Proust among the Politicians

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Jacqueline Rose’s *Proust among the Nations* and Christopher Prendergast’s *Mirages and Mad Beliefs: Proust the Skeptic* both contain deeply learned, insightful, rewarding accounts of Marcel Proust’s body of work, particularly *In Search of Lost Time*. There remains, nonetheless, important thinking positioned between these texts to do on the political implications of Proust’s aesthetic theory. Rose elaborates Proust’s investment in the Dreyfus Affair, World War I, and anti-Semitism, tracing his explicit discussions of these issues and their symbolic representations in the social world, with great care and expertise—but she addresses the aesthetic and philosophical aspects of his theory only tangentially, sidestepping its implications for the political conclusions she draws. Prendergast, by contrast, attends lyrically and minutely to the aesthetic and philosophical, detailing the relationship between skepticism and belief within the world of

the *Search*. Even in his chapter titled “The Citizen of the Unknown Homeland,” however, he only addresses how concerns of nation and citizenship affect Proust’s construction of his text, not how Proust’s text can help us understand these issues. There is still need for an account of Proust’s work that directly addresses the contemporary political implications of his aesthetic conclusions, a project I would like to begin here as I discuss the two texts under review.

Specifically, I want to argue that the Proustian aesthetic contains clues to the working of contemporary American politics, particularly the mind-set of the “Far Right”—the demographic self-identified as the “Tea Party” and currently strongly influencing the bulk of the Republican Party’s agenda. They share the use of generalization to devalue the particular, an intolerance of otherness and the unknowable heightened by their unavoidability, an overriding fear of death that does not recognize itself as such, and the construction of self-sustaining myths of redemption, conservation, and forgetfulness that aim to alter or replace existing structures in the world. In effect, they follow the patterns that characterize a totalitarian habit of mind.

The main difference is Marcel’s meticulously self-conscious account of his own doubts and weaknesses—the Far Right’s anti-intellectualism, along with the weakness of their premises, prevents such introspection. This makes Proust indispensable as a source of insight into the psychological underpinnings of recent and current American policy debates—his chronicle of struggles with anxieties, emotions, and intellectual insights before he reaches his conclusion may offer possible points of intervention into Far Right thinking.

Of course, as Rose demonstrates, many of Marcel’s specific concerns in the *Search* align with current leftist; he is pro-gay and antiwar, and given his views on the French government’s role in the Dreyfus Affair, doubtless he would be sympathetic to Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden. As a result of these specific views, one would not call Proust himself totalitarian. I am less concerned here, however, with Marcel’s positions on specific events than the sweep of his philosophy, the habit of mind that he

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1. Throughout, I will follow the convention of generally referring to the author as “Proust” and the narrator as “Marcel.” I also prefer to abbreviate *In Search of Lost Time* (À la recherche du temps perdu) as “the *Search*,” as it serves both as the title of the text and the action that the text undertakes. Citations of the text give the volume and page number parenthetically, from Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, general ed. Christopher Prendergast (London: Penguin, 2002).
disseminates. This way of thinking is far more dangerous than any single idea, and as we are all well aware, the most reasonable and just idea can, when backed by a totalitarian mind-set, lead to atrocity.

Despite their careful research, both Rose and Prendergast (along with many other critics) allow Proust's political pronouncements, as well as the beauty of his prose and the complexity of his vision, to sway their judgment of his project as a whole. They contort their analysis to demonstrate that the intended upshot of the *Search* is a complex and paradoxical composite of the philosophies elaborated throughout, rather than a problematically redemptive conclusion supported by a rigorous but self-justifying account of its development.

Rose takes his admission and investigation of his own capacity for cruelty and violence as an admirable expression of psychoanalytic maturity and good faith, which enables her, for most of the book, to make of Proust a kind of hero-exile, an enemy of illusory borders as well as a champion of justice. She interprets his understanding of suffering and the other's unknowability as a wisdom and willingness to work on these topics, ultimately making the *Search* almost a novelization of psychoanalysis. Prendergast makes Proust a mad skeptic, maintaining that his doubting voice does not conquer his ultimate belief, but it does reveal "a Proust who in fact made up his mind about nothing, including the proclaimed belief in art" (*MMB*, 28). His Proust has the alternately perfectly reasonable, slyly comedic, and bizarrely hallucinatory mind-sets of a schizophrenic, and he spends much of *Mad Belief* on close readings aimed toward understanding the nature of Proustian illusion—a topic I will take up later in this essay.

