

# Part Two

# RECHERCHE

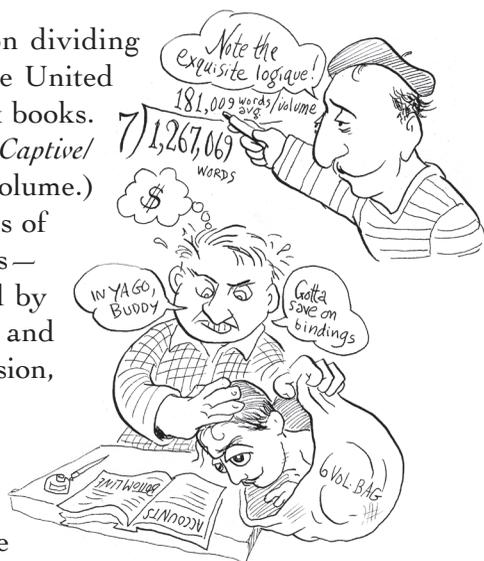


Now it's time to look at Proust's masterwork itself—at least after some preliminary points concerning What, Who, Where, When, and How...

**What?** ONE OF THE FIRST ISSUES that comes up in discussing *RECHERCHE* is how to divide the work. The mélange of *Le Côté de Guermantes One and Two*, *Sodomie et Gomorrhe One, Two, and Three*, can be confusing, to say the least.

The French seem to have settled on dividing *RECHERCHE* into seven volumes. In the United States, it tends to be served up in six books. (English versions have combined *The Captive/Prisoner* and *The Fugitive* into a single volume.) At present, there are two full versions of *RECHERCHE* available in the United States—an “early” version initially translated by Scott-Moncrieff and his successors, and a later, amended Scott-Moncrieff version, published by Modern Library.

We will discuss *RECHERCHE* according to the American volume breakdown and introduce each with various title options, according to the following system:



*A la recherché du temps perdu*  
(*On the Research of Lost Time, On Research Into Lost Time*)

*In Search of Lost Time* (later Moncrieff title)

*In Search of Lost Time* (Penguin title)

*Remembrance of Things Past* (early Moncrieff title)

*Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Zeit* (German title, from Suhrkamp)

**Who?** The major “who” question for *RECHERCHE* concerns the narrator. *RECHERCHE* is told mainly in the first person. Commentators often refer to that person as “the Narrator,” although he might also be referred to as Marcel, because there is at least one paragraph in *RECHERCHE* in which the Narrator is twice addressed by that name (V: 202–203). Readers will note, of course, that Marcel happens to be the name of *RECHERCHE*’s author, Marcel Proust. Proust would probably insist that Proust the author be differentiated from the narrator of his book, since *RECHERCHE* is a philosophical novel, not an autobiography.



*But because I had the misfortune to begin a book with the word “I”, people jumped to the conclusion that, instead of seeking to uncover laws in general, I was undertaking “self-analysis,” in its most personal and detestable sense.*

—Proust, letter, October 1921

However, even Marcel Proust the author sometimes refers to himself as the personal, self-narrating voice of *RECHERCHE* in letters to various friends.

*You will see [Albertine] when she is just “a young girl in bloom,” in whose shadow I spend such happy hours at Balbec. Then when I become suspicious of her over nothing at all and then, for no good reason, either, I trust her again ... I arrive at a point of wishing for her death ... I learn of Albertine’s death....*

—Proust, letter, late 1915

Accordingly, we will refer to the first-person narrator of *RECHERCHE* as Marcel, as well as the Narrator.

The more minor “who” question for *RECHERCHE* also involves “real” identities. Just as *RECHERCHE*’s fictional Marcel Narrator begins with Real-Life Marcel Proust, so one can trace many major characters from *RECHERCHE* to actual people from real life. Such endeavors have amused Proust fanatics for years.

