Proust led an almost irresistibly intriguing life. It was one of wretched ill health combined with seemingly endless creative stamina; desire in surfeit but scant satisfaction; wealth and privilege coupled with perennial yearnings for the company and favours of those of a lower social station. These aspects of the life make for fascinating reading and can feed profitably into our understanding and appreciation of Proust's novel, but if we tarry too long over them we risk becoming bewitched by the man and his manias, losing sight of the art to which he dedicated his life.

As biographers and critics have profitably shown for decades, Proust drew on practically every aspect of his personal experience when creating his novel. His life and the rapidly changing world in which he lived provided inspiration, ideas and scenarios, which fed into the construction of his literary project. But this, crucially, does not mean that Proust and his Narrator are one and the same. Proust had a brother, a Jewish mother, a sinecure position for a time at the Bibliothèque mazarine; the Narrator of the Search has none of these. Proust was homosexual; for his heterosexual Narrator, lesbianism is a threatening, unknowable otherness that provokes in him pathological fear.

Detailing such divergences, however, is something of a fool's errand. For every aspect of the Narrator we consider that sets him apart from his creator, another will present itself that suggests congruity or sameness. Some readers (and critics of the novel) think of the Narrator as 'Marcel', a choice which implicitly aligns the Narrator's identity with that of his creator and asks a brief moment of the novel to bear a great deal of critical weight. In The Captive (which Proust had not finished editing when he died) the Narrator remarks that Albertine, awakening, would 'say “My – ” or “My darling – ” followed by my first name, which, if we give the narrator the same name as the author of this book, would be “My Marcel,” or “My darling Marcel”, (C, 77; P, 1658). This sudden acknowledgement of the Narrator's fictional status and that of the text in which he appears introduces a bewildering ontological dilemma for readers to ponder but is not iron-clad 'proof' that the novel's protagonist is 'Marcel' and less still that being so named would mean that he and Proust are one and the same person.
Matters are complicated by the fact that in his correspondence and the notes made during the writing of the novel, Proust habitually adopted the first person when referring to the Narrator of his novel, thus blurring the line between creator and created. Additionally, George Painter, Proust’s first, highly influential, English-language biographer, worked on the premise that the *Search* was a ‘creative autobiography’. Understanding the novel, for Painter, was largely a question of mapping Proust’s fictional characters on to his real-life acquaintances. Taking all these matters into account, it is most straightforward, and it will be my practice in the present volume, to refer to the individual who leads us through the pages of the *Search* simply as the ‘Narrator’, similar to but separate from the work’s author.

I shall discuss Proust’s life not because the information thus imparted provides a necessary foundation upon which to rest one’s reading of the *Search*, or because knowing which individuals from Proust’s social circle may offer ‘keys’ to certain characters will make the novel easier to comprehend and enjoy. Rather, it is fruitful to begin with a consideration of Proust’s life because an awareness of his family background, his health and upbringing, the relations he developed through childhood into adolescence and his conduct in the affairs of his adult life can provide us with a valuable sense of the forces that shaped this singularly complex individual. Readers whose primary interest is in Proust’s novel should inform themselves of biographical fact and anecdote in the way that we might visit a vineyard in order to note how the breeze comes down the slopes, to see how the sun strikes the grapes and to feel the texture of the soil between our fingers, fingers that later will hold a glass of something quite distinct but inextricably related to that earlier experience.

