

Of the infinitely

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Preface

A rigorous and logical narrator historian writes a novel while illustrating concepts of neuroscience a la *Mon oncle d’Amerique*, discussing literature and culture a la *An Incomplete Education*, and recalling memories of childhood a la *Remembrance of Things Past*. The novel is constructed to reflect the existing web of knowledge as a work of creative nonfiction, and can effectively be subtitled “an intellectual voyage.”

On a general level, this book is an attempt to unify the art of written communication as a medium in a single volume, combining the attributes of fiction and nonfiction, the goals of entertainment and education, and the ideals of diversity and structure. Don’t let that fool you! The ambitions of this book are small. It merely wishes to be just what it claims to be: a book, that is, a sequence of intelligible words with no pictures, no movie clips, and no interactivity, used to communicate ideas from one entity (the author) to another (the reader) coherently and effectively. A reader with mere curiosity should pick it up, enjoy it without obstacles, and be done with it, saying “I’ve just read an interesting book.”

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Chapter 1

Proust

Of the infinitely many ways to begin this narrative, I choose the one that leads to the most logical progression of causes and effects from my point of view. Although the circumstances of my birth, upbringing, and education lead to an imperfect explanation of the events which I am about to describe, they do account for much of my behavior and my perception of the behaviors of others after that crucial evening of September 30th, a date wherein begins the chain of events that led logically from my prior existence to my current existence. Any record of history must undoubtedly leave out some factor that explains a fine grain of some aspect of a motivation, because no record can be complete, else the reader can never hope to finish reading it, much less for the historian to write it in the first place. Thus I must necessarily leave out much of the circumstances of my childhood in favor of recounting certain experiences of my youth when they are useful in explaining the mechanism in a progression of events. I begin with that improbable catalyst that set off a necessarily sequence of reactions leading to my present demise: the night of September 30th.

I say that it is improbable only because of the 365 times 23 or so opportunities for thinking seriously about the topic, I chose, or rather fell into the mood of, that particular night to take the burden off my shoulders and contemplated what Marcel Proust was really talking about in his overture to *Swann's Way*. He begins as follows.

For a long time I used to go to bed early. Sometimes, when I had put out my candle, my eyes would close so quickly that I had not even time to say to myself: "I'm falling asleep." And half an hour

later the thought that it was time to go to sleep would awaken me; I would make as if to put away the book which I imagined was still in my hands, and to blow out the light; I had gone on thinking, while I was asleep, about what I had just been reading, but these thoughts had taken a rather peculiar turn; it seemed to me that I myself was the immediate subject of my book: ...

Thus as I was reading about Proust reading about himself while he fell asleep while I fell asleep, I took the “Archimedean” stance, if you will, of sounding off an alarm in my mind, crying out “Eureka!” and saying to myself “this boundary between consciousness and unconsciousness, just the way I’ve experienced it, it’s just the way Proust described it in the introduction to *Swann’s Way*.”

First, there’s that bit about going to sleep early; I’m all for going to sleep early when it’s possible.

Second, the peculiar turns of thoughts had taken, for me too, an aura of comprehensible nonsense. An idea taken to bed becomes so unique, so exact, and solves its problem so elegantly that, were I to force myself in an effort equivalent to the conjuring of the idea, I would immediately get up from bed to write it down. (Unfortunately, if you do choose to write it down, you would have much trouble deciding what exactly to write down, as my semi-annually kept journal would attest.) Perhaps it is true that Friedrich Kekulé discovered the structure of benzene while dreaming of two snakes biting each other’s tails, that Samuel Taylor Coleridge composed his masterpiece *Kubla Khan* in an opium induced dream state, that Geoffrey Chaucer based his *The House of Fame* on a dream, that Otto Loewi discovered neurotransmitters after an experiment to test whether stimulation of heart beat is electrical or chemical appeared twice in his dreams (The first time, he scribbled some notes down and went back to sleep, only to find them indecipherable in the morning.). Not able to speak for them myself, I can only say that for me personally, most transiently promising visions arrived at in a dream are far less glamorous than they appear to be. For example, I once had an idea for a book that I believed would have changed the course of literary history and took the novel to a new height it has never been to before, or so it seemed in an early morning half-waking half-dreaming state. It goes as follows, as I quote from my records.

Old man living in California: second oldest man to ride a plane in the air force. He talks to his wife in bed about following devil

vs. following hangman. He meets another woman, plays golf with her. Her sudden suicide brings forth her only lost son. He learns of her death by suicide. His wife returns. He talks of following the hangman. Ultra realistic dream of a film!

