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37, GLEBE PLACE,
CHELSEA, S.W.3.
FLAXMAN 6803.

21st August 1945

Dear Mr. Lehmann,

Dimitri and I want to thank you for the kind idea you had of sending us Kapetanakis' lecture on Proust. We both enjoyed it very much as the excellent English translation, which so well renders his style. It is indeed a remarkable study, suggestive and full of Kapetanakis' subtleties & peculiarities, and we are looking forward to seeing it published sometime in the near future.

I heard that you have been in Paris and hope that shall soon have the pleasure of receiving your impressions, which will give us

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a clear idea of the literary and artistic atmosphere of post-war France.

Yours very sincerely
Hero Lambros

27 August 1945

My dear Lehmann,

Forgive me for keeping Kapetanakis' fine paper on my desk for a week, instead of returning it to you earlier. Let me also add my thanks to those of Hero, and repeat how much we are looking forward to seeing it printed soon. Yours ever

Dimitri Lambros

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MB: without final corrections

II-3A

D. CAPETANAKIS: A LECTURE ON PROUST

Translated from the French by John Lehmann

Ladies and Gentlemen,

There are few things as tedious as those lectures or books which have as their title "The philosophy of such-and-such a poet, or such-and-such a novelist". In spite of that, in spite of not wishing in the least to be tedious, I want to talk to you this evening about the philosophy of a novelist - about the philosophy of Marcel Proust. The title is not very promising, and I am sure you are expecting something quite shattering; for that reason I hasten to tell you that I shall endeavour to keep as far as possible from everything the title suggests and you anticipate. And I shall do so not only because I do not want to bore you, but chiefly because I believe that what is customarily presented as the philosophy of a poet or a novelist has nothing at all to do with philosophy; for if it had, it would not be tedious. No doubt you think this is only a paradox; but one of the most common misconceptions is the idea people have about the nature of philosophy. They think of it as an abstract and useless science that has nothing to do with life - with our life - and that when it enters our experience in the guise of a lecture or a book can only make ordinary healthy-minded people yawn. Almost everybody has this idea about philosophy, even those who are at pains to discover the philosophy of their

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favourite poet. They read the poet's work, they make a note of the most abstract passages, and then with these passages and using their own thoughts to fill in the gaps they try to construct a system, which they present to us as the philosophy of this author or that author. Of course this construction is as far removed from true philosophy as it is from the author to whom it is attributed: God forbid that I should behave in such a manner to an author of whom I am so fond as Proust. But the better to avoid making such a mistake, I would like to say a few words about what I believe true philosophy to be. I do not believe that philosophy is a science - far less an abstract and useless science that has nothing to do with life, with <u>our own life</u>. The study of the works of the great philosophers teaches us the complete contrary; and in order to give you an idea of what these works do teach, in order to show you that philosophy is very far from being something abstract, boring, and alien to our life, I shall choose as an example a philosopher who has the reputation of being very abstract, very boring and very dry - I shall choose Aristotle. There is a little phrase of his, hidden away in one of his least read works, which may help us to understand the true nature of philosophy. "Being," says Aristotle, "is better than not being, it is better to be alive than not to be alive." Of course it is better to be alive, you will say, than not to be alive! We need no philosophy to tell us what everyone knows so

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well. And yet reflect again. Does everyone really know what true life is? Is it not possible that there are people who might maintain that not being is the only kind of existence that is worth while, and that death is better than life? Let us take the poets. Take, for instance, Shakespeare. Listen to what Claudio says in Measure for Measure:

"To sue to live, I find I seek to die;
And, seeking death, find life ... "

Remember also the words of Iphigenia in Goethe's play:

"A useless life is nothing but a premature death ... "