The image of Proust that one might gather from journalistic references is that of a bedridden hypochondriac, a hyper-sensitive, moustachioed aesthete, notoriously nocturnal, independently wealthy and idiosyncratic in taste. There is, naturally, factual foundation for these enduring images: his biographers offer accounts of the treatments he took for his asthma, the installation of the cork lining on the walls of his bedroom, the unusual hours he kept, the drinks and dishes he favoured; and the photographs we have of him at different ages will permit those so minded to piece together a rough timeline for the growth and development of the famous moustache. The clichéd conceptions of Proust, however, which lodge in the collective imagination a picture of an author familiar even to those who have not read his work, are based largely on our knowledge of the adult Proust. What of his childhood and adolescence? Perhaps we should start there if we are to gain some sense of the child that would be father to this most exceptional man.
Proust was born on 10 July 1871 in Auteuil, a village to the west of Paris where his mother’s uncle had a house to which his parents had moved when the disruption and violence of the Paris Commune grew intolerable. He was a weak baby and the family harboured serious doubts about his chances of survival. When he was well enough they moved back to Paris. Their vacations were spent largely in Illiers, the paternal family seat to the south-west of Paris, near Chartres. Proust would later draw heavily on the landscapes and way of life at Illiers in constructing the ‘Combray’ section of *In Search of Lost Time*. In 1971, to mark the centenary of the author’s birth, the village’s name was formally changed to Illiers-Combray; it continues to attract a great many Proustian pilgrims. Proust’s mother, born Jeanne Weil, came from a wealthy Jewish family (her grandfather made his fortune in porcelain manufacture and her father was a stockbroker) and his father, Adrien Proust, was Catholic, although neither practised their respective religion. Proust was baptized and confirmed in the Catholic Church and he and his brother Robert, born in May 1873, were raised as Catholics.

Proust’s initial weakness and poor health are one explanation for the strong bond he developed with his mother. His relationship with her was closer than that with his father, in large part because of the latter’s career. Adrien Proust was a successful doctor, held in high public regard, who published extensively on a wide range of subjects of medical science. His implementation of the use of the ‘cordon sanitaire’ or quarantine line in the fight against cholera contributed to his election to the prestigious *Académie de médecine* in 1879; by 1885 he was elected Professor of Hygiene in the Faculty of Medicine. He travelled a lot, worked long hours and believed in the benefits of regular exercise and the strict scientific treatment of illness. As his career went from strength to strength his first son’s health gradually deteriorated.

In the spring of 1881, returning with his parents from a walk in the Bois de Boulogne, Marcel had a sudden choking fit: this asthmatic seizure that almost killed him marked the beginning of his lifelong struggle for breath and inaugurated what would thereafter be a constant nervous fear of the open air and an extreme sensitivity to dust, pollen and smoke. After the onset of his asthma, longer spells were spent on the Normandy coast, where Adrien believed the sea air would have a beneficial effect on his son’s respiratory problems.

Proust attended the Lycée Condorcet in Paris from 1882 until 1889 but missed a great deal of schooling for health reasons. At this time it was popular for children to have keepsake books, albums which included questionnaires friends filled out so as to learn more about each other. Proust completed one such questionnaire in 1886: judging by his responses, the adolescent Proust was romantic, idealistic and had pastimes befitting his age, health
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and upper-middle-class background (favourite occupations: ‘Reading, daydreaming, poetry, history, theatre’). About six years later Proust took a similar questionnaire and his answers are revealing of his development. He was extremely fond at this time of Marie de Benardaky, a girl with whom he played in the gardens of the Champs-Élysées, and Jeanne Pouquet, the companion of Gaston, son of Mme Arman de Caillavet, a society hostess whose salon Proust had recently begun to frequent. It is at Pouquet’s feet that Proust can be seen strumming a tennis racket-guitar, mock serenading her in a well-known photograph from 1891 or 1892. Despite his attraction to Pouquet and other young women in the late 1880s, tellingly, in the second questionnaire, Proust described his favourite quality in a man as ‘feminine charm’, his favourite qualities in a woman as ‘Manly virtue and openness in friendship’. These answers anticipate his later challenging of commonplace conceptions of gender identities in his novel.1

Letters from the late 1880s offer evidence of Proust’s sexual experimentation with his (all male) classmates at Condorcet. But his inquisitiveness was more than libidinal. From a young age he read widely; at the Lycée he read set texts such as Pascal’s Pensées and Leibniz’s Monadology as well as recent and contemporary writers such as Barrès, Renan, Leconte de Lisle and Loti. He began contributing to journals run by his classmates, amongst whom were Daniel Halévy, who became a noted historian and biographer; Fernand Gregh, later a major critic and member of the Académie française; and Robert de Flers, another future Académicien. As well as drawing on his reading and the intellectual and amorous stimulation he received from this remarkable peer group, Proust’s perspective on the world also developed through his precocious participation in the salon life of belle époque Paris. He was an enthusiastic reader of Anatole France and it was in the salon of Mme de Caillavet, France’s mistress, that Proust eventually met the eminent writer who, in due course, provided the preface for his first book, published in 1896, the year France was elected to the Académie française.