There is nothing much to write home about. The monumental, paradigm shifting, Pulitzer Prize winning nature of the work could simply not be found. (And what is it about the devil and the hangman?) Here's another seemingly great idea from my past reveries, in the domain of ideas for motion pictures.

Film of a dream of bleeding in the left ear due to car crash or some other violent event. Awaken to find that ear plug in the left ear is hurting. Example of adaptive nature of dream: body tells brain what to dream. In fact, I was even dreaming of the ear plug before I actually awoke to take it out. Circular filmmaking.

I've also had, via sleep and early morning half-wakefulness slouching in bed, an idea for a story I was to title *Biography of John Gay*.

A man who, influenced by Virginia Woolf and others, wants to be a lesbian. He changes his lifestyle (cross dressing), forcing others to declare him gay (but he is not). Like Mr. Peter Bent, he prefers to explore female sexuality, but he is confused by his own sex, which precludes him from lesbianism.

On the advice of Salvador Dali and others, particularly how-to- write-a-novel types whose names are in a neat aisle at your local bookstore, I kept a journal of ideas and recollections of dreams. This journal has never ceased to be a source of personal entertainment. Unfortunately, there has been no novels as of yet, but just like Coleridge in writing *Kubla Khan*, I'm hoping to catch a glimpse of the infinitely more beautiful realm of the dream and jot down some 54 or so of the original 300 or so complete lines from that "vision in a dream" revealed to me while incapacitated with a finite memory. Here then, finally, is a vision I had rather recently, an idea for another book.

A biography of Al Davis, the man who loved the masses. He wanted to win, more than anything, the heart of the universe around him. He won.

Indeed, the peculiar turns of thoughts of sleep are glorious, incomprehensible, and impossible to ignore afterwards.

Finally, let us turn to that curious comment of Proust's: "I myself was the immediate subject of my book." Reading past the possibly misleading translation, not only does Proust mean that he was imagining himself to be the protagonist of that novel he was reading, but also that his wandering thoughts have taken over the contents of the book. Curious fellow this Proust is, for he actually imagined that imagination had taken over reality to become a reality! Instead of clogging your mind further with speculative, possibly spurious theses, let us pause here to examine the career of Proust, for to understand what his book says, we darn well better understand its immediate subject. I promise you I'll return to that necessary sequence of reactions soon and explain the relevance of all this discussion on the biographical narrative you've purchased, expecting a swash-buckling adventure with high cholesterol romance.

Marcel Proust was the son of a professor of medicine and an educated Jewish woman. He went to school at Lycee Condorcet, but we can safely say that he was more enamored with his life than his studies, so that beaches at Normandy became the model of his fictional Balbec, military training at Orleans became Doncières, and visits to uncles and aunts in Auteuil became Combray. Like most literary geniuses, he was afflicted with a disease, which in his case, was the asthma that later confined him to a room on Boulevard Haussmann for the latter half of his life while he continued revising his masterpiece, expanding it from three to seven volumes. Although he also wrote a collection of various hodgepodge called *Pleasures and Regrets*, an incomplete novel about himself called *Jean Santeuil*, and various articles for the magazine *Le Banquet*, he is really only famous for the enormous 4000 page plus masterpiece *Remembrance of Things Past*, the first volume of which is *Swann's Way*.

Proust's claim to fame is the stream of consciousness style which takes the reader into the (usually wandering) mind of the author, who claims to realistically portray her own consciousness, but actually, just gets to write whatever she feels like at the moment. You probably know that people like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf (whom we will get to later in this book), and William Faulkner were direct descendants of Papa Proust. The remarkable thing about Proust is that he found an excuse, a justification for his new style in the philosophy of Henri Bergson. Whether he was convinced by

the philosophy or the philosophy was convinced by him is debatable, but it certainly is the case that his writing tries very hard to live up to the theory of real time. The idea is that real time is experienced time, not measured clock time. One moment may seem longer than another because so many things happen. Another moment may seem short because things happen so routinely. Some other moment may even seem long because we're so bored. The point is: the actual time on the clock doesn't reflect our experience. Children's time goes by slowly because a smaller proportion of their lives have been lived. The elderly seem to die so quickly because compared to their eighty years of existence, one year seems so short. (On the side, note that this means Einstein didn't solve the whole problem of perceptual time, only the physical one.) If the principle of lived time is to be taken seriously, then different amounts of writing should represent different durations of time, and (here's the juggernaut from Proust) the subject matter of the writing should reflect experienced time, past or present. Since Proust spent his days reminiscing on old times, his lived time is mostly in the past. Even the process of writing takes time, but he never writes about that. Instead, he writes about the interesting stuff like love, society, disappointment, and the taste of a piece of madeleine in lime tea.

