-exists us and therefore we are obliged, since it is both necessary and hidden, to do what we should have to do if it were a law of nature—to discover it. But this discovery which art obliges us to make, is it not, I thought, really the discovery of what, though it ought to be more precious to us than anything in the world, yet remains ordinarily forever unknown to us, the discovery of our true life, of reality as we have felt it to be, which differs so greatly from what we think it
is that when a chance happening brings us an authentic memory of it we are filled with an immense happiness? In this conclusion I was confirmed by the thought of the falseness of so-called realist art, which would not be so untruthful if we had not in life acquired the habit of giving to what we feel a form of expression which differs so much from, and which we nevertheless after a little time take to be, reality itself. I began to perceive that I should not have to trouble myself with the various literary theories which had at moments perplexed me—notably those which practitioners of criticism had developed at the time of the Dreyfus case and had taken up again during the war, according to which “the artist must be made to leave his ivory tower” and the themes chosen by the writer ought to be not frivolous or sentimental but rather such things as great working-class movements. . . . —Time Regained 6: 277

Art is real life:

For plenty of people who lack the artistic sense, who lack, that is to say, the faculty of submitting to the reality within themselves, may yet possess the ability to expatiate upon the theory of art until the crack of doom. And if they happen to be diplomats or financiers to boot, involved in the realities of the present age, they are likely to believe that literature is an intellectual game destined in the future to be progressively eliminated. (Some critics now liked to regard the novel as a sort of procession of things upon the screen of a cinematograph. The comparison was absurd. Nothing is further from what we have really perceived than the view that the cinematograph presents.) —Time Regained 6: 279

The goal of the artist is to discover the truth about the human condition:

At the beginning of the war M. Barrès had said that the artist (he happened to be talking about Titian) must first and foremost serve the glory of his country. But this he can do only by being an artist, which means only on condition that, while in his own sphere he is studying laws, conducting experiments, making discoveries which are as delicate as those of science, he shall think of nothing—not even his country—but the truth which is before him. —Time Regained 6: 280
Without for moment believing in Albertine’s love I had twenty times wanted to kill myself for her. For when it is a question of writing, one is scrupulous, one examines things meticulously, one rejects all that is not truth. But when it is merely a question of life, one ruins oneself, makes oneself ill, kills oneself all for lies. It is true that these lies are a lode from which, if one has passed the age for writing poetry, one can at least extract a little truth. Sorrows are servants, obscure and detested, against whom one struggles, beneath whose dominion one more and more completely falls, dire and dreadful servants whom it is impossible to replace and who by subterranean paths lead us towards truth and death. Happy are those who have first come face to face with truth, those for whom, near though the one may be to the other, the hour of truth has struck before the hour of death! — *Time Regained* 6: 280

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Some people were also saying that the art of an age of haste would be brief, just as many people before the war had predicted that it would be short. The railway, according to this mode of thinking, was destined to kill contemplation and there was no sense in regretting the age of the diligence. But in fact the car has taken over its function and once more deposits tourists outside forgotten churches. — *Time Regained* 6: 281

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The truth is that as soon as the reasoning intelligence takes upon itself to judge works of art, nothing is any longer fixed or certain: you can prove anything you wish to prove. [...] . . . the first thing that a reader has to do is to find out whether this reality is present beneath a writer’s superficial mannerism of thought and style, it is upon just these superficial mannerisms that criticism seizes when it sets out to classify authors. — *Time Regained* 6: 295

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For there is a closer analogy between the instinctive life of the public and the talent of a great writer, which is simply an instinct religiously listened to in the midst of a silence imposed upon all other voices, an instinct made perfect and understood, than between this
same talent and the superficial verbiage and changing criteria of the established judges of literature. —*Time Regained* 6: 296

*This work of the artist, this struggle to discern beneath matter, beneath experience, beneath words, something that is different from them, is a process exactly the reverse of that which, in those everyday lives which we live with our gaze averted from ourselves, is at every moment being accomplished by vanity and passion and the intellect, and habit too, when they smother our true impressions, so as entirely to conceal them from us, beneath a whole heap of verbal concepts and practical goals which we falsely call life. —*Time Regained* 6: 299-300

The first part of this quote was given in the lecture:

. . . real books should be the offspring not of daylight and casual talk but of darkness and silence. And as art exactly reconstitutes life, around the truths to which we have attained inside ourselves there will always float an atmosphere of poetry, the soft charm of a mystery which is merely a vestige of the shadow which we have had to traverse, the indication, as precise as the markings of an altimeter, of the depth of a work. (For the quality of depth is not inherent in certain subjects, as those novelists believe who are spiritually minded only in a materialistic way: they cannot penetrate beneath the world of appearances and all their noble intentions, like the endless virtuous tirades of certain people who are incapable of the smallest act of kindness, should not blind us to the fact that they have lacked even the strength of mind to rid themselves of those banalities of form which are acquired through imitation.) —*Time Regained* 6: 302-03

And in the end the writer realizes that if his dream of being a sort of painter was not in a conscious and intentional manner capable of fulfillment, it has nevertheless been fulfilled and that he too, for his work as a writer, has unconsciously made use of a sketch-book. For, impelled by the instinct that was in him, the writer, long before he thought that he
would one day become one, regularly omitted to look at a great many things which other people notice, with the result that he was accused by others of being absent-minded and by himself of not knowing how to listen or look, but all this time he was instructing his eyes and his ears to retain forever what seemed to others puerile trivialities, the tone of voice in which a certain remark had been made, or the facial expression and the movement of the shoulders which he had seen at a certain moment, many years ago, in somebody of whom perhaps he knows nothing else whatsoever, simply because this tone of voice was one that he had heard before or felt that he might hear again, because it was something renewable, durable. There is a feeling for generality which, in the future writer, itself picks out what is general and can for that reason one day enter into a work of art. And this has made him listen to people only when, stupid or absurd though they may have been, they have turned themselves, by repeating like parrots what other people of similar character are in the habit of saying, into birds of augury, mouthpieces of a psychological law. —*Time Regained* 6: 305-06

**On reading**

And the recognition by the reader in his own self of what the book says is the proof of its veracity, the contrary also being true, at least to a certain extent, for the difference between the two texts may sometimes be imputed less to the author than to the reader. Besides, the book may be too learned, too obscure for a simple reader, and may therefore present to him a clouded glass through which he cannot read. And other peculiarities can have the same effect as inversion. —*Time Regained* 6: 322

**On the role of suffering**

When we turn to our own future, the work in which our unhappiness has collaborated may be interpreted both as an ominous sign of suffering and as an auspicious sign of consolation. —*Time Regained* 6: 311

. . . if unhappiness develops the forces of the mind, happiness alone is salutary to the body. But unhappiness even if it did not on every occasion reveal to us some new law, would nevertheless be indispensable, since through its means alone we are brought back time after time to a perception of the truth and forced to take things seriously, tearing up
each new crop of weeds of habit and skepticism and levity and indifference. —*Time Regained* 6: 314

. . . it almost seem as though a writer’s works, like the water in an artesian well, mount to a height which is in proportion to the depth to which suffering has penetrated his heart.)

—*Time Regained* 6: 317-18

**The role of the intellect**

I felt . . . that these truths which the intellect educes directly from reality were not altogether to be despised, for they might be able to enshrine within a matter less pure indeed but still imbued with mind those impressions which are conveyed to us outside time by the essences that are common to the sensation of the past and of the present, but which, just because they are more precious, are also too rare for a work of art to be constructed exclusively from them. . . . —*Time Regained* 6: 303

But it required courage of many kinds, including the courage of one’s emotions. For above all it meant the abrogation of one’s dearest illusions, it meant giving up one’s belief in the objectivity of what one had oneself elaborated, so that now, instead of soothing oneself for the hundredth time with the words: “She was very sweet,” one would have to transpose the phrase so that it read: “I experienced pleasure when I kissed her.” Certainly, what I had felt in my hours of love is what all men feel. One feels, yes, but what one feels is like a negative which shows only blackness until one has placed it near a special lamp and which must also be looked at in reverse. So with one’s feelings: until one has brought them within range of the intellect one does not know what they represent. Then only, when the intellect has shed light upon them, has intellectualized them, does one distinguish, and with what difficulty, the lineaments of what one felt.