Proust’s health was still precarious and he harboured desires to become a writer, so his decision in 1889 to sign up voluntarily for military service upon graduating from the Lycée may seem surprising. It was in fact calculated: those volunteering undertook just one year’s service rather than being enlisted for the normal three. The young intellectual was stationed to Orléans, but his asthma disrupted his fellow cadets so he was lodged privately in the town (which now has its rue Marcel Proust). Early on in his service, in January 1890, Proust’s maternal grandmother, Adèle Weil, died from an attack of uraemia. Proust’s mother, devastated, went into mourning, travelling later in the year to Cabourg where previously they had holidayed, the three generations together;
there she sought consolation in reading the letters of Mme de Sévigné, her mother’s favourite author. Proust returned to Paris after his military service with thoughts of becoming a writer, but with little sense of how he might do so. His parents wished him to study with a view to a stable future (of the sort that writing could not guarantee), so, somewhat reluctantly, in November 1890, Proust enrolled in the Faculties of Law and Political Science, the conventional pathway for those seeking a diplomatic career.

His studies were a minor part of his existence, however, as writing of a number of non-academic sorts began to occupy him: he wrote for *Le Mensuel*, commenting on societal and political affairs, and founded, with a group of ex-Condorcet students, *Le Banquet* (the title borrowed from the French rendering of Plato’s *Symposium*), a journal in which he published reviews and sketches based on his ever-growing experiences in the salons. It was at this time that Jacques-Émile Blanche (1861–1942), an established society painter, began his sketches and eventually completed the portrait by which Proust’s youthful face would be forever remembered, his pallid complexion, pursed lips and narrow moustache looming enigmatically out of a dark background, atop evening dress, adorned with the sensual splash of a white orchid in his buttonhole. This painting, now in the Musée d’Orsay, captures Proust eternally as a twenty-one-year-old socialite, ironically perhaps for one whose novel shows him to be so exceptionally alert to the mutability of the human body and the effects of the passing of time.

In 1891, as Blanche worked on his portrait, Oscar Wilde published *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and visited Paris. One might anticipate that a meeting between the notorious Wilde and the impressionable young Proust would have been a momentous occasion. It is not certain, however, that they actually met. Two years later Proust’s first sustained creative piece, ‘Violante ou la mondanité’ [Violante, or Worldly Vanities], was published in *Le Banquet*. Thereafter short stories, criticism, satirical sketches and essays were published in *La Revue blanche* (a prestigious journal which provided a platform for writers such as Verlaine, Mallarmé and Gide) as well as other journals and papers. In the salons of Mme Straus, Mme de Caillavet and Madeleine Lemaire he met major artistic figures of all stripes: the actress Sarah Bernhardt, poets such as José-Maria de Heredia and Leconte de Lisle, painters including Degas and Puvis de Chavannes (Lemaire herself was a painter); as well as aristocrats and royals including Charles Haas and the Princesse Mathilde. Proust, whose background was solidly *haut bourgeois*, gained access to these social arenas where titled nobility rubbed shoulders with the artistic elite by dint of his ability to charm and entertain with his conversation, wit and considerable intellect. His interactions with the prominent worldly figures of his day exposed
him to intrigues, to quirks of language, conventions of behaviour, patterns of prejudice and pretension – in short, gave him a sort of sociological training. The salons were the preserve of the wealthy, but they displayed to Proust’s sensibilities deeper laws and configurations of human interaction that could be found throughout the social spectrum, as his lengthy conversations with domestics and hotel and delivery staff would later confirm.