# Where?

*RECHERCHE* takes place mainly in three locations in France:



# COMBRAY

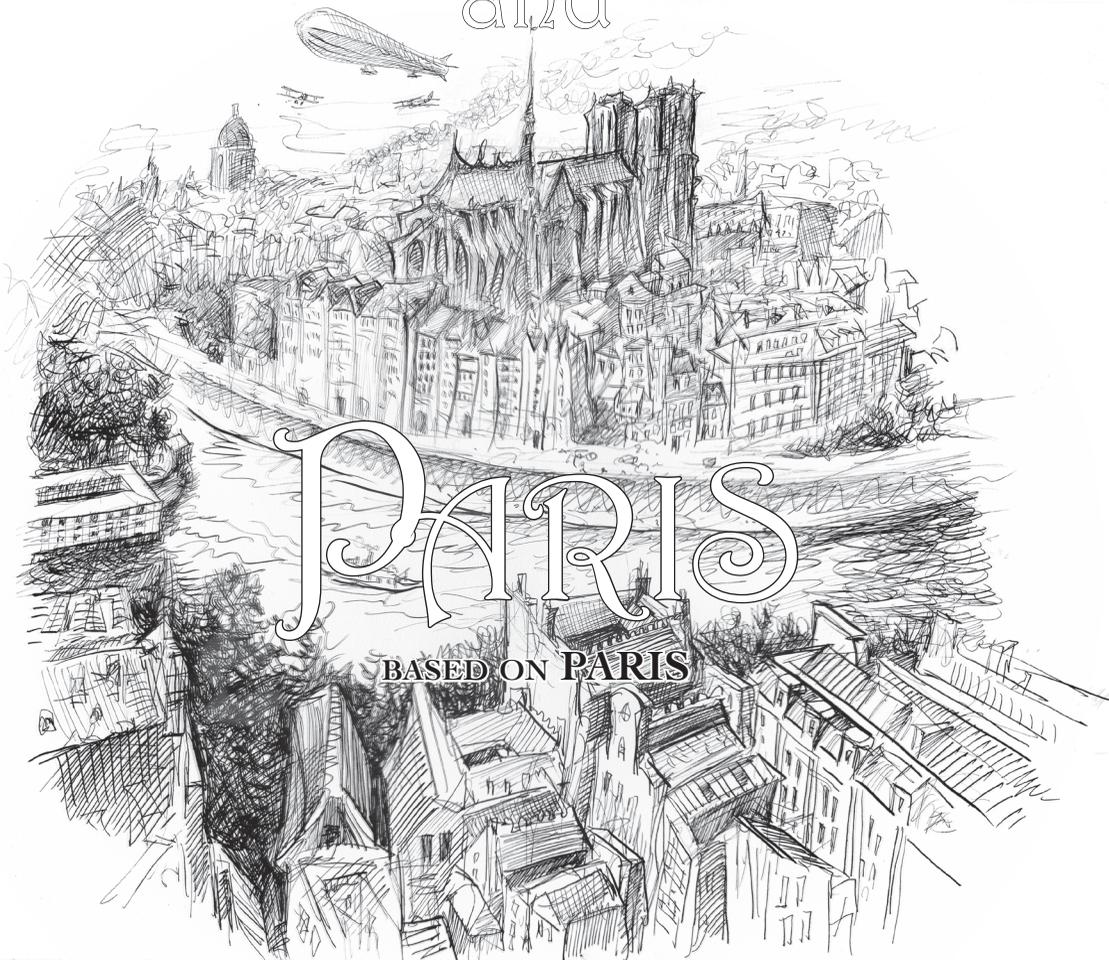
BASED ON PROUST'S FATHER'S HOMETOWN OF ILLIERS, SOUTHWEST OF PARIS

# BALBEC

BASED ON CABOURG,  
A SEASIDE RESORT IN NORMANDY



and



# PARIS

BASED ON PARIS

**When?** One could do worse than to set *RECHERCHE* within the exact parameters of Proust's life, 1871–1922, or in a fifty-year period such as 1875–1925. One researcher, Willy Hachez, calculated that Marcel Narrator was actually born in 1879 and derived other dates in *RECHERCHE* from that. In our discussion of each section, following Hachez, we will try to give a sense of the “actual historical time” in which the story is taking place.



