Reading Marcel Proust is like watching a toy wand unfurl time after time after time. Picture it. Your mother gave it to you for Christmas. It’s light. It’s plastic. It’s rectangular. It’s small enough to put in your pocket. You carry it around from place to place, pretending that it can transform water into wine, lemon into lime. One day your mother catches you taunting the dog with it, and snatches the wand. Sit down, she says, let me show you something. You sit at the kitchen table while she unfastens a knot of string that has been wrapped around your wand. Feather after overlapping feather is spread before you. You didn’t realize that your wand contained so many layers, such a cross-section. Some feathers look older than others. Some are tattered. Some are long. Some are short. Every color imaginable is represented. “It’s a wonder,” you say to yourself, “that it could’ve been bound by that little knot of string.” Your mother picks up the object and starts shaking it, moving the air, making you cold. You thought you had a plastic wand. Now you realize that you had a fan all along.

Marcel Proust’s Swann’s Way, the first part of his opus Remembrance of Things Past is a labyrinthine journey through the mind of the narrator, also named Marcel, in which a simple madeleine pastry becomes a conduit to another universe, or a church. Like an object reflected infinitely in a mirror, it contains every past manifestation of itself. It is never static. It’s a wonderful labyrinth; the reader wants to get lost in its walls. Noises transform into smells, which then morph into distant memories. If Proust’s writing was a painting, it would be a Van Gogh—Starry Night, maybe. The sky swirls into clouds. The stars radiate outwards and become a part of the heavens. Everything blends together; nothing can be reduced.

Can people exist in such a universe as Proust’s, a world where solid, liquid, and gas aren’t discrete states, and synesthesia is the norm? Proust’s narrator, in a moment of ontological speculation, asserts that
none of us can be said to constitute a material whole. . . our social personality is a creation of the thoughts of other people. Even the simple act which we describe as 'seeing someone we know' is to some extent an intellectual process. We pack the physical outline of the person we see with all the notions we have already formed about him. (20)

There’s a sense of gruesomeness in being “packed” in this way—a tension between how we actually exist, and how we perceive our own existence. In Proust’s universe, people are rarely understood on their own terms. Others construct them.

What is this “packing” all about? Because this is the verb, the thing being done to the other person, it’s important to consider its literal meaning as Proust uses it. Ruth Draper, an expert actress of the mid-20th century who used the monologue form to channel different personae, may be able to provide an answer. One of her audio monologues, her much-acclaimed “The Italian Lesson,” depicts the narcissistic aloofness deemed typical of a society lady. “And get dear little Mr. Miller,” says this matron to her maid, “he’s always free, you know. And he likes everybody and he likes everything, and always gives me a feeling of hope” (Draper). Draper’s character does what Proust’s narrator describes: she “pack[s] the physical outline of the person” with a ubiquitous “always,” as if she could know Mr. Miller completely. But if Marcel’s mind is spacious, allowing for every nuance of the people he knows, the matron’s feels claustrophobic. Nothing exists beyond Mr. Miller’s “proper margins” (Proust 63). What the matron reveals is that this “packing” can be as much a rhetorical process as it is the “intellectual” one mentioned by Proust’s narrator.

So, according to Proust, what is our responsibility in imagining other people beyond our own knee-jerk impulse to “pack” them into our preconceived notions? To what extent are we supposed to conjure the complexity of their lives? As we see, there’s a tug-of-war between reduction and expansion, between “packing” and “unpacking” in Proust’s narrative. Some people—Swann’s vapid dinner hosts, the Verdurins, who “never invited you to dinner” but “had your ‘place laid’ there,” or Marcel’s egotistical neighbor Monsieur Legrandin—circumscribe people and things within an impassable border (206). Marcel, on the other hand, can go on for pages about the “unconscious cruelty” of his parents at bedtime, the timeless “shimmering brilliance” of
stained glass at the church of Combray, or a simple madeleine which looked “as though [it] had been molded in the fluted valve of a scallop shell” (29, 65, 48). Proust unfolds his fan across such images and memories. The mundane is made beautiful and expansive. Reading Proust, we are moved to look at reality differently.

How does Proust accomplish this unfolding? While venturing to the church in Combray, Marcel observes:

memorial stones, beneath which the noble dust of the Abbots of Combray who lay buried there furnished the choir with a sort of spiritual pavement, were themselves no longer hard and lifeless matter, for time had softened them and made them flow like honey beyond their proper margins. (63)

Proust’s sentences are recursive, like a person unpacking the suitcase of a complete stranger. Each item pulled out is completely revelatory, from “memorial stones,” to “noble dust,” to “choir,” to “spiritual pavement,” to “honey.” Proust breaks down the barriers of both physical matter and time, moving between varying levels of abstraction. The Abbots are no longer static, but exceed their “physical outline.” But something puzzling remains in Proust’s description. It’s as if the very nature of the deceased souls could somehow nourish the people standing on top of the spiritual pavement in the present day. Several degrees of matter and time are removed—and yet there’s a connection.