Notice that Proust didn't find bullet-proof justifications for his techniques. For example, why does he rely on immediate sensory experiences to remind him of the past? You can easily bring up the past by talking about it. It is only rarely that you remember your mom's cooking habits by smelling the aroma of a stained undershirt. Why does Proust rely on taste, smell, and other sensory experiences? Mostly because he chose to. For another example, why does he write constantly about past affairs and aunt's lime-blossom, and not at all on the mental processes involved in constructing his novel? For goodness sake, he spent his entire day locked up in a cork-lined room writing his autobiographical excuse of a novel; shouldn't he write about being locked up in a cork-lined room writing an autobiographical excuse of a novel? The problem is that as soon as he does, he'd be dwelling in the present, and not the past, which is not what he wants. In order for Proust's technique to work, writing itself has to be a transparent medium that has no intrinsic value and takes zero amount of time to complete. You may say that half of Proust's life didn't count because he was writing. The other half includes numerous blank pages because he fell asleep.

The question that came to my mind on the night of September 30th and continued to plague me on the morning of October 1st was: how should peo-

ple write about what they're writing about? If Proust never found justification for writing what he wrote, then how do I find justification for beginning to write what I write? Above all the hoopla about realistic representations of life and experience lies a simple rule: people write what they know about. Proust knew about real time and intuition and monkey business about memory and how it's the same as experience, so he wrote about them. I know about Proust, so I should write about Proust. My stream of consciousness is not about lemon tea and armpit odor, it's about ideas of Proust, Henry Adams, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Orson Welles, Virginia Woolf, biology, philosophy, neuroscience, mathematics, psychology, movies, relationships, sports, dysfunctional families, television reruns, etc. If I were to put my stream of consciousness on paper, there would be lots of boring stuff like what was on TV at 11:00 PM on September 30th. I decided to weed out the useless boring stuff and save the "slices of cake" for a book.

And as the words "slices of cake" (quoted, no doubt, from a book on Alfred Hitchcock somewhere) echoed in my mind's tongue, I fell gently into sleep. Little did I know I was going to wake up with a related, but even more important question concerning life, one that doesn't just affect artistic expression, but the ethics of existence itself. But before that happened, the plot of this narrative says it has had enough and takes over the command to send a phone call from nowhere.

Chapter 2

Jelkes

Actually, it wasn't a real phone call, but a ringing in my head, but I had to get out of that chapter some how by any means necessary. The other promise about discussing the ethics of existence, however, will indeed be fulfilled. So here's what has happened so far. I'm getting ready to go to bed when Proust interrupted my stream of consciousness with his stream of consciousness about how best to put streams of consciousness down on paper. Then, following my own stream (I will refrain from repeating the phrase "of consciousness" from here on), I began to question Proust's motivation for discussing streams, but ended up justifying both his method and my own reckless streaming here in this book.

Now here's the key transition point. Following Proust's technique, I am now justified to shoot straight past what ever happened that night and the subsequent morning, and the morning after that morning, and so and so forth, until we arrive at October 15th or so in the span of 170 words. I say October 15th *or so* because it doesn't really matter exactly which date it was, or even which year, as long as you get the idea that I zipped right past a couple of weeks. You may recall my calling September 30th a "crucial evening" and an "improbably catalyst" wherein began a chain of logical events. As unlikely as it sounds, those statements still hold true, for something quite definite did happen after I went to sleep (in addition to the telephone ringing). Why then did I choose to stream past it recklessly (and I am stimulating your interest here) and leave you to contemplate on something that may or may not have happened? Well let me get back down from that fantastic level and assume my profession on the realistic level as a writer of fiction and fill you in on the limited details of what may have happened before we dwell into

that mysterious character who provides the name to the title of this chapter.