In Madeleine Lemaire’s salon Proust became acquainted with the dandy and poet count Robert de Montesquiou (1855–1921), one of the period’s most remarkable figures. A decadent aesthete with wealth, pomposity and idiosyncrasy in vast measure, aspects of his behaviour and eccentricities fed into Proust’s fictional baron de Charlus. The decadent novelist J. K. Huysmans had already drawn heavily on Montesquiou as a model for Jean Des Esseintes, the protagonist in his 1884 novel *Against Nature*, which is thought to have influenced Wilde’s *Dorian Gray*. Besides Montesquiou, chez Lemaire Proust also met a brilliant young composer named Reynaldo Hahn. His infatuation with Hahn lasted approximately two years but their friendship endured Proust’s lifetime. His early letters to Hahn, frequently signed ‘Your pony’, reveal how rapidly his amorous devotions developed. In the Parisian salons as well as in country residences (such as Lemaire’s château de Réveillon at which Proust and Hahn spent a month in 1894), musical recitals were heard, plays and paintings discussed and the polemics – and gossip – of the day were debated. A subject that began in 1894 to pique the interest of chattering socialites, bourgeoisie and working class alike was the case of Alfred Dreyfus.

A Jewish captain on the General Staff, Dreyfus was accused of having passed information to the Germans, convicted of treason and sent, for life, to the penal colony on Devil’s Island off the coast of French Guiana. In 1896, suspecting that Dreyfus was being framed to protect a non-Jewish officer, Colonel Picquart proved that the evidence against Dreyfus – a memorandum stolen from the German embassy in Paris – had been written by another man, Major Esterhazy. The latter, however, was acquitted and Picquart jailed. This turn of events led to a public outcry and demands for a retrial of Dreyfus. Emile Zola (1840–1902), in a series of articles in the *Figaro* newspaper, called for truth and justice, protesting vociferously against the military cover-up and the systemic anti-Semitism of the time. Proust and other Dreyfusards campaigned amongst writers and public figures for signatures on a petition backing Zola’s critique of the military’s juridical violations. Proust famously won Anatole France’s influential signature for the cause. The drama reached its peak with the publication in January 1898 of Zola’s open letter ‘J’accuse’ and, the following day, the petition against the authorities, the ‘Manifesto of the Intellectuals.’ Tried for
defamation, Zola was sentenced to a year in prison but fled to England, avoiding this fate. Dreyfus was retried but found guilty again in 1899; it was not until 1906 that he was rehabilitated.

Proust is often represented as an ivory-tower aesthete but his commitment and action during the Dreyfus Affair cast him in a different light; indeed, the ways in which intellectuals were galvanized in public support of the cause anticipated the conception of socio-political engagement that characterized much French thinking and writing in the early and mid twentieth century. The Affair coloured the political landscape in France for over a decade; the tensions and tribulations it brought to all levels of French society are reflected in Proust’s novel.

Proust achieved his ‘licence’ degree in Philosophy in 1895 and in June 1896 a collection of his writings, Les Plaisirs et les jours [Pleasures and Days], was published in a luxury edition illustrated by Madeleine Lemaire. The book did little to change Proust’s public image as a dilettante, a social climber and a snob. The following month, however, his article ‘Contre l’obscurité’ [Against Obscurity] was published. In it he takes issue directly with the aesthetics of symbolists such as Mallarmé. Proust begins to set out his own artistic agenda, writing forcefully in reaction to an influential current of the time: the article offers a glimpse of the writer, hitherto sheltered under the carapace of the socialite, who has thought deeply on the role of art and the function of the artist in his age.

From June 1895 Proust had a post working in the Mazarine library; or he would have done had his evasions (citing health problems) and nepotistic string-pulling not permitted him to take repeated leaves of absence. His leave was made permanent in 1900. During these years Proust spent time in Dieppe, Belle-Île and Beg Meil in Brittany, in Kreuznach in Germany with his mother, and in Fontainebleau. The sketches and notes for a novelistic project, never finished, posthumously known as Jean Santeuil, were drafted during this time. From his letters we know that Proust was also working his way through a substantial collection of European writers: Rousseau’s Confessions, Balzac and Sainte-Beuve in large doses, Shakespeare, Goethe and George Eliot. His reading at Fontainebleau in October 1896 alone (Julius Caesar, Anthony and Cleopatra, Wilhelm Meister, Middlemarch) represents a remarkable sweep of tales of love, ambition, deception and self-exploration, all concerns that take their place in Proust’s later writings.