Even La Fontaine, the La Fontaine who wrote the Fables and whose life was so varied and so delightful, even he complained at the end of his career that in spite of his life as a "butterfly of Parnassus flying from flower to flower and from object to object", he had not really lived. In spite of the richness of his life, he did not consider it a true life. I could quote many other examples; but what they all make us feel is that the nature of true life is not as obvious as one might think, and that certain people a little different from the ordinary are aware of this and try at all costs to discover and to realise the kind of life that is worth being lived. These people a little out of the ordinary are the true philosophers. They are in search of being as Aristotle would have said - and it is to this search that Proust devoted his life. His long novel called "In Search of Lost Time" could very well have been called "In Search of Being". In any case even his actual

title is sufficient indication that this search for "lost time" is nothing but the search for real being. We have no need to look for Proust's philosophy in occasional chance reflections, scattered here and there in the text, which it would be extremely difficult to assemble into anything like a system. His thought, not in the least rhapsodical, was the continuous movement of his reason inflamed by his passion for existence. Like nearly all the great philosophers, he was neither dogmatic nor a maker of systems. ~~He~~ His mind was always in movement, always searching, always experimenting. To quote Aristotle again: "Philosophy is forever occupied with a question which has no answer". The momentary solutions that one finds for a problem have only significance for the moment. The important thing is the <u>continual movement</u>; and it is that which constitutes the philosophic life, and that which Proust makes known to us in the sixteen volumes of his novel. But before considering this work of Proust's, we ought to know something about the life and personality of the author. Behind all philosophies there are living men, whose expression they are. Even the most frigid speculations are the product of a human life, very often the product of an unique suffering. Proust's philosophy makes such a deep impression on us, because it was the expression of a suffering the depth and intensity of which make us shudder.

I do not know if we will ever come to learn the concrete facts of Proust's life which led him to despair. Although his long novel

is nothing but one long confession, we do not know precisely what Proust suffered, nor what people made him suffer, nor whether it was friendship or love - and if love, what kind of love - which brought him the greatest disappointments. He himself said: "No one wishes to unlock his soul". And in spite of the revelations which he made about himself, which surpass in audacity and sincerity all previous confessions in history, he managed to conceal from us what he was really like. Henri Massis, whose recent study shed the most revealing light yet on Proust's inner life, goes as far as to assert that the aim of his life, of his art, of his deepest impulse, was to prevent himself "from being recognised, identified, discovered". Even his most intimate friends who have published their recollections of him - either because they do not want to say too much or because they do not really know very much - never tell us enough. His letters tell us even less. We know nothing of the love-affairs of a man who has spoken to us so much about love.

Marcel Proust was born in Paris in 1871, and was the son of a professor of medicine and of a cultivated Jewess of frail health. His love for his mother was the most important fact in Proust's life. One could plausibly maintain that the final aim of his work was to show the unique importance of the relations between a mother and her son. His health was very delicate, and from earliest childhood he had to give up many things which he loved,

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the open air, the smell of trees, the scent of flowers which asphyxiated him. He had an almost pathological sensibility. His ardent imagination, his refined taste, and perhaps a need to forget himself made him fling himself eagerly into the worldly life of the titled aristocracy, whose names inflamed his imagination, and of cultivated society, whose manners enchanted him so often. That is why we find people writing that he was the perfect snob. But we should not forget that snobbery is a way, like any other, of forgetting oneself, of assuaging one's suffering. Apparently during the first years of his worldly life, Proust had some dark disappointments and sufferings. The little volume of stories, poems, dialogues and thoughts which he published in 1891 under the title of Les Plaisirs et les Jours reveals this clearly enough. The stories in this volume, in particular, are the confessions of people who have known the darker places of vice, who have felt a horror of them and have suffered the consequences. It seems that Proust plunged ever deeper into the emptiness of worldly life in order to lose himself and to free himself from the terrible visions which pursued him. And what was worse was that he had to lie to the only person in the world who meant anything to him: to his mother. That mother died, and Proust saw with horror that he had let her go without giving her any of the things she expected from him. Perhaps it was this remorse which made him decide to retire from the world, and create the great

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work which he could but feel that the dead mother he loved so much still hoped for from him. So it was that he lived during the whole of the last part of his life, an ascetic's life, remote from the world, sleeping during the day-time and working at night, in a room sealed from the noises of the outside world, with Céleste, the faithful servant whom he immortalized in his novel under the name of Françoise. Paul Morand, who was in close contact with him during that time, has written a poem in which he describes Proust and the atmosphere of the room in the house on the Boulevard Haussmann where he lived in creative solitude. That Ode à Marcel Proust gives us the most vivid impression of Proust during those days, a creature of the night and solitude, whose despair was only half-hidden under the half-broken mask of a man of the world.