**How?** It is hard to write a synopsis of any work of fiction. For example, one might summarize two major works of Western literature—Homer's *Odyssey* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*—in just four words, “How I got home,” or, better, sixteen words, “A guy trying to go home encounters problems and adventures before finally reaching home and wife.” And yet, much as these brief synopses pertain to both works, each of them differs in matters of language, style, details, themes, approach, and focus. In how much detail must one delve into these aspects in order to convey a full sense of each work? In the end, of course, to get a full sense of the work in question, one should read the whole darn book.

Nevertheless, teachers and critics continue to try to cull and compress Homer and Joyce. And we will try to do something similar with Proust. So we begin with a sixteen-word synopsis: “A guy who wants to write figures out something worth writing about and writes about it.”

In five words, the summary might be as simple as: “How I became a writer.”

The structure of *RECHERCHE* is circular. It begins with a young man wanting to be an author. In its final pages, the author finally realizes that he has a book in him worth writing, and he sits down to write it. Thus, from the last page of the last volume, one returns to the first page of the first volume. The first sentence of the first volume reads as follows:

*For a long time I used to go to bed early.* (I: 1)

And the last sentence of the last volume concludes with these words:

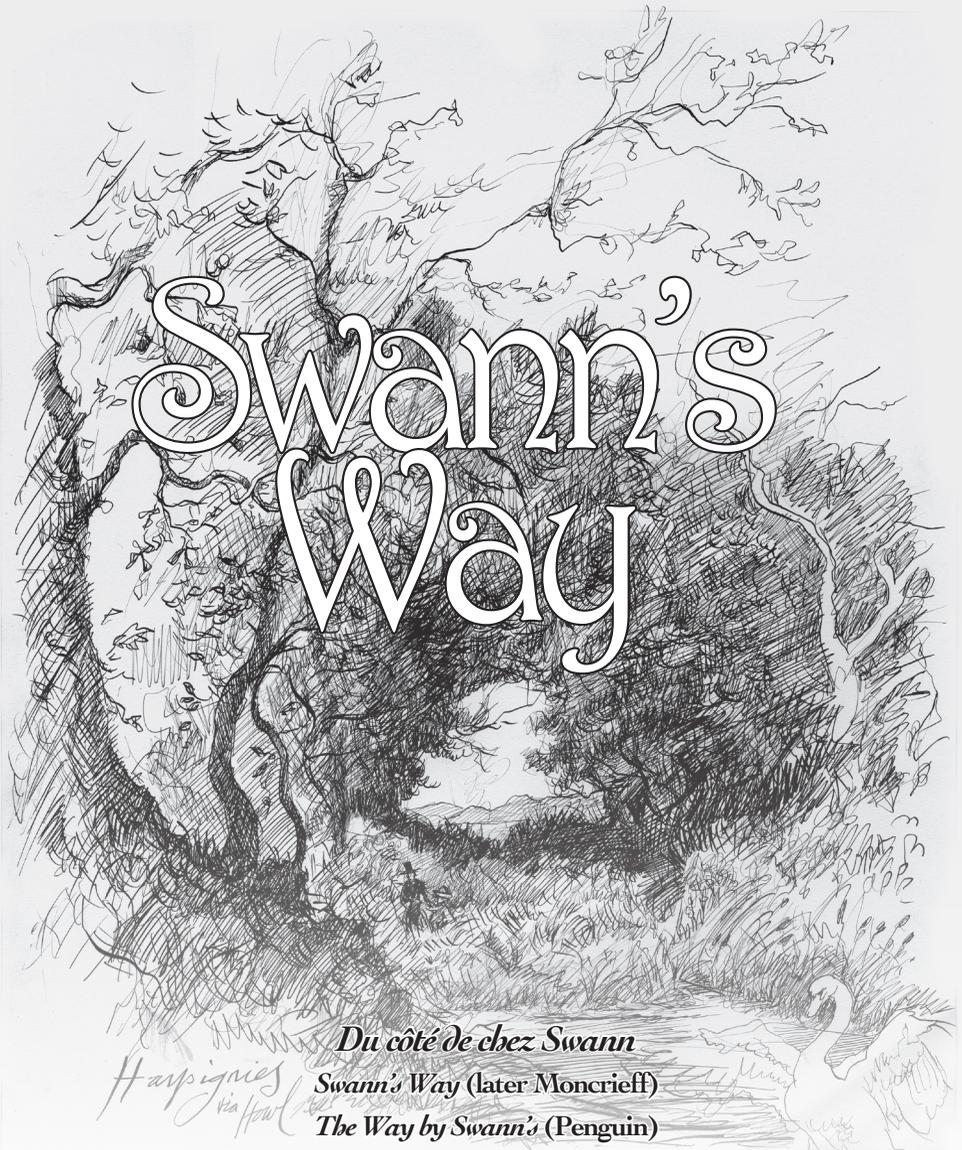
*... they touch the distant epochs through which they have lived, between which so many days have come to range themselves—in Time.* (VI: 532)