They both know Proust's 1914 letter to Jacques Rivière, which clearly states his investment in the final apotheosis:

> It is only at the end of the book, at a time when the lessons of life are understood, that my thinking will unveil itself. If one deduced from it [the end of *The Way by Swann's*] that my thinking is a sort of disenchanted skepticism, it would be exactly as if a spectator having seen the end of the first act of Parsifal . . . supposed that Wagner had meant to say that the simplicity of the heart leads to nothing.

Although perhaps conceding that his thinking is closer to "enchanted skepticism," in their desire to redeem Proust's redemptive project they both make a very similar deduction—a possibility that Proust foresaw in that same letter. "I did not want to analyze this evolution of a belief system
abstractly, but rather to recreate it, to bring it to life. I am therefore obliged to depict errors, without feeling compelled to say that I consider them to be errors; too bad for me if the reader believes I take them for the truth.”

Rose and Prendergast, as well as most of Proust’s readers, tacitly dismiss the fact that the skeptical voice in Proust’s work, the doubter and the promoter of justice, does not triumph in the end of the text. Rose takes his insistence “that no political reality is worth the sacrifice of the subtlest components of art,” which undermines her analysis of his earlier investment in the Dreyfus Affair, as spurious: “Proust does not seem to be aware that he himself has provided the most eloquent answer to his own charge: most simply because in À la recherche, Dreyfus is no distraction from writing but is a privileged terre d’élection for writing, the very ground on which it moves” (PN, 89). In other words, Rose argues that her ability to trace explicit references to and find echoes of the Dreyfus Affair throughout the Search means that the text’s explicitly stated and painstakingly elaborated goal is moot. Similarly, Prendergast’s thesis assumes that skepticism is not evidence of the evolution of a mind-set, but rather that it is integral to the final aesthetic. As I will discuss later, he bases his understanding of illusion, which is essential to his overall interpretation of skepticism and belief, on events in In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower rather than the superseding discussions in Time Regained.

I believe that Proust’s self-consciousness does not defuse but rather enhances the danger of his aesthetic. Ingrid Wassenaar gives a beautiful summary of his command of our conundrum:

We cannot quite dispense with the knowledge that this is a first-person text, that all of the characterization that we witness, while fictionalized, comes from a controlling narratorial source. Redemption or its possibility turns out to depend on Marcel’s powers as a narrator. And so we cannot rid ourselves of the knowledge, however repellent, that all of the grandiose moral speculations, psychological explanations, and justifications in the novel come from one mind, and can be returned to it, refuted, and denounced as utterly subjective whimsy. Proust will not allow us to forget this threat, and this is why he is a great writer.

Prendergast interprets this to mean that Proust’s greatness lies in his ability to make us see and even mirror his vast self-knowledge, but I think Wassenaar is getting at something much more subtle. The “threat” here is two-layered, coded in the passiveness of “can be returned to [one mind].” Who threatens the return? The undertone of the Search, its dependence on involuntariness and chance, implies that threat is part of the “truth” of subjectivity. In this sense, Proust’s greatness is his brave willingness continually to render this threat visible, despite its unflattering implications for himself. This is the most common reading, and it is consistent with Rose’s and Prendergast’s interpretations. Additionally, and with Marcel’s own fixation on subjectivity, truth, and reality, it is the way that the text implies we should read it.

On the other hand, everything in the text depends on Marcel’s powers, and so he must ultimately be behind the threat. In this case, his greatness is in his breathtaking mastery of such a complex hall of mirrors. He not only makes us accept his text’s “repellant” subjectivity but also brings us to huddle with him against a threat he has made. He is the gunman, but he also successfully insists that he, with us, is just another hostage. Although Proust makes a great deal of his text as an “optical instrument” with which the reader can look into himself, he so clearly defines the terms of this looking that the reader simply populates the prestructured thoughts with his own names and images—everywhere a reader of Proust encounters not himself but Proust’s lens, which simultaneously focuses and distorts.