The second half of the 1890s witnessed a waning in Proust and Hahn’s closeness; Proust’s affections were growing for Lucien Daudet, younger son of renowned writer Alphonse Daudet (1840–97). In February 1897 Jean Lorrain, a novelist and journalist whose voluble homophobia was as notorious as his
closeted homosexuality, published an article mocking Pleasures and Days and casting aspersions about the nature of Proust and Daudet’s relationship. At the time, a public insinuation of homosexuality, however accurate it may have been, was perceived as an affront to the integrity of the accused and to the honour of his family name. The oddity of this situation – a known homosexual publicly deriding another – is characteristic of the attitudes of the period to same-sex relations. What Lorrain reviled (and what he perceived between Proust and Daudet) was homosexuality taking the form of effeminacy, un-manly behaviour. Strictures of form in society dictated that same-sex preference and practices should be expressed and satisfied discreetly and in private: the acceptable face of masculinity was a virile one and so Proust, fearful of the impact Lorrain’s affront might have on his parents, challenged him to a duel with pistols. Shots were fired on 6 February, neither man was injured and the matter was deemed resolved.

Some time in 1897 Proust discovered the work of the English art historian and critic John Ruskin (1819–1900). For several years Proust absorbed himself in Ruskin’s œuvre, collaborating closely with his mother and Hahn’s English cousin Marie Nordlinger to translate two of Ruskin’s well-known works, The Bible of Amiens (1885) and Sesame and Lilies (1865): the translations were published, respectively, in 1904 and 1906. In 1900 Proust visited several of the French cathedrals Ruskin had studied, as well as Venice and Padua. In 1901, after these trips and the concerted focus of his work, Proust’s health was poor, but he managed, the following year, to make visits and to attend several exhibitions across Belgium and the Netherlands. This activity was pleasing to Proust’s parents who had feared he might never combine well-being with the volition necessary to commit to any task of real substance.

Proust’s mother had an operation in the summer of 1898 to remove a cancerous tumour; she regained sufficient strength to travel with her son to Venice and Padua in 1900 but was no longer her resilient self. In November 1903 her husband, by now commander in the Legion of Honour for his distinctions in medical science, died suddenly. In September 1905, still distraught at her loss, after repeated attacks of uraemia, the complaint from which her mother had suffered, Jeanne Proust died of acute kidney failure. ‘She takes my life with her’, wrote Proust in a letter at the time, ‘like Papa had taken hers.’ The solidity and comfort of the family unit was shattered and Proust, fragile of health, was alone in the world with his grief.

The two brothers shared the considerable family fortune. Although this included a substantial monthly income Proust was incorrigibly extravagant and lived constantly in fear of becoming insolvent. Towards the end of his year of mourning, he resolved to move to new surroundings, something he had
always found debilitatingly difficult. He moved to his uncle’s old apartment at 102 boulevard Haussmann, a property his mother had known well, which pleased him. Such consolation notwithstanding, the move was an enormous upheaval: the noise of traffic and passers-by outside and renovation work within the building troubled him; he feared the levels of dust, and pollen from the trees. In August 1907 he went to Cabourg, a destination again determined by fond memories of time spent there with his mother, and this trip – the first of a succession of summers spent in the seaside resort – marked a number of new beginnings.