—*Time Regained* 6: 300

. . . we have to conceptualize [our individual suffering] in a general form which will in some measure enable us to escape from its embrace, which will turn all mankind into sharers in our pain, and which is even able to yield us a certain joy. Where life immures, the intelligence cuts a way out, for if there exists no remedy for a love that is not shared, the awareness of a state of suffering is something from which we can extricate ourselves,
if only by deducing the consequences which it entails. The intelligence knows nothing of those closed situations of life from which there is no escape. —*Time Regained* 6: 313

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Confident now that he has discovered his vocation, Marcel no longer fears the distracting elements of social life:

I realized, what is dangerous in social life is merely the social and worldly inclinations with which one approaches it. In itself it can no more turn one into a mediocre writer than an epic war can turn a bad poet into a sublime one. —*Time Regained* 6: 333-34

**Themes:**

**Death**

The happy years are the lost, the wasted years, one must wait for suffering before one can work. And then the idea of the preliminary suffering becomes associated with the idea of work and one is afraid of each new literary undertaking because one thinks of the pain one will first have to endure in order to imagine it. And once one understands that suffering is the best thing that one can hope to encounter in life, one thinks without terror and almost as a deliverance, of death. —*Time Regained* 6: 319

**The role of dreams, the nocturnal muse**

Dreams were another of the facts of my life which had always most profoundly impressed me and had done most to convince me of the purely mental character of reality, and in the composition of my work I would not scorn their aid. [. . .] And I thought that in the same way dreams would bring sometimes within my grasp truths or impressions which my efforts alone and even the contingencies of nature failed to present to me; that they would re-awaken in me something of the desire, the regret for certain non-existent things which is the necessary condition for working, for freeing oneself from the dominion of habit, for detaching oneself from the concrete. And therefore I would not disdain this second muse, this nocturnal muse who might sometimes do duty for the other one. —*Time Regained* 6: 326-27
Involuntary memory:

Naturally, at the moment when the stiffness of the napkin had restored Balbec to me and for an instant caressed my imagination not only with the sight of the sea as it had been that morning but with the smell of my room, the speed of the wind, the sensation of looking forward to lunch, of wondering which of the different walks I should take (all this being attached to the feel of the linen like those thousand wings of the angels which revolve a thousand times a minute), or at the moment when the unevenness of the two paving-stones had extended in every direction and dimension the desiccated and insubstantial images which I normally had of Venice and St Mark’s and of all the sensations which I had felt there, reuniting the piazza to the cathedral, the landing-stage to the piazza, the canal to the landing-stage, and to all that the eyes see the world of desires which is seen only by the mind. . . .—Time Regained 6: 269-70

For as this impression of beauty came to me only when, an immediate sensation—no matter how insignificant—having been thrust upon my consciousness by chance, a similar sensation, spontaneously born again within me, somehow in a single moment diffused the first sensation over different periods of my life and succeeded in filling with a general essence the empty space which particular sensations never failed to leave in my mind, as this was how I came to experience beauty I might just as well receive sensations of the appropriate kind in a social as in a natural environment. . . —Time Regained 6: 333

Cedar Keys

October 23 [1867]. To-day I reached the sea. While I was yet many miles back in the palmy woods, I caught the scent of the salt sea breeze which, although I had so many years lived far from sea breezes, suddenly conjured up Dunbar, its rocky coast, winds and waves; and my whole childhood, that seemed to have utterly vanished in the New World, was now restored amid the Florida woods by that one breath from the sea. Forgotten were the palms and magnolias and the thousand flowers that enclosed me. I could see only dulse and tangle, long-winged gulls, the Bass Rock in the Firth of Forth, and the old castle, schools, churches, and long country rambles in search of birds’ nests. I do not
wonder that the weary camels coming from the scorching African deserts should be able to scent the Nile.

How imperishable are all the impressions that ever vibrate one’s life! We cannot forget anything. Memories may escape the action of will, may sleep a long time, but when stirred by the right influence, though that influence be light as a shadow, they flash into full stature and life with everything in place. For nineteen years my vision was bounded by forests, but to-day, emerging from a multitude of tropical plans, I beheld the Gulf of Mexico stretching away unbounded, except by the sky. What dreams and speculative matter for thought arose as I stood on the strand, gazing out on the burnished, treeless plain! —John Muir, *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*, Marine Books, 123-24.