Thus, in that atmosphere of modern asceticism - for Proust was a true ascetic in spite of his experiences of the underworld - in that rather sombre atmosphere, and with an almost incredible concentration of effort, he produced his great work, sixteen volumes which form an indivisible whole. I prefer to call it a "work" rather than a "novel", because it's not a novel in the strict sense of the word, nor simply an autobiography, and one certainly cannot call it a book of science or pure philosophy. Works which express the whole personality of an author cannot be exactly classified. That is why we can examine Proust's work from the most different points of view. We can talk of Proust's psychology,

Proust's sociology, Proust's aesthetic, or, as I am doing at the moment, of Proust's philosophy. And I believe we certainly have the right to talk of philosophy in connection with Proust. It is not because I am particularly interested in philosophy that I have discovered it in Proust's work. No; as I said earlier on, even the title of his book is evidence of preoccupations which Aristotle could only have described as philosophical. There is a certain passage where Proust has described the way in which he composed his book, and which ends with an incontestable avowal of his philosophical passion. I think if I read you that passage it will be the best way of passing from the biographical part of this lecture to the part devoted to his ideas. Any writer worthy of the name (says Proust) must shut himself up in a kind of darkness because all great works are the children of darkness and silence, he must shut himself up for years together and prepare his book with the most meticulous care, with continual regroupings of his forces as if for an offensive, endure it as if it were a duty imposed upon him, accept it as a rule of life, build it like a church, follow it like a prescribed regime, overcome it like an obstacle, win it like a friendship, feed it like an infant and create it as if it were a world, mindful of those mysteries the explanations of which are probably only to be found in other worlds, the intimations of which move us more than anything else in life and in art."*

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* Time Regained

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Those mysteries, which Proust mentions in this memorable passage, are nothing but the problems which create a philosopher. They have no answer - they can perhaps be explained in other worlds - but when they present themselves to us they are so overwhelming that the only point of our lives can be to find a solution. And when we think like that, we are in fact coming back to what Aristotle said about philosophy, that, it is for ever occupied with a problem which has no solution. This problem presents itself to us under many guises. Each of us has his own special way of seeing it and experiencing it. And that is why it is so interesting to be acquainted with all the different philosophies, or rather with the thought of all the different philosophers. Each philosopher has his own individual way of experiencing the problem, which is different from everybody else's way. The influences which come from outside are in most cases only superficial, limited to language and form. There has been too much talk of the influence of Bergson and Ruskin on Proust. My own belief is that Proust changed what he took from them to such an extent that there is not much point in stressing their influence. One thing, however, which has been absolutely ignored, is the resemblance of Proust's philosophy to that of an English poet, - to Wordsworth's philosophy. The central experience in the famous "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood", is one of the principal motifs of Proust's work. In that famous poem Wordsworth

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tells us that during his childhood, ~~meadow, gorse and stream~~

"meadow, grove and stream,
"The earth ~~carter~~, and every common sight
To me did seem
Apparell'd in celestial light
The glory and the freshness of a dream."

But he then goes on to tell us that the "visionary gleam" has fled and the dream has faded away -

"The things which I have seen I now can see no more."

In spite of this, he tells us that these recollections of childhood are a "perpetual benediction" and the "fountain-light" of all his days, which -

"Uphold us, cherish, and have power to make
Our noisy years seem moments in the being
Of the eternal silence: truths that wake
To perish never ... "

The things of the external world are, for the child, symbols of a truth which is not to be understood, but only felt. The grown man can no longer see such symbolism in the world around him, and it is for that reason that he must call on his memory to recreate what he saw during his childhood, and to feel once more the depth beneath the appearance of things.