Part of Proust's tactic is to link the last sentence of his book with the first by using the word “time” in each, reflecting a tactic he noted in 1907:

*Thus the word parricide, having opened the article, closed it.*

—Proust, letter, February 1, 1907

AND SO LET US BEGIN our attempt to recapitulate Marcel's research of, and search for, Lost Time.



*Du côté de chez Swann*  
*Swann's Way* (later Moncrieff)  
*The Way by Swann's* (Penguin)  
*Swann's Way* (early Moncrieff)  
*Unterwegs zu Swann*

Years: 1890, 1880, 1895

ONE SCARY THING about *Swann's Way* is that almost all of the many major characters of *RECHERCHE* make an appearance in this first volume. The problem for the reader is that it is not clear who will become important or how they will develop. One could argue that the reader should begin *RECHERCHE* with the final volume, because it is there that one is alerted to who and what will finally be deemed important; everything one reads in the earlier volumes will really end up somewhere, in something that climaxes in something quite meaningful. As Proust explained in letters to friends:

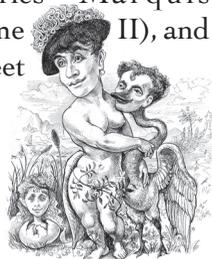
August–September 1913: *Not only is it impossible to anticipate the whole work from this single volume, which derives its meaning from the others.... it will be like those pieces which, when played separately at a concert, we fail to recognize as leit-motive until later when we are able to place them in the work as a whole....*

February 24, 1913. *There is a Monsieur who narrates and who says “I”; there are a great many characters; in the first volume they are “prepared” in such a way that what they do in the second is exactly the opposite of what one would expect from the first. ... [I]t is so complex that it will not be clear until much later where all the “themes” have begun to be combined.*

With due respect to the many, many (literally hundreds of) characters in *RECHERCHE*, the following stand out as playing major roles:

### Swann Family:

Gilberte Swann is a contemporary of Marcel Narrator (born around 1880). She is the daughter of Charles Swann, a rich Jew, and of Odette, a social climber with a dubious reputation caused by a dubious history. (Odette begins her married life as Mme. de Cr cycy, and then becomes Mme. Swann, then Mme. de Focheville.) Around 1902, Gilberte marries Marquis Robert de Saint-Loup-en-Bray (whom we meet in Volume II), and they produce a daughter, Mlle. Saint-Loup (whom we meet in the final volume).