Frank Kermode’s elaboration of the ideas of myth and fiction in The Sense of an Ending is a tremendously useful frame for this discussion. It pulls Rose’s work on borders in the mind and nation together with Prendergast’s analysis of illusion, skepticism, and belief, demonstrating that the ethical impact of psyche on polis hinges on the varieties of doubt and belief in which we engage.

Kermode advised Rose’s PhD thesis and remained a mentor and close colleague for the rest of his life. Rose’s body of work shows the impact of Kermode’s influence on her thinking, particularly her 1998 book States of Fantasy, in which she focuses on the relationships between mental structures and their national counterparts: the ways that states govern states. This relationship is also at the center of Proust among the Nations, which is dedicated in part to Kermode: “To what lengths will the mind go to rid itself of a stranger, or to shut down the thought it does not want to hear? And if the mind is torn apart by this question, then we should not
perhaps be surprised, as we gaze on the scarred landscape of contemporary political life, that so too is our world” (PN, 69). In its desperate search for an impossible safety, the mind convinces itself that it is safest behind a wall, with an enemy on the other side. Freud and his successors show how this occurs within the mind, and for Rose, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict shows how this individual phenomenon becomes social: “Memory, notably memory of the dead, is the place where our intimate and social selves are joined, where fantasy and history are irrevocably intertwined” (PN, 113). Rose’s discussion is rich and thoughtful, but it purposely skirts the problem of ethical authority. The rightness or wrongness of the mind-set is not under discussion; her focus on psychoanalysis gives her one overriding way to think about the mind’s habits and fantasies, and, by extension, one way a nation engages in forgetfulness. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not unique because the Israelis choose to engage in one of several possible mind-sets. It is unique because of the incredible accidents of historical circumstance that would make the victims of the worst crime in the modern world the perpetrators of a crime structurally similar, although (as Rose is always extremely careful to point out) not comparable in terms of viciousness or scale.

One leaves Proust among the Nations with a much clearer understanding of the ways that forgetfulness shapes nations, but there does not seem to be much to do about it. “Today, we are witnessing a technocratic perfection of violence, together with a flood of images of disaster on our screens, whose paradoxical consequence seems to be the idea that death is history. Death—above all, death in war—is being forgotten” (PN, 111). We are helpless in the face of forgetfulness; whether or not I, as an individual, forget, all we can do collectively is witness.

Perhaps because he is from an era of more analog, gross, “imperfect” forms of violence, Kermode’s ethical distinction is much clearer. He begins by extolling the importance of fiction: “After Nietzsche it was possible to say, as Stevens did, that ‘the final belief must be in a fiction.’” Such a fiction is “like infinity plus one and imaginary numbers in mathematics, something we know does not exist, but which helps us to make sense of and to move in the world.”4 Prendergast’s contention sounds, at first, similar to this: “the discursive machine of Le Temps retrouvé is itself working overtime to shore up a belief that defies rationality, a ‘mad belief,’ vital to sustaining ‘life,’ perhaps, but doing so as a pure fiction, somewhat in the spirit,

if not the manner, of Nietzsche’s life-protecting fictions . . . a spellbinding illusion, but illusory nonetheless” (MMB, 4). Kermode, however, has finer and more consequential distinctions to make, attending more closely to the same Nietzsche passage:

“The falseness of an opinion is not . . . any objection to it,” says Nietzsche, adding that the only relevant question is “how far the opinion is life-furthering, life-preserving, species-preserving.” A man who thinks this is in some danger of resembling the Cretan Liar, for his opinion can be no less fictive than the opinions to which it alludes. He may be in worse danger; he may be encouraging people who hold the fictive view that death on a large scale is life-furthering and species-preserving. On the one hand you have a relatively innocent theory, a way of coming to terms with the modern way of recognizing the gulf between being and knowing, the sense that nature can always be made to answer our questions, comply with our fictions. . . . But on the other hand you have the gas-chambers. . . . If the value of an opinion is to be tested only by its success in the world, the propositions of dementia can become as valuable as any other fictions. The validity of one’s opinion of the Jews can be proved by killing six million Jews.5