One must admit that such an experience is by no means common to everyone. There are some writers who cannot bear the memory of their childhood, who hate their childhood: André Gide, for instance, or Thomas Gray. There are, however, others, - such

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as Wordsworth, Vaughan, Hoelderlin, and Proust - who find the most solid reality in their childhood, because it speaks to them of the mystery of another world. In order to re-create his childhood - or rather the sense of intimacy with the mystery of the world which his childhood gave him - Wordsworth wrote his "Prelude". For the same reason Proust wrote his great novel. His years of childhood were for him, in his own phrase, "Les terrains resistants sur lesquels il s'appuyait", and that because in those recollections of childhood he saw the ~~fine~~ true symbols of the mystery of existence. But how was he to recover their special quality? Ordinary memory cannot recreate the symbolic nature of things. Luckily, according to him, there is a kind of involuntary memory which, with the aid of the things themselves, can recover contact with their symbolism. "I feel there is much to be said," he said, "for the Celtic belief that the souls of those whom we have lost are held captive in some inferior being, in an animal, in a plant, in some inanimate object, and so effectively lost to us until the day, which to many never comes, when we happen to pass by the tree or to obtain possession of the object which forms their prison. Then they start and tremble, they call us by our name, and as soon as we have recognised their voice the spell is broken, we have delivered them; they have overcome death and return to share our life. And so it is with our own past. It is a labour in vain to attempt to recapture it, all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is

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hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of the intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us), which we do not suspect. And as for that object, it depends on chance whether we come upon it or not before we ourselves must die."*

It was on just such an object, and its miraculous power, that Proust built up the whole edifice of his novel. That object was a little cake called "madeleine" which his mother gave him one day with his tea. In the taste and smell of the "madeleine" Proust recovered his lost childhood. While he was still a child his aunt gave him the same cake when he went to see her in her room. And now, "Just as the Japanese amuse themselves by filling a porcelain bowl with water and steeping in it little crumbs of paper, which until then are without character or form, but, the moment they become wet, stretch themselves and bend, take on colour and distinctive shape, become flowers or houses or people, permanent and recognisable, so in that moment all the flowers in our garden and in M. Swann's park, and the water-lilies on the Vivonne and the good folk of the village and their little dwellings and the parish church and the whole of Combray and of its surroundings taking their proper shape and growing solid, sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea."* That evocation of the past, or rather that resurrection of the past by means which are

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* Swann's Way, ~~Pt. I.~~ Translation of C.K. Scott Moncrieff.

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not intellectual but almost magical, is the principal aim of "A la Recherche du Temps Perdu". The philosophical significance of such a resurrection is clear, because it is the resurrection of the symbols of a truth which affects us without our being able to define it. But it is not only the living recollections of our childhood which have this particular quality. We are always meeting people and things which disturb us in the same way when they present themselves to us as individual realities. One of the greatest enigmas which tortured Proust, which made up the joy and agony of his life, was the enigma of the individual.

Proust believed that everything in life which is general - a general idea, one person like another, for instance, - is of far less importance than the individual, than what is unique in the world, what cannot be replaced or represented by anything else. He believed that pessimists are only pessimists because they see happiness as something generalized. But happiness is never generalized. Happiness always comes in some unique shape, it is always new, always unexpected. We can never tell in advance what will make us happy. That is the reason why those who believe in what is unique, individual and unexpected believe also in happiness. Apart from what is individual, everything is empty, denuded of interest and desperately boring. One might perhaps maintain that such thoughts are nothing but the ideas of an aesthete. But with Proust individuality is not merely something aesthetic:

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it is the very essence of things. It is the force which, in love, causes our peculiar emotion towards the beloved. Nor is it the perquisite of people alone. Even inanimate objects can, by the force of their individuality, become unique and irreplaceable for us. According to Proust, there is a feeling which turns things from a mere spectacle to beings <u>without any equivalent</u>. Even landscapes (he says) have a certain quality of individual life. Even a room has its individual charm. The belief that certain things have an individuality of their own can give to those things a soul which they keep, and which grows in us. The <u>name</u> of a thing is generally the beginning of such a development of individuality. When he was young, Proust tells us, "I did not think of towns, landscapes, historic monuments as more or less agreeable scenes, cut out here and there from the same material, but I thought of each one as an unknown being, essentially different from all the rest, which my soul craved to know, and would have much profit from knowing. And how much more individual they became when they had names, names which only existed for them, like the names of people. Names give us an image of people - and of towns which they accustom us to think of as individual, as unique as people, - a confused image which draws from them, from the brilliant or sombre quality of their sound, the colour with which it is uniformly painted, like one of those posters, completely blue or completely red, in which, owing to the limitations of the process employed or

