

Chronology of the Novel - by Mark Calkins

The internal chronology of the Recherche suffers from minor and less-than-minor anachronisms and inconsistencies. Thus it is inevitable that any attempt at a coherent chronology will remain imperfect, unable to integrate every date or historical reference satisfyingly. What is one to do, for example, with the fact that the historical theatrical events the Narrator says Odette attends during her courtship with Swann take place over a period of forty years? In sum, Proust's attention to nuance and detail do not extend to chronological coherence. Is this a "weakness" of the novel? That is for individual readers to decide.

Note about the novel and Proust's life: In each of the three chronologies that follow, the end of the novel is situated sometime after Proust's death (1922). Of course, since the Recherche is an imaginative work of fiction rather than an autobiography, the events it recounts need not be delimited by its author's life. However, perhaps a word is in order about this late placement of the novel's conclusion. In "Time Regained," shortly before his epiphany on the uneven paving-stones, the Narrator states that he just returned to Paris "many years" after he entered a second sanatorium; he entered this sanatorium in 1916 after a second trip to Paris. So, "many years" after 1916 he has his epiphany on the uneven-paving stones; but, after these "many years," yet before 1922 (if we are to delimit the novel by Proust's life), he must write the novel we are reading. It does not seem very coherent that after 1916 both "many years" can pass and our Narrator can write the long novel we have been reading, all before 1922. That said, the fact that since the Narrator doesn't realize he can write until "many years" after 1916, but Proust himself began writing the Recherche in 1908, this by itself should already put us on guard about thinking too rigidly about a chronological correspondence between Proust's life and that of his Narrator.

1. In *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Gérard Genette maps some of the particular difficulties in establishing the chronology of the novel (it is "neither clear nor coherent"), and provides the following "indicative chronology," which I find mostly convincing (90-92).

- Swann in Love: 1877-78
- [Births of the Narrator and Gilberte: 1878]
- Combray I: 1883-1892

- Gilberte: 1892-spring 1895
- Balbec I: summer 1897
- Guermites: autumn 1897-summer 1899
- Balbec II: summer 1900
- Albertine: autumn 1900-beginning 1902
- Venice: spring 1902
- Tansonville: 1903?
- The War: 1914 and 1916
- Matinée Guermites: about 1925

2. In *Philosophy as Fiction: Self, Deception, and Knowledge in Proust*, Joshua Landy presents a chronology based on a very close reading of the text that, while it does not give dates, ingeniously indicates that the Narrator has begun writing a novel about Swann and Odette long before his fall on the uneven paving-stones (39). In fact, Landy's introductory chapter convincingly shows that the Narrator is writing (or will write) three separate texts: a memoir, a fictionalized autobiography, and a novel (43).

- Swann's affair with Odette (before the Narrator's birth).
- The "drama of the goodnight kiss."
- The events depicted in sequence from "Combray II" to The Prisoner, with the exception of the "Bois de Boulogne episode" that concludes Swann's Way.
- The writing or drafting of "Swann in Love."
- The events depicted in the sequence from The Prisoner to Time Regained up to and including the Tansonville episode.
- The "many years" spent in sanatoria and the period of "going to bed early," by which time the visit to Tansonville is itself a distant memory.
- The "episode of the Petite Madeleine."
- The writing of (more of) the Narrator's memoir, including the memories resurrected by the madeleine (all of "Combray II").
- The "Bois de Boulogne episode."
- Visits to Paris in 1914 and 1916.
- The "matinée Guermites" (postwar) and a new memory of Combray (Eulalie's bedroom).
- The full draft of the Narrator's memoir.
- A shift to sleeping during the day; a fall downstairs upon returning from an outing.

- Seclusion.
- The Narrator begins writing his novel; sketches shown to uncomprehending friends.
- Continued, intermittent work on the memoir; the last narrated events in the chronological span of the Recherche are: a) a meeting with the now-senile Odette, three years after the "matinée Guermantes"; and b) the receipt of a letter from Charlus, some time around 1926.

3. My own understanding of the novel's chronology largely follows that of Genette and Landy, but significantly places the "Bois de Boulogne episode" before the "episode of the Petite Madeleine," as I believe that the joyous insights about recovering the past described in the latter would invalidate the Narrator's despair about "lost time" described in the former.

Swann's Way:

- Overture: after 1925
- "Combray I": 1883-1892
- Episode of the madeleine: 1904
- "Combray II": 1883-1892
- "Swann in Love": 1877-78
- [Births of the Narrator and Gilberte: 1878]
- "Place-Names: The Name": 1892-1895
- Bois de Boulogne episode: 1903

Within A Budding Grove:

- "Madame Swann at Home": 1892-1895
- "Place-Names: The Place": 1897

The Guermantes Way:

- 1897-1899

Sodom and Gomorrah:

- 1899-1900

The Captive & The Fugitive:

- 1900-1902

Time Regained:

- Tansonville: 1903
- The War: 1914, 1916
- Matinée Guermantes: 1925