Knowing that a belief is fictional is not enough; a hypothesis is a consciously fictional belief, but at the same time, it makes a claim to truth, demanding its validation by application in the world. Combined with political power, this mentality easily slips toward abomination. It sediments into myths, which “call for absolute, fictions for conditional assent. Myths make sense in terms of a lost order of time . . . fictions, if successful, make sense of the here and now.”6 Myths are heavily nostalgic and, at the same time, concerned with their timeless validity.7 They brook no dispute, often standing as edifices to their own powers of insular self-justification. Prendergast’s restatement of his formulation of mad belief makes its resonances with hypothesis clearer: “While believing in it, to the point of sacrificing the entirety of a creative life to it, Proust himself is aware of the frailty of the belief” (MMB, 15). Frailty is not invalidity or untruth; a form of weakness, it

requires careful protection. In situations like these, a myth’s rigidity is often directly proportional to the fragility of the belief it surrounds.

Here we have the ethical distinction that Rose’s text elides. This seems to be by design; the elision allows her to focus more closely on the fantasies that keep the world barely tolerable, the places where we slip back and forth between fiction and myth. Nonetheless, making the consequences of this mind-set clear is, I think, essential if we are to formulate any way out of the forgetfulness that Rose so effectively analyzes.

Kermode continues,

There may even be a real relation between certain kinds of effectiveness in literature and totalitarianism in politics. But although the fictions are alike ways of finding out about the human world, anti-Semitism is a fiction of escape which tells you nothing about death but projects it onto others; whereas King Lear is a fiction that inescapably involves an encounter with oneself, and the image of one’s end. . . . [T]he fictional as if is distinguished also from a hypothesis because it is not in question that at the end of the finding-out process it will be dropped. We are never in danger of thinking that the death of King Lear, which explains so much, is true.8

The last chapter of Proust among the Nations is about the kind of suffering we see on the heath, using Samuel Beckett and Jean Genet as figures that directly confront the intolerable. In this chapter, Rose tries to hold on to Proust as an ethical force, but he is dissolving out from under her. By portraying Proust as an ethical example, Rose has backed herself into a corner and now must try to argue with Beckett about Proust; she is a skilled critic, but here she finds herself out of her depth. Ultimately, she resorts to arguing that Proust’s discussion of suffering contains a kind of unelaborated “ethical strain” that she sets against Beckett’s scathing claims of Proust’s amorality. Later, she speculates that Beckett’s reading of Proust is a projection of his fears for the modern world. Most readings of Beckett’s Proust interpret it as a ground for Beckett to work out his own intellectual and aesthetic project, but Rose’s analysis goes much further, implying that subconscious fears influence his intellectual rigor. Even raising these issues knocks Proust off his pedestal, but Rose ignores the wounds, making sure to save space at the very end for Proust as a “faithful companion” of her discussion.

Proust’s ethics, however, remain suspect. He does with Albertine exactly the inverse of what Shakespeare does with Lear and Cordelia. Although we are never in danger of thinking that Albertine’s death is true, Proust’s account of it is wholly a fiction of escape. His extension of the telling takes us straight from denial into forgetfulness; there is no moment in *The Fugitive* for the reader to cry. Throughout their relationship, Proust portrays Albertine as primarily a figment of Marcel’s imagination; after her death, she can still be alive within him because the unknowability that characterizes other humans is an infuriating obstacle, as opposed to an essential fact in which it is possible to rejoice. Marcel’s suffering is real, but nonetheless it feels as far as possible from the rending agony of Lear’s “Howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones!” In Marcel’s profound denial, the reader finds an exhaustive examination of what the mind cannot tolerate, but it is spiked with self-justification. He is not forced to confront the nakedness and futility of impossible hope as in Lear’s “Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips, / Look there, look there!”9

The “true” is much more fraught in the *Search* than in *King Lear*. Proust’s final aesthetic hinges on his repeated claims that everything is in the mind, that true life is in literature. He purposefully mixes autobiography and imagination, perhaps nowhere more than in the figure of the author-narrator. It is no coincidence that Joshua Landy’s book *Philosophy as Fiction*, perhaps the most careful chronicle of the distinction between Proust’s narrator and author, also categorizes the *Search* as a work of philosophy. Landy’s overriding concept is “lucid self-delusion,”10 which is very similar to Prendergast’s “skeptical mad belief.” In both cases, the “true” is not only a question within the text but also across the border between text and reader. Although Proust disdains intellectual theories as such (“Gross unscrupulousness. A work in which there are theories is like an object with its price-tag still attached” [6:190]), his work ultimately attempts to make experience occupy a space between fiction and reality, the space of the philosophical or theoretical. Proust constantly pushes us to think that the truths he explicitly outlines in the text are the same truths that exist in the world.