There he met Alfred Agostinelli, a nineteen-year-old driver, in whose taxi he visited many nearby sights of interest and in whom he found an employee, companion and, ultimately, an object of love. Agostinelli served as Proust’s driver in 1907 and 1908 before disappearing from view until 1913 when he contacted Proust looking for work. Proust already had a driver in Paris, Odilon Albaret (whose wife Céleste, from 1914 until Proust’s death, served as his housekeeper), but he nevertheless agreed to take on Agostinelli as a secretary and lodged him and his partner Anna in the apartment on boulevard Haussmann. Proust preferred to keep this arrangement quiet; tensions grew between them (primarily because of Proust’s jealousy) and yet still he spent great sums of money on the younger man. Agostinelli, however, fled without warning to the south coast of France in December 1913. Proust did his best but failed to make him return. The following summer, having enrolled himself in a flying school near Antibes under the name ‘Marcel Swann’, on just his second solo flight, against his instructor’s advice Agostinelli attempted a low turn, crashed into the sea and drowned with his sinking aircraft. For Proust, an ‘integral part of [his] existence’ had been stolen from him by the fierce, sudden finality of death.

Many aspects of Proust and Agostinelli’s relationship work their way into the Search, above all in the later, tortuous unfoldings of the Narrator’s relation with Albertine, written after Agostinelli’s death. For Proust the period between meeting Agostinelli in Cabourg in August 1907 and his death in 1914 was one of unprecedented, intense creative activity.

Near the start of 1908 Proust began making notes and jottings for a novel in a notebook, the Carnet de 1908, which has entries dating up to 1912 and is a vital document in understanding the genesis and evolution of the various scenes and ideas that would eventually combine to form In Search of Lost Time. As Proust’s creative cogs began to turn, in January 1908 there broke an intriguing news scandal: an engineer named Lemoine convinced the president of De Beers that he could make diamonds and successfully swindled a sizeable sum of money from him. Proust wrote accounts of the improbable affair in the
style of several major writers, which were published to great acclaim. Between late 1908 and August 1909 he also filled ten school notebooks with material we now know as *Contre Sainte-Beuve* [*Against Sainte-Beuve*].

Sleeping (or trying to sleep) during the day and working all night, buoyed up against asthma and fatigue by medicines and stimulants had long been Proust’s *modus vivendi* and it was how he set about constructing his novel. By 1909 he had a fragmentary draft, although its boundaries were decidedly indeterminate. The cork lining, insulation from the ills of the outside world, went up in boulevard Haussmann whilst Proust was in Cabourg in July 1910. The following summer he wrote that his novel was ‘an extremely considerable work, at least in terms of its mad length’ and that in order to finish it, he should like the assistance of a secretary ‘for two or three months’.\(^5\) Eleven years later Proust would die before his final revisions to this most ‘considerable work’ were complete.

In October 1912 the overall working title was *Les Intermittences du cœur* [*The Intermittencies of the Heart*] and the work was to consist of two volumes, *Le Temps perdu* and *Le Temps retrouvé*. After refusals from a number of publishers, including the *Nouvelle Revue Française* (*NRF*), whose decision fell to André Gide, who may not have bothered to read the manuscript, Proust finally decided to publish at his own expense. Terms were agreed with Grasset in March 1913, and Proust soon set about revising the proofs. Finally, in November 1913 *Swann’s Way* was published, announced as the first of three volumes of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, the second and third advertised as *Le Côté de Guermantes* and *Le Temps retrouvé*.

The novel never ceased to swell between its inception and the publication of the first volume; so it continued to grow organically for nine more years until Proust’s death in 1922 and beyond to September 1927 when the publication of *Time Regained*, by then the seventh volume of the *Search*, closed the loop of this *sui generis* publishing adventure. *Swann’s Way* received mixed reviews, but soon some of those who had earlier knocked Proust’s project, or had prejudged it because of his reputation, were avowing their admiration, among them Gide, who went some way towards atoning for his prior lapse by suggesting that the *NRF* publish the rest of the *Search*. The contract was finalized in 1916 and the publication of the novel was resumed, between *NRF* covers, in 1919.

It was just a month after the publication of *Swann* that Agostinelli disappeared from Proust’s apartment. This traumatic chapter in Proust’s personal life diluted the joy that publication should have brought. Agostinelli’s death the following summer struck another body-blow to Proust’s already weak frame. *The Guermantes Way*, the second volume announced at the time of the publication of *Swann*, should have been published in 1915 but Bernard Grasset was
mobilized and his publishing house closed down (Proust’s ill health kept him out of active service, although the fear of medical checks and the possibility of enlistment kept him constantly on edge). As a result this volume also swelled in 1914–15, cleaving into what we now know as *A l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* [*Within a Budding Grove*] and *The Guermantes Way*.