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a whim of the artist, not only the sky and the sea are blue or red, but also the boats, the church, the passers-by. The name of Parma, one of the towns I most wanted to visit since I had read La Chartreuse de Parme, seemed to me compact, glossy, mauve and tender; if anyone talked to me of some house in Parma where I should be received, the pleasure it gave me was to think that I should live in a glossy, compact, mauve and tender house which had no connection with the houses in any other town of Italy, because my imagination pictured it with the aid of that heavy syllable of the name of Parma where no air circulated, and of all I had made it absorb of Stendalian sweetness and the reflected gleam of violets. And when I thought of Florence, the image that sprang up before me was of a town miraculously embalmed and like the corolla of a flower, because it was called the city of lilies and its cathedral Sainte-Marie-des-Fleurs."* Proust found it impossible to choose between those two towns, both of which had for him so incomparable an individuality. Neither could ever replace the other for him. But generally the names of people and of things are too narrow. They make the things they stand for seem too simple. One nearly always fills the name of something unknown with fancies, dreams. And this dream-content rouses in us the desire to know the thing or the person more intimately. And that is very important, because Proust tells us that without

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* Swann's Way. ~~Place Names -- the Name~~.

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such a desire we can never know anything. If one desires something one wants to possess it, and knowing it is a way of possessing it. But the individual personality of another person is not something one can possess, it is not something that one can know. The individual is something irrational, something our reason cannot grasp. We can only desire it, move in its ambit, struggle, sacrifice ourselves, even die for it. This struggle for the individual reaches its purest and clearest expression in love. What makes the person we love so mysterious, so desperately desirable for us is his or her individuality. When we find in someone only general concepts, we cannot love that person. Love begins when we begin to see in another person something individual, something unique and without any equivalent. Then it is that every movement of that person, even the most trivial, and every gesture appears to have an importance, a significance that is terrible in our eyes. We suddenly have a strange new awareness. The existence of the person we love in the world we generally find so boring, gives it a miraculous beauty. We watch the rising of the sun of one of our beloved's glances as if it were some wonderful spectacle, and we examine the growth of a smile as if it were a phenomenon of nature. But love is by no means satisfied with such wonder and admiration alone. According to Proust, love is the insensate and intolerable desire to possess the beloved. Not merely physically: physical possession is not really possession at all, said Proust.

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One wants to possess the whole being of the beloved. It is an old truth, and we find it in Plato's Symposium, in the speech of Aristophanes when he says that "what the lover wants of the person he loves is something indefinable, that one can feel but not express". Proust, like a philosopher who wants to express the inexpressible and find the unfindable, cannot be satisfied with such a statement. He wants to find the meaning of love at all costs. He cannot rest content with the usual solution which is given to the problem of love. He refuses to be deceived, even by himself. He will have nothing to do with the idea that procreation is the real point of love. To look for its true meaning he had the courage to leave the regular paths of love to descend into the accursed towns of Sodom and Gomorrah. This is not the time or place to follow Proust in that terrible descent which is one of the most overwhelming things in literature since the descent of Dante into Hell. What we know is that Proust has depicted the suffering and sterility of love in a quite terrifying way. And what is worse, is that in spite of all that he dared to risk, when he asks himself: what is it that binds us to the person we love? What is it in love that we must possess or die? - he finds no answer. But Proust cannot endure that. To escape that suffering, that philosophical anxiety that is always looking for something it cannot find, there is only one way: to lose oneself in the general, to forget oneself in objectivity and the calm of natural laws.