The elaboration of these “general laws” is the foundation of the *Search*—perhaps most importantly the foundation of what Proust calls his altruism:

Certainly what I had experienced in the library and was trying to protect was still pleasure, but it was no longer selfish pleasure, or at least its selfishness (for all the fruitful altruisms in nature develop in a selfish way, human altruism that is not selfish is sterile, like the altruism of a writer who breaks off his work to go see a friend in trouble, or to accept a public office, or to write propaganda articles) is of a kind that is useful for other people. (6:346)

The artist's altruism is a function of egotism, not its opposite. In order to offer readers the "optical instrument" he means his text to be, he must turn inward, not only refusing distractions and social invitations but also focusing exclusively on his own perspective (not excepting, of course, his own perspective's vagaries and limits). The particulars and otherness that enable love are counterproductive to the good he will do with his art. This is one place that we can directly see the ways that Proust's ethics align with totalitarian politics. Comments from Esther Shalev-Gerz, a monument designer, could be a direct analysis of Marcel's treatment of Albertine from the perspective of the end of the Search. "Compassion for the victims tends to rely on the comfort provided by historical distance. . . . Humanizing and personalizing those who suffered from a purposeful, willful destruction would be to exterminate them more efficiently. . . . What possible historical reckoning can there be if we silently bury the will and the purpose, if we lament the horror while innocently uncoupling ourselves from its cause?" (PN, 141). This hearkens back to Wassenaar's discussion; Proust laments the horrors within his text, particularly the destruction of Albertine, even as he is their cause.

Near the end of the Search, Proust comments, "I felt something near to horror at myself, the self-horror that some nationalist party might come to feel after a long war fought in its name, from which it alone had profited and in which many noble victims had suffered and succumbed without ever knowing . . . what the outcome of the struggle would be." Rose says "there is something not quite right" about these lines, asking, "What nationalist party, victorious in war, is appalled . . . and mourns its victims?" (PN, 128).

11. "They were not, as I saw it, my readers, so much as readers of their own selves, my book being merely one of the magnifying glasses of the sort the optician at Combray used to offer his customers; my book, but a book thanks to which I would be providing them with the means of reading within themselves" (6:342). For a very useful exhaustive account of the optical metaphor, see Roger Shattuck, Proust's Binoculars (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).
As Shalev-Gerz shows above, it is a party that needs to distance itself from its crimes, that needs to comfort itself about its own generosity of spirit, a party with a more complex but still horrible structure of self-justification.

Proust’s stated altruism ensnares the reader in his world—it effectively renders his truths into Kermode’s hypotheticals. He demands that we test out his text as a lens, giving us very little room to back away. I believe this is why he has inspired books like *Proust Was a Neuroscientist* and *How Proust Can Change Your Life*—few other authors inspire us to use them like Proust. It is also why he has paralyzed and haunted so many writers, who express how the breadth and perfection of his vision circumscribes them. Walter Benjamin wrote to Theodor Adorno that he feared developing an “addictive dependency” if he spent too much time translating Proust, and Virginia Woolf famously lamented in letters and diary entries that he had “solidified what has always escaped” and that “Nothing seems left to do. All seems insipid and worthless.” More recently, Orhan Pamuk wryly commented in an interview, “When Proust wrote on love, everybody read it as universal love; when I write about love, they call it Turkish love.” He does not mention how strenuously and craftily Proust advocates for his idea of love to be read as universal. Even as he rigorously analyzes and even deflates his own impressions of the world, he implies that they are entirely true.