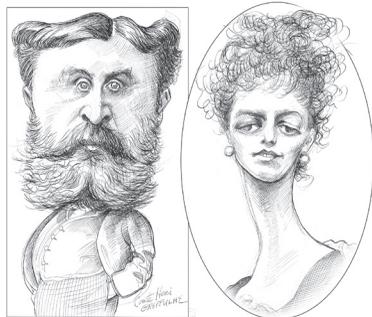


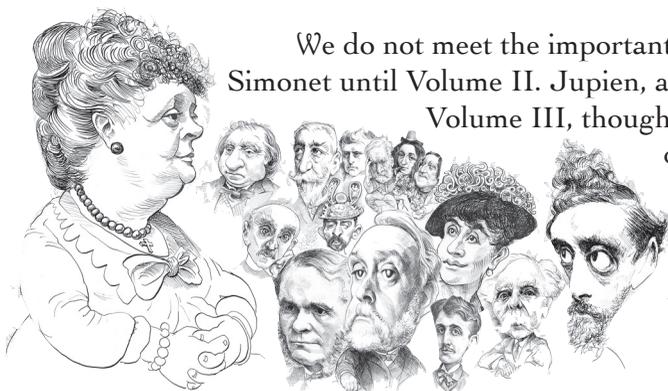
### Guermantes Family:

The Guermanteses derive from the nobility around Combray; they also reside in Paris. There are the Duke and the Duchess Guermantes (Basin and Oriane), and the Prince and the Princess Guermantes (Gilbert and Marie-Hedwig). Robert Saint-Loup is a nephew to Oriane as well as to Baron Charlus, who is a brother to Basin.

### The Verdurin Circle:

Mme. Verdurin rules over a salon and becomes Princess Guermantes when Marie-Hedwig dies. Various characters attend her salon. Artists that pass by or through this “little clan” in one fashion or another include Bergotte the novelist, Elstir the painter, and Vinteuil the composer.



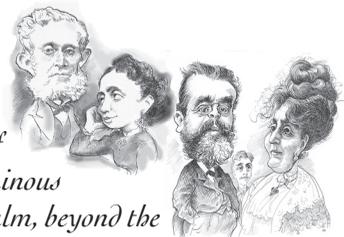


We do not meet the important character of Albertine Simonet until Volume II. Jupien, a tailor, is first named in Volume III, though Marcel's grandmother compliments him in the early pages of Volume I. Just before the end of the final volume, we learn that Jupien is Odette's first cousin.

Marcel Narrator also has a mother, a father, a grandmother, and a grandfather; the family has a cook named, Françoise. The novel begins with the young narrator (about 10 years old, around 1890) in Combray, trying to get to sleep and finagle a goodnight kiss from his mother as his elders try to entertain Charles Swann, a neighbor. Marcel's mother reads to him from George Sand's *François le Champi*.

Marcel mulls over memory:

*And so it was that, for a long time afterwards, when I lay awake at night and revived old memories of Combray, I saw no more of it than this sort of luminous panel. ... The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) which we do not suspect.... (I: 56, 57–58)*



It is at this juncture that Marcel has his madeleine moment, with its flood of sensations:

*[I]n that moment all the flowers in our garden and 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 shapes and growing solid, sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea. (I: 62)*

MARCEL TURNS TO RECOLLECTIONS OF COMBRAY, the name of which provides the title of the first section of *Swann*. There are two paths that Marcel and his family and friends usually take as they walk about Combray: one goes toward Méséglise-la-Vineuse, past Swann's estate; thus it known as "the Méséglise Way," or "Swann's Way." The other goes toward the chateau of the local nobility, the Guermantes family; hence it known as

“the Guermantes Way.” For your cocktail conversation or French Lit seminar, here is an opportunity to observe that Swann’s Way represents life with the high bourgeoisie, and that Guermantes Way represents life with the French aristocracy. Marcel Narrator explored both.