How can the very stuff of the entombed Abbots of Combray—the honey-like flow of their matter, no longer sentient but still embodying some kind of essence—still have any bearing on the choir singing above? It’s as if the very objects of the church embodied the spirits buried there. Dr. J. Warneck, an anthropologist who studied the Tinneh Native Americans of British Columbia, focused on their belief that the soul is “an elixir of life, a life stuff, which is found everywhere in nature” (Warneck, qtd. in Chapman 298). For this people, the soul acts as the mediator among different entities. The Tinneh believe that “the spirit of a deceased person . . . is benefited, not by the substance of the food which he sets out as an offering, but by its soul” (305). It is the soul that communicates with another soul, the “food” soul to the “deceased” soul. In this context, Marcel’s observation about the Abbots of Combray seems to express elements of animism. Animism, at least as
Warneck conceives of it in the Tinneh, offers an alternative to the very reductive form of existence portrayed by Ruth Draper’s character. The animist belief that souls can be found “everywhere in nature” jives better with Proust’s expansive notion of existence. Across space and time, a soul may become shared.

This animistic notion of existence makes more sense in a Proustian context when considering the author’s allusions to artwork and biblical figures. The narrator recalls a memory of his father:

I stood there, not daring to move; he was still in front of us, a tall figure in his white nightshirt, crowned with the pink and violet cashmere scarf which he used to wrap around his head since he had begun to suffer from neuralgia, standing like Abraham in the engraving after Benozzo Gozzoli which M. Swann had given me, telling Sarah that she must tear herself away from Isaac. (39)

Proust makes many movements here, and not only between past and present. He starts with his father, moves to Abraham, and then to an engraving of Abraham. His father transforms across space and time, from a person to a biblical character, and then to a graven image. Not only does the father go through several incarnations (he moves from biblical allusion to visual art piece), but Marcel’s perception also becomes more multilayered: Proust sees Marcel’s father directly, then through a character on a page, and then he sees his father through an artist’s interpretation of this character on the page. Proust leads us outwards, showing how artwork embodies the “life stuff” of his father, having the power to transcend physical boundaries.

One could look at this situation another way. R.D. Laing, a British psychiatrist of the mid-20th century, asserts in his book *Self and Others* that the “act that is genuine, revealing . . . is felt by me as fulfilling . . . [i]n this action I am myself. I put myself ‘in’ it. In so far as I put myself ‘into’ what I do, I become myself through this doing” (109). Causality seems to be of issue here: while Proust’s narrator sees his father in past works of art—his scope expanding ever outwards—Laing would see the artist as putting herself into her art and, in return, becoming this new, more genuine self. Laing would not be so concerned with Proust’s father’s resemblance to Abraham. Rather, he would put himself in place of the artist, asserting that Benozzo Gozzoli creates him-
self through the process of engraving. The artist thus exceeds his “physical outline” of his own accord. Might this, in a sense, be a more optimistic alternative to Proust’s “packing” of the self? If I create myself through my work, doesn’t that mean that I have the power to defy other peoples’ notions of me?

Artists’ models may be seen solely as physical outlines “packed” with the notions that artists have of them. To the casual observer, the artist doesn’t imagine the reality that the model inhabits. The model becomes what the artist wants him to become. On the surface, this experience is the opposite of Laing’s notion of “potentiat[ing] the being or existence of the doer”; nor does it “make patent the latent self” of the model (108, 112). This artist may as well be the society lady depicted by Ruth Draper, telling her maid that she “picked up a charming young Englishman . . . [and] put him on a piece of paper.” Rhetorically, she reduces the “charming young Englishman” to a number on a piece of paper, just as the artist may reduce the model to an image on canvas. So, when Proust’s narrator imagines his father as Benozzo Gozzoli’s engraving of Abraham, isn’t he “packing” him with Gozzoli’s interpretation of this biblical figure, not to mention his own interpretation of Gozzoli’s interpretation?

It’s difficult to imagine Proust’s narrator’s perception of his father as reductive. If anything, it’s expansive. There’s an apparent contradiction: though he likens his father to a mere engraving, he is able to imagine his father as a more complex being by doing so. The wand fans out, and he is able to see every distinct feather: Abraham, the engraving of Abraham, his own interpretation of the engraving. Gozzoli’s image allows the narrator to perceive his father “beyond [his] proper margins.” On the other hand, the society lady’s “charming young Englishman” is stuck on the paper. He does not “flow.” He’s reduced, frozen like ice.

Unfolding a wand into a fan, we see the object in all of its complexity. But to what end? The narrator, by imagining his father as an engraving, may see him as a more multilayered person, across space and time. But even if we can imagine ourselves into another person, what does this “imagining” achieve? Monsieur Swann does something similar with Odette, his mistress, albeit more confusedly, when he likens her to Botticelli’s painting of the biblical figure Zipporah (Exodus 18: 1-6):
The vague feeling of sympathy which attracts one to a work of art now that he knew the original in flesh and blood of [Zipporah] became a desire which more than compensated, thenceforward, for the desire which Odette’s physical charms had at first failed to inspire in him (245).