Near the beginning of *The Masked Ball*, just as he is beginning to incorporate aging and time into his understanding of art, Marcel says that “the beauty of images lies behind things, the beauty of ideas in front of them. So that the former cease to impress us when we reach them, whereas we have to go beyond the latter in order to understand them” (6:240). The spatial relationships here are slightly muddled; to be clear, if we are reading from behind to in front, we have the observer’s starting point, beautiful images, things, and then beautiful ideas. Both images and ideas are part of the “in the mind” sort of reality that Proust so heavily privileges. At some of the earlier points in the text, particularly in *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower* when he is spending time with Elstir, he combines image and idea into the single category of “impression”—everything that is “in the mind” as opposed to factually indisputable in nature. By the end, however, although he sees that writing mingle lines and links image with idea, he understands that

it does not combine them. The subjective impression of a thing is recognizably illusory, but this image opens up an idea that has the kind of mental reality that trumps the thing. This is why Proust is finally able to imply that involuntary memories are an optical illusion of past and present seeming to be overlaid on one another, but at the same time, involuntary memories and art really enable him to escape momentarily and redeem time’s passage.

As I mentioned previously, Prendergast’s understanding of skepticism and belief in Proust as a tension between the recognition of illusion as such and the belief in those illusions relies almost entirely on those early scenes with Elstir. The analysis itself makes some extremely insightful extrapolations from minute details. Prendergast troublingly concludes, however, that Proust’s aesthetics of impression are in line with his thoughts in the Bois de Boulogne, which he explicitly cites in the Rivière letter as provisional. Proust’s idea of impression, Prendergast argues, “teaches us that ‘surfaces and volumes’ can be momentarily detached from ‘the names which our memory imposes on things once we have recognized them,’ but never proposes that the severance be made permanent in the name of a higher knowledge” (MMB, 128). By the end of the book, however, Proust has demonstrated that recognizing the illusions involved in detaching “surfaces and volumes” from “the names which our memory imposes” will not prevent him from proposing that these illusions teach us ideas that “should be made permanent in the name of a higher knowledge”—or rather, as he would have it, ideas that are already permanent truths that he has simply uncovered and exposed—in other words, myths.

At this point, we have a collection of important general details about Proust’s aesthetics. I will summarize here, and then discuss their resonances with Far Right politics—although I think that many of the implications should be immediately obvious. First, Proust manages to create a text that is almost entirely subjective at the same time as, within this subjective frame, it implies that the author/narrator’s actions are involuntary. This puts him in the position of the aggressor-as-victim, a pose the narrator also adopts with Albertine. Second, when Albertine dies, Marcel’s narration, despite portraying deep suffering, does so to escape its implications rather than face them. He lodges himself deeply in denial, undertaking schemes that purport to alleviate it but are clearly, in fact, gambits to perpetuate it. Third, rather than allowing him to discover human truths for himself, Proust gives the reader a lens so determinative it demands to be understood as universal, so stifling and logically sealed that it stymies independent thinking—a lens of myth. He justifies this “gift” with a claim
of the same type of altruism that I mentioned earlier: perfectly consistent with egotism. It is altruism that, even as it recognizes the particular and the unknowable other, cannot accept them and so seeks to create a worldview that will somehow “solve” them. Fourth, he constructs a mode of thinking about the relationship between truth, idea, and illusion that is impenetrably self-justifying and enclosed. It can maintain homeostasis even while recognizing that some of its main premises are illusions by believing that illusions are simply the portions of the truth that happen to be incompatible with the natural world.

Behaving as an aggressor but posing as a victim, using involuntariness or a self-defined idea of “truth” as a justification, seems almost to be the fundamental modus operandi of the Far Right. Donald Pease’s 2010 article, “States of Fantasy: Barack Obama versus the Tea Party Movement,” gives a clear accounting of much of this logic, specifically as it relates to race and the president. “The election of Obama designated that part of their practical reality that the members of the Tea Party could not incorporate. They could not acknowledge the reality of Obama’s presidency without undermining the viability of their prior construction of themselves... In the Tea Party, the relationship between the white defenders of the true America and the anti-American president became a nodal point.” The Tea Party and many members of the broader Republican Party behaved as though Obama’s foreignness, encoded in his name and his face, was itself a precipitating act of aggression, even as Republicans were aggressively obstructionist nearly to the point of absurdity from the beginning of Obama’s first term. “Birtherism” became, for a short while, almost acceptable in mainstream politics.