As Proust’s novel hypertrophied from half a million words before the war to around one-and-a-quarter million words after it, violent conflict was destroying human life on an unprecedented scale. Proust followed the developments of the war in their minutest details, reading seven newspapers a day. He was critical of what he viewed as expressions of jingoistic nationalism from many writers of the time such as Montesquiou and Léon Daudet, elder brother of Lucien. His health was poor, the hours he kept were unconventional, but he continued to write huge numbers of letters and to go out periodically in search of details he would stitch into the fabric of his novel. He attended concerts and theatrical performances, including those of the ‘Ballets russes’, brought to Paris by Sergei Diaghilev. In addition to the sociological and intellectual inquisitiveness that could be sated in the boxes of the Opéra or in the dining rooms of the Ritz, at Albert le Cuziat’s male brothel Proust was also able to satisfy his libidinal curiosities. Le Cuziat’s establishment was a source of gossip, gratification and insights (sometimes voyeuristic ones) into the normally concealed workings of desire. From individuals like le Cuziat, the wide range of men who used his brothel and, as of 1917, Olivier Dabascat, the *maître d’hôtel* at the Ritz, Proust availed himself of a multiplicity of perspectives on the world that add a persuasive sense of depth and texture to the social landscapes of his novel.

In 1918, Proust was in the streets during a German bombing raid on Paris. Later that year he received further intimations of his mortality when he was struck briefly by facial paralysis and light aphasia (short spells of being unable to recognize language). The following year brought laryngitis but also long-awaited recognition in the form of the Goncourt Prize for *Within a Budding Grove*, published in June along with the *NRF* printing of *Swann* and a volume of collected shorter writings, *Pastiches et mélanges*. The new laureate, however, was struggling with the mundanity of moving house again. The building in boulevard Haussmann was sold to a bank and Proust had to move out. In October 1919 he moved to what would be his final residence at 44 rue Hamelin.

Proust’s ailments and his long-term enthusiasm for self-administering large quantities of barbiturates, caffeine and other substances had taken their toll on his body. His deteriorating eyesight and respiratory troubles slowed down his corrections to *The Guermantes Way* and although the award, in September 1920, of the Legion of Honour lifted his spirits he still worried about whether
people would actually read his work. *The Guermantes Way* and the first part of *Sodom and Gomorrah* appeared between October 1920 and May 1921. The following month, feeble and pale from medication and insomnia, Proust ventured out to an exhibition of Dutch Masters where he saw Vermeer’s *View of Delft*, a painting he had last seen in the Hague in 1902. Some time between 1916 and 1922, he wrote the word ‘Fin’ [The End] at the foot of the page that brings the novel to its close. When this word was written, his single unstinting task was complete. ‘I’m no longer anxious’, he told Céleste Albaret, ‘my work can appear. I won’t have given my life for nothing.’  

The second part of *Sodom and Gomorrah* appeared in May 1922, and from about this time Proust’s diet consisted largely of ice cream and iced beer: it was all he could palate after having burnt his digestive tract taking insufficiently diluted dry adrenaline. Eventually he developed bronchitis, which in turn became pneumonia. On 18 November Proust died with his housekeeper and his brother at his side. The latter and Gaston Gallimard edited and published the novel’s remaining volumes, *La Prisonnière* [*The Captive*] (1923), *Albertine disparue* [*The Fugitive*] (1925) and *Time Regained* (1927).

The smooth-cheeked artist of Blanche’s painting was no more; on his deathbed Proust’s face was heavily bearded, the searching eyes now closed and darkly ringed. Existence for the artist was over, his form etched by Paul Helleu and photographed by Man Ray for posterity, their respective media pointing symbolically backwards and forwards to the old and new centuries to which Proust belonged. As for his work – the monstrous work that had taken so long to materialize, that tortured him, drained him of his vitality yet equally gave him purpose and fulfilment – life was just beginning.