**Jealousy**

Jealousy is a good recruiting-sergeant who, when there is a gap in our picture, goes out into the street and brings us in the desirable woman who was needed to fill it. Perhaps in our eyes she had ceased to be a beauty? She has become one again, for we are jealous of her and therefore she will fill the gap. Once we are dead, we shall have no joy that our picture was completed in this fashion. But this consideration does not in the least discourage us. We feel merely that life is a little more complicated than it is said to be, and circumstances too. And it is absolutely necessary that we should portray this complexity. The jealousy that is so useful is not necessarily born of a look, or an anecdote, or a retroflection. It may be found, ready to sting us, between the leaves of a directory—what for Paris is called *Tout-Paris* and for the country the *Annuaire des Châteaux*. —*Time Regained* 6: 330-31

**Love, subjective nature of**

When I considered my past life, I understood also that its slightest episodes had contributed towards giving me the lesson in idealism from which I was going to profit today. My meetings with M. de Charlus, for instance, had they not, even before his pro-German tendencies taught me the same lesson, demonstrated to me, even better than my love for Mme de Guermantes or for Albertine, or Saint-Loup’s love for Rachel, the truth of the axiom that matter is indifferent and that anything can be grafted upon it by thought;
an axiom which in the phenomenon, so ill-understood and so needlessly condemned, of sexual inversion is seen to be of even greater scope than in that, in itself so instructive, of love? For love shows us Beauty fleeing from the woman whom we no longer love, and coming to take up abode in a face which anybody else would find hideous and which to ourselves too might have seemed, as one day it will seem, unpleasing: but even more striking is the spectacle of the goddess, taking with her the reverent homage of a great nobleman who thereupon instantly abandons a beautiful princess, migrating to a new perch beneath the cap on an omnibus conductor. And my astonishment every time I had seen after an interval, in the Champs-Élysées or in the street or on the beach, the face of Gilberte or of Mme de Guermantes or of Albertine, was this not a proof that a memory is prolonged only in a direction which diverges from the impression with which originally it coincided but from which gradually it further and further departs? — *Time Regained* 6: 321

I had seen that love places in a person who is loved what exists only in the person who loves (in Rachel, for instance, as she appeared to Saint-Loup and to me, in Albertine as she appeared to me and to Saint-Loup, in Morel or the omnibus conductor as they appeared to other people and to M. de Charlus, who in spite of this showered delicate attentions upon them, recited Musset’s poems to them, etc.). — *Time Regained* 6: 324

**Memory as a sculptor**

. . . if I see something which dates from another period, it is a young man who comes to life. So that my personality of today may be compared to an abandoned quarry, which supposes everything it contains to be uniform and monotonous, but from which memory, selecting here and there, can, like some sculptor of genius, extract innumerable different statues. And this is true of everything that we see again after a lapse of time, books in this respect behaving just like other things: the way in which the covers of a binding open, the grain of a particular paper, may have preserved in itself as vivid a memory of the fashion in which I once imagined Venice and of the desire that I had to go there as the actual phrases of a book. An even more vivid memory perhaps, for phrases sometimes are an obstruction, just as sometimes when we look at a photograph of a person we recollect him less clearly than we do when we are merely thinking about him. — *Time Regained* 6: 285
Vanity

And more than any chorus of Sophocles on the humbled pride of Oedipus, more than death itself or any funeral oration on the subject of death, the humble greeting, full of effort to please, which the Baron [Charlus] addressed to Mme de Saint-Euverte proclaimed the fragile and perishable nature of the love of earthly greatness and all human pride. —Time Regained 6: 247

The writer sacrifices his body to create his work.

The writer sacrifices his body to create his work. We remember the analogy from Time Regained. “. . . let us submit to the disintegration of our body, since each new fragment which breaks away from it returns in a luminous and significant form to add itself to our work. . .” —Time Regained 6: 315

Here is a similar one applied earlier in the novel to Bergotte:

Bergotte read scarcely anything. The bulk of his thought had long since passed from his brain into his books. He had grown thin, as though they had been extracted from him by a surgical operation. His reproductive instinct no longer impelled him to any activity, now that he had given an independent existence to almost all his thoughts. He led the vegetative life of a convalescent, of a woman after childbirth; his fine eyes remained motionless, vaguely dazed, like the eyes of a man lying on the sea-shore and in a vague day-dream contemplating only each little breaking wave. —The Guermantes Way 3: 447