The predominantly white, older, male party believes that it is under siege, that immigrants and people who use public assistance programs (represented by Reagan’s “welfare queen” myth) want to make white Americans a minority and force the “real” hardworking Americans of the Far Right to pay higher taxes to support them. Mitt Romney gave this belief voice in his infamous 2012 remarks: “there are 47 percent who are with [Obama], who are dependent upon government, who believe that government has a responsibility to care for them,

13. Donald Pease, “States of Fantasy: Barack Obama versus the Tea Party Movement,” boundary 2 37, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 103. This is precisely the same logic that underlies Rose’s analysis of the Dreyfus Affair: “If the Jew was innocent, the conceptual schema of the knowable world, as well as its founding institutions, would fall to pieces. If a Frenchman were capable of treason, an inconsolable nation would have despaired” (PN, 82).
who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you name it.”¹⁴ This 47 percent only “believes” itself victimized, despite unprecedented income distribution disparities, high unemployment, racial disparities in prisons and hiring, and the gender-based wage disparities; the clear implication is that the remaining 53 percent are the real victims. They can justify any actions they take as involuntary, simply the natural response to the perceived aggressions.

Perhaps the clearest aggressor-as-victim structure appeared in the 2011 debt ceiling standoff. Republicans represented their refusal to take previously rote and uneventful actions as involuntary and necessary, portraying themselves as victims of Democratic insistence on unnecessary spending and tax hikes. Many commentators accurately described the ploy as “taking the nation hostage,” even as Republicans followed up by lamenting the damage to “our great nation” and blaming the subsequent downgrading of the nation’s credit score on Obama’s refusal to accede immediately to their demands. As Pamuk noticed, Proust’s use of the word love to describe a complex of desire, jealousy, and boredom goes largely unchallenged as part of his edifice of truths, even as the intricacies of his portrayal garner close attention. Similarly, because of the “truths” that the rhetoric of deficit reduction, small government, and reckless spending established, the public “debate” over the debt ceiling, consisting largely of radio and news show talking points, was vigorous and divided, rather than universally aghast at the selfishness and absurdity of such a ploy.

The profound levels of denial and the attempts to deny and escape death in Far Right politics are most sadly and viscerally clear in the recent discussions about gun legislation. The chorus meets almost every attempted piece of gun legislation: “you aren’t going to take away my guns!” Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary in nations that have strict firearms laws, these conservatives are viscerally convinced that the only way to be safe is personally to possess a firearm. This nostalgic construction of safety matches a regressive image of America as a rugged frontier; in the same way as industrial agribusinesses work to convince consumers that they are actually rustic, smiling farmers straight out of the nineteenth century, so the NRA works to reinforce the myth of the individual gun owner as the intrepid, heroic homesteader. Particularly in the wake of Sandy Hook and other recent mass shootings, it makes sense that

this possession would be an integral accessory for fantasizing about control in an increasingly uncontrollable political climate. Gun-related crimes become, for the gun owner, not a matter of trying to accept the near randomness of an inconceivable tragedy but of fantasizing about how things would have been if only one had been there, ready to put a bullet into the perpetrator and prevent the entire tragedy. As they talked to legislators on Capitol Hill about gun legislation (which subsequently failed), the parents of children killed at Sandy Hook had Lear on their faces: “O, you are men of stones! / Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so / that heaven's vault should crack.” It was intolerable for the legislators to face lucidly within themselves the fear of death without escaping into fantasies of control and armed heroism.

The denial is also intimately related to the “War on Women,” which has seen a radical reduction in women's access to reproductive health care, specifically abortion services, since 2011. The rhetoric surrounding the “pro-life” camp reflects a profound idealization of a form of “other” that is lovably voiceless, like Albertine as she sleeps, as well as perfectly aesthetically generalizable: a fetal tabula rasa. The death of such a figure appears as simultaneously tragic and invisible, always absent for almost all of those who mourn it. It is a perfect opportunity to pontificate about emotions and to try to control whether death occurs, but not to deeply encounter oneself. Promoting and enacting restrictions on abortion, as well as more local actions like protesting outside of clinics, do not teach anything nor discernibly alleviate the suffering in the world; they serve only to make the legislators and protesters feel better. Once born, the child loses its idealized status and with it the sympathy of those who cannot stand otherness. It becomes a member of a specific, often somehow “foreign” demographic and the responsibility of someone else. Even as the number of abortion restrictions is skyrocketing, Republican-controlled state governments are drastically cutting child and family services.