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It is in that mood that he formulates those general laws of love, and tells us that suffering is the universal and inevitable ~~f~~ate of lovers. He tells us that love is a kind of madness, and he never tired of repeating it. He even reaches the point of denying his deepest belief, in saying that individuality - which, as we have seen, has a far greater reality and importance for him than anything else - is nothing but an illusion. "What we call individual," he says, "is merely something general." It is with such remarks, general, objective, and detached, that Proust seeks to escape from his anguish, from his intolerable suffering. And he did it deliberately, as an ailing doctor gives himself a drug. It is he who said that "life, love and suffering lead us to dead ends". But those walls that life puts up across our path can be pierced by the intellect. The intellect does not recognise any closed situations in life, from which there is no issue. With the intellect one can dissolve the person one loves into a vaster reality, - so vast that one might be able to forget that person. One might be cured of the suffering of love, if one pretended to oneself that it was a kind of illness, an illness, for instance, of the heart.

There are moments in Proust's work when the need to find a solution in philosophy of the most urgent problems of existence is so painful, that we begin to feel that we cannot go on, that we must put the book down. We summon our intelligence to our aid,

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to give us a moment of rest, of respite; but only a moment; because philosophical anxiety can never cease, can never allow us to stop for good. Proust's affirmation, for instance, that love is only a kind of madness and the individuality of the person we love an illusion, has nothing definitive about it. We turn the page, and we find Proust fighting with all his strength to find another solution to this problem that in reality has no solution. He has changed his point of view. He tries to avoid ever being the same. It is the surest way to avoid the danger of dogmatism. The only thing we find is constant with him is anxiety, - always bound up with the preoccupation caused by the problem of time. The abstract problem of time, - what time is apart from our individual life and our suffering, - is not so overwhelming as the problem of the relation of our own life to time. We might say that time is ourselves. Our "I" is not something static, inflexible, always the same. Our "I" is a movement in time, that is a perpetual process of change. But normally we are not aware of our movement in time. We consider ourselves as something fixed. The greatest tragedy in life, says Proust, is that our heart changes. But we only know it through our imagination and through novels. We know perfectly well the theory that the earth revolves, but in reality we take no account of it. We walk on something which appears motionless, and we live in peace. It is the same with time. It is for that

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reason that novelists, to make us really feel the passage of time, accelerate the speed of events in a quite frightening way, and in two minutes hurry us through ten, twenty, thirty years. It was through novels that Proust had his first revelation of the fact that he was not situated <u>outside</u> time but <u>in</u> time, and there was nothing he could do about it. That first revelation, so full of sorrow, is presented to us in his novel in a most remarkable way. One of the chief aims of <u>A la Recherche du Temps Perdu</u> is to make us feel time as something living, inseparable from our own existence. When we come to the end of the sixteenth volume, to the end of the novel, the new idea of time we have acquired makes us feel giddy. Proust gives us a new awareness of ourselves, the awareness of our existence in a fourth dimension, the dimension of time. This new awareness is certainly dangerous. When one feels oneself so bound up with time, when one feels oneself so completely its prisoner, - then despair is not far away. Proust's novel would indeed be a work of absolute despair, if one did not find in it the great belief which was Proust's sole support: the belief in art. He believed that art could liberate man from the prison of time. His reasons for that belief are of no great interest. They were invented by faith. But could one say that Proust found a definitive solution to the problem of life, - the solution of art? No, I believe that in spite of that faith, Proust never ceased to ask himself the philosophical question, the question that has no

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answer. It was in one of his moments of most complete sincerity that Proust wrote that "art can show us what riches, what enormous variety is hidden in the night of our souls, - the night of our souls which we call nothingness." It was in another such moment that he asked himself whether nothingness is not indeed the truth and all our dream nothing but a lie.

Nothingness - everything - called God by believers - are the two names which philosophers give to the darkness which surrounds our existence. The true philosophers are those who can make us feel ~~what one can~~ this thing that some call God, ~~or~~ (and others) nothingness. And that is why we find in Proust a true philosopher. He is always talking to us of nothingness, of the darkness of our soul and the night which extends beyond our lives: the night which those who believe call God.