That night was the beginning of what I believe to be an experiment performed on my nervous system. Soon after I fell asleep, my subconscious mind fixed on the idea of having to fix on something, anything. The first perceptible change in my mental behavior was that I felt like I had to control my breathing, that if I was not consciously aware of the breathing, I would miss out some how. It seems to me I was trying to direct my attention at more worth while endeavors, but frequently failed because I returned untimely often to fixing on my own breathing. Those of you who have this kind of “syndrome” could tell me exactly what is wrong, but my own conclusion was that my mind was performing an experiment in psychology. If consciousness was something different from mere attention, then fixing it (if it existed at all) on some repetitive circumstance would provide some sort of heightened experience. (You may laugh now, but yes, I was trying to have an out-of-this-world experience by being aware of my breathing.) If consciousness is merely daily living, then my excessive attention would be pointless. The control condition would be living without fixed consciousness while the experimental condition would be living with fixed consciousness. Needless to say, the whole experiment was a failure, because I assumed that there was some mode of living that is qualitatively distinct from daily existence. My excuse was to study consciousness, but I knew quite well that this thing called “consciousness” has no objective existence that is quantifiable. Why then do we have the concept of consciousness? Let us return to that point in the future. First, let us examine why it is that we want to fixate at all. (You may think I am crazy at this point, but let me assure you that the need to concentrate for what ever reason is universal. Irrational it may be, there is a human predilection for fixation that often has no direct benefit for the individual who performs it, either physiologically or evolutionarily.)

I have been discussing the need for, or impulse of, fixation which the general reader may or may not have ever experienced. To ground the discussion in more solid footing, let us instead discuss the related topics of the need for, or impulse of, belief and the need for, or impulse of connection. Returning to that October 15th morning after nights of fruitless experimentation, I decided to go to the theatre. I called up my friend Dybbuk (this time with a real phone) and booked the tickets to see Tennessee Williams’s *The Night of the Iguana* that night. Following the streamer’s approach again, we returned home after both experiencing an epiphany on account of the play and took turns sitting on each other’s laps for a while. (You might have gathered that

Dybbuk and I have a boyfriend- girlfriend, girlfriend-boyfriend relationship.)

Tennessee Williams.

The Night of the Iguana.

So many circumstances in the world and in life seem indeterminant, free to take on whatever direction the moment will dictate. But upon further reflection, everything seems to have been determined, win or lose. People have hidden agendas for doing certain things that they don't realize hurts others. Sometimes they do it even if it did hurt others. Such things are subtle; for example favoring teams from a certain region of the country as a referee. This happenstance is determined by the will of the people, often the ugly will of the people. The world, having started out with no moral obligation but the survival of the (reproductively) fittest, have taken on the evolutionary principle of "spiritual selection" as opposed to natural and sexual selection. People will choose to favor those that contribute to their inclusive fitness, where, in this case, the fitness extends not only to family members, but to anyone or anything that one feels is in someway similar to oneself or even just likeable by oneself. Thus there is no ultimate principle of morality, especially in regard to a survival-based arena such as sports. In the real world, morality is clouded by this prejudice of inclusive fitness. Therefore even the most harmless rules have some hidden agenda. This in turn is the element that determines events. Thus while things seems to surprise us, we fail to recognize that our inner nature determines the outcome of events. We, like members of a basketball team, try our hardest, put forth our heart and effort to accomplish something great. But at the end, whether we do or do not succeed comes down to a large degree to the referee because only they determine whether such was or was not a foul. Life then is like a game of basketball and people in it are either teammates or opponents. People of power are the referees whom you cannot antagonize without picking up technical fouls. Coaches are the philosophical forces: morality (or goodness) versus selection (or barbarism). The only open-ended issue in all this is the way you play the game. The rules of the court are the rules of society. But you may choose to follow your own rules. You will of course be penalized,

but your freedom may outweigh the penalty. For example, you may choose to engage in something based entirely on merit alone. You will be hard pressed to find such an activity, however; and the more you engage in it, the more you'll realize the inadequacies of it. We may live the life we like. In the end, however, the outcome has already been determined by our human natures.