The egotism of these positions also considers itself a form of altruism. Many of the new abortion requirements, like the broadcasting of a fetal heartbeat, the forced viewing of an ultrasound image, and the doctor's reading of a state-required script that is often counter to accepted medical

15. King Lear, p. 189, 5.3.232.
knowledge, assume that a woman cannot make this decision without the masculine intervention of the state.

Until it was largely resolved recently by the July 2013 rulings of the Supreme Court on DOMA and California’s Proposition 8, the Far Right position on gay marriage had a similar agenda of control without understanding. The “one man and one woman” definition of marriage was an established truth, as they saw it, and to destabilize this would destabilize the entire identity of marriage, just as some of Obama’s opponents saw his election as destabilizing the racial identity of the United States. More important, the opponents of marriage equality could not comprehend homosexuality. This unknowability, with its echoes of threatening otherness and even death, was intolerable. Although we know that Proust was homosexual, Marcel’s views toward Albertine’s behaviors—the absolute inability to accept them, combined with lascivious interest—mirror the obsessive interest of some politicians in banning same-sex marriage. In both cases, these politicians take it upon themselves to define their subjective perspectives as truth, and then attempt to extend these truths into common usage, no matter how many lives it tears apart. Their cruelty is justified by the aesthetic perfection and redemptive clarity of their imagined results.

Finally, all of these topics pertain to the one-way seals of the relationship between illusions, the world, and ideas. The logic that percolates there is perfectly mythic, designed to propagate itself in the world—but not to allow any force to infect its sense of purpose. Glenn Beck, Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, and the cohort of Fox News call their subjective opinions and interpretations of events “fair and balanced,” although they are often designed to addict and paralyze. They create a world that is comforting in the perfection of its logic, using voices that gracefully preclude and rhetorically whirl around any objections. They create a lens through which to see the world that both empowers and creates a severe dependency, just as Benjamin and Woolf feared of Proust’s optical instruments. The myth of the “liberal media” as a powerful, lying, dominating force allows the conservative voices to justify their use of images and illusions they know are overblown (references to Nazism, fascism, and communism, in particular) as necessary to convey an understanding of the idea they believe is truth—

even as neither of those are close to “the thing,” if the thing is fact or moral reasonability.

The idea is safety from danger, the ability to construct borders to keep out the other, and the false sense of unity and control that results from a cohesive, self-sustaining vision. It is the belief that if one generalizes enough, proclaiming a love for the other that is really just a desire to own and control her, a cocoon of subjectivity and egotistical altruism will be there to cushion one from death. Of course, this logic is buried in the Far Right, Tea Party, and Republican platforms, but Proust’s rigorous pursuit of his aesthetic redemption exposes the habits of mind that characterize such thought. In outlining her goals, Rose says, “It will be my argument throughout this book that Proust not only inhabits this [political] world, vibrantly and urgently, at numerous points throughout his writing, but that in doing so, he can help us understand some of the deepest, most persistently difficult components of our contemporary political world” (PN, 23). I completely agree, yet I believe that careful attention reveals a darker but even more useful aspect of Proustian aesthetics that mirrors our current political situation in yet more dire ways: the subsuming of skepticism, reason, and love under waves of myth generated by an intolerable fear of death and the imminent unknown, the willingness to stereotype and generalize about certain individuals or populations to render them less threatening or ultimately even nonexistent, and the egotistical “altruism” that seeks to spread its vision of truth and remake the world in its own image.

Concluding his article about Obama, Pease advocates fighting fantasy with fantasy, arguing that the desperate strength of fantasy requires an answer in kind. I agree, but Kermode’s distinction between myth and fiction is an essential ethical clarification of Rose’s discussion of fantasy, and, as such, we must take care not to replace Far Right myth with Far Left myth—as we have seen, the mythic habit of mind is more dangerous than its specific content. Any response to Far Right logic must include not just fantasy but specifically fictions, the kind of sustaining and contingent fictions that force us to face ourselves and deepen our experience of the world. As Kermode shows, promoting fictions is not promoting contemplative inaction but rather taking care that the goal of action is not to prove a hypothesis but to learn how to be better humans to each other and ourselves.

18. Throughout, I have consciously characterized the reader and the artist-creator as masculine and “the other” as feminine because this is consistent with the gender politics that this habit of mind promotes.