Again, Proust moves us through time and space. From the general “vague feeling” to the present “now,” to the particular “became,” to the future-looking “thenceforward,” to the past “had at first”—the line between Odette and Zipporah is dissolved. Object and person, art and lover, merge into a blurry, amorphous mess.

Like Marcel’s father, Odette is likened to a piece of art. But here, Odette seemingly becomes “the original,” the prototype of Botticelli’s Zipporah. The cause-and-effect works differently, and what is achieved? Swann’s desire for the “work of art” absolves Odette of her lack of “physical charms.” The art piece allows her to become more beautiful than he initially thought. He appreciates her more—perhaps even loves her more—because he could pack her with the image of Zipporah. Except, in this instance, Zipporah is not a “notion . . . already formed,” “packed” into her “proper margins”: Odette, to Monsieur Swann, is the original. Zipporah is seen as an interpretation of Odette, and so Botticelli’s painting deepens Swann’s understanding of his lover. Swann doesn’t freeze Odette into a piece of art. Rather, the art piece becomes an extension of Odette.

And yet, this extension hardly seems like an ethical solution to the aforementioned “packing.” Although Zipporah may allow Swann to appreciate Odette more, it seems condescending and objectifying to allow an inanimate object—albeit one that was meant to represent a person in the first place—to fill in the gaps of someone’s original self. Is he really imagining her, or altering her? For Sarah R. Phillips, the interaction between model and artist is more complex than a mere “packing” of the artist’s notions into the physical outline of the model. In her book *Modeling Life*, Phillips portrays models as more autonomous agents when artists render them. Phillips asserts that “[a]n energy exchange elevates a modeling session to the stature of ‘art’ because the exchange opens a window into the spirit or inner being of the life model” (16-17). To Phillips, art exists when the work is an expression of the subject’s inner life. Zipporah may be Swann’s way of imagining himself into Odette, his subject.
In Proustian terms the artist isn’t “packing” the model with preconceived notions so much as bringing to the fore what is already there; drawing the model allows the artist to jump the boundary between artist and subject. The artist sees a part of the model’s interiority that she wouldn’t otherwise see. Like the attentive reader who notices aspects of a text not readily visible—such as its imagery, repetition, syntax, and tone—the artist, imagining the person onto the canvas, is able to see not only the very physical aspects of the model that might be missed by a casual observer, but also the intangible selves that “flow . . . beyond their proper margins.” And what could be more “potentiating”?

Turning back to Laing’s definition of “potentiat[ion]” as an act that “makes patent the latent self of the doer,” we can also assert that Phillips’s “doer” is both the artist and the model. As Karen, a model interviewed by Phillips, states, “[Artists] pick up on my feelings, and they put that into their artwork. When I am an active participant with the piece of artwork, I think they come out with better pieces” (16). The model and artist create together. Being an “active participant,” Karen, as well as other models, gives the artist a piece of her humanity to put onto the canvas. The more she participates in this process of creation, the more “potentiat[ing]” the drawing will be. This process is markedly similar to Tinkhe animist belief: the “life stuff” of an object is transferable to another.

As we already know, Draper’s society lady does not allow her own self to be “transfered” to another person. Considering a commissioned portrait of her daughter, she challenges the artist: “We put the child up on top of the piano so that she should be on level with the picture, and we both think that you’ve got her a little bit thin . . . there’s something not quite right about the mouth” (Draper). The society lady proceeds to shape the image of her daughter to her own liking, rather than trust the image the artist captured when the child was modeling for him. The society lady, in this instance, is subverting the artistic process that Phillips lays out. Though her daughter may have been an active participant, the society lady packs the child’s physical outline with her own notions of what she wants her daughter to look like. The society lady does not think like an artist. She is unable to imagine her daughter on both the daughter and the artist’s terms. She’s a vandal, sabotaging the sacred exchange of human imagination.
For Proust, having an artistic sensibility is an ethical issue. To see the world in an active, involved way, rather than in passive, limiting absolutes—that is the way we imagine ourselves into others. When Marcel goes to the Church in Combray, or looks at his father at that fateful moment in his childhood, he collaborates with what he is given; in the process of this exchange of consciousness—that of the object, and that of the artist—he reaches a deeper understanding, imagining his way into the subject. The artist’s sensibility jumps the boundary between self and other, not only imagining a way into another person’s life, but feeling the very substance of that life—the other’s very individuality—passing from the fingers and onto the page, or shaped into clay, chiseled into stone, or simply into our mind. The artist becomes the subject and can feel the subject’s pain, joy, and boredom. At the root of this exchange is an ability for compassion, to admit to ourselves that we do not have all of the answers, and yet to dare to imagine the world in all its beautiful, unfettered complexity.

WORKS CITED