The determinism of life does not take away from our ability to analyze it. The forms of analysis have certain "flavors" to them. There is quantitative analysis like mathematics, experimental analysis like biology, philosophical analysis like rationalization, literary analysis like art, emotional analysis like personal crises, skill-based analysis like learning to master piano, reflective analysis like remembering the past, or even ignoring most of what we observe as a form of ignorance-based analysis. Above even the forms of analysis are forms of thinking. To reach the goal of understanding the world and everything (including us) in it, we must be open to all kinds of analysis, all kinds of thinking. Better yet, we must come up with different ways of thinking. Sometimes, the most difficult part of all is the goal itself. What should one do, not out of habit, but out of the concern over what one should do with one's life. This is what gets difficult because the very words you are reading is a form of analysis: the philosophical kind. What should one do? Well, I can answer it here philosophically, but it is the combined thinking at different levels (such as life experience, opportunities, luck, ulterior motives) that propels us to specialize, or on the ontological level, to differentiate. Is life simply differentiation? One might think so from the scientific perspective, but religiously speaking, emotionally speaking, truthfully from my heart, that notion does not stick. So how can I determine what life's purpose is without agreement from my various perspectives, or different ways of thinking? In particular, how can I resolve this issue, not with another higher level of abstraction, but with a tangible, yet remarkably consistent answer? It seems impossible not to indulge in philosophy as an answer to all these problems, but I'm digging a deeper and deeper hole for myself. Perhaps it is better to stop. (I hope very much that I am not hitting a dead spot here. I often wonder whether people like you who are reading what I write actually sympathize with what I am trying to express. For myself, whenever I re-read my own writing, I feel like laughing because, by golly, that thing I was thinking about the other day, it's just like it is written down here. Other times, it is not so funny, because I realize how extraordinary it is for communication, even between you and I, to be reasonably understandable. But I hope for the best.)

Not before one last point can I stop. The seeming determinism of life

does not prevent those of us with a formula of success from accomplishing what we intend. For example, if you are right handed and want to write left handed, you can do so eventually if you keep sticking with it. If you want to make money, motivate yourself constantly, seek opportunities constantly, and you can eventually do it (I, however, have no first hand experience.). If you want to be the best (or at least a very good) writer in the world, practice often enough and gain enough feedback, and you will one day reach that goal. Although limits due to physical talent or mental makeup determined by childhood experiences exist, no limit can stop you from at least accomplishing much of your goal as long as you plot all your actions towards attaining it. The only constant in attempting to raise your inclusive fitness: take a goal-directed approach supported by actions directly relevant to that goal. (It sounds like a cliché, but please realize how many times one thinks she is taking a goal-directed approach when in fact she is not. For example, she wants to loose weight. But when the NCAA tourney game comes on, she wants to watch it. Well, that takes away from the exercise, which takes away from losing weight. Things you do indirectly affect your goals. If you want to study for the GRE, but then you turn on the radio or television, even just to pass time. Well, then you are not studying, are you? When you do study you tell yourself you are working towards that goal, but you fail to recall that everything else you do contributes to working towards or away from that goal. This is not to mention that we have multiple goals. Thus in a general sense, the goal-directed approach is absolute. In practice, achieving the goal-directed standard of action, or at least near the standard's limit, is quite difficult. This is what makes life difficult, and essentially probabilistic, and ironically, determined in a sense. We strive to limit our imperfections. But some of us are more imperfect than others. Wink, wink.)

I promise this will be the very last point, or really, a rather crude sort of advice. Feel free to ignore if it doesn't concern you. There are those of us who suffer from problems of motivation. One knows she should be getting something done, but instead, are driven to do some other thing that is not constructive, often because of some impinging tease. For example, you might have been watching TV when you should have been studying for an exam. Most of the time, there is no justification for it. Sometimes, however, you could argue that it is an once-in-a-lifetime event, or that you need a "break" (I put it in quotation marks because there is no such thing as a break from living), or even (and you're really getting desperate here) that your hormone levels do not allow you to continue your goal-directed behavior.

Unfortunately, none of those excuses really justify your slouching off. The only real reason behind it is one's inherent laziness, or unwillingness to take goal- directed but possibly complex actions (note that the action is complex but not difficult – no task is difficult when broken down into its essential components). Thus the barrier to goal- directed action is simply lack of energy. While we *are* limited by energy, we normally never get to any where close to that limit. Most of the time, we are curtailed by perceived limits to energy. For example, there is nothing physically impossible about reading a book and keep on reading a book, even if it is a boring book, but because the wonders of, say, television awaits, we are distracted, losing sight of our goals and ending up pursuing dubious goals we had no idea of wanting to pursue, like increasing our knowledge of arena football players. Between doing what I want to do and doing what I had no idea of ever wanting to do, I'll go with the former. (I know you are saying that it is much more "difficult" in practice. But even this excuse is an attempt to hide from the reality that the only real limitation is energy, and we never get near that limit, unless in certain intensive physical sports. If even this argument doesn't work for you, try writing things down, arguing with yourself. That usually works for me.) Thus, I'll let you the reader do what you want to do now, and flip the page to begin the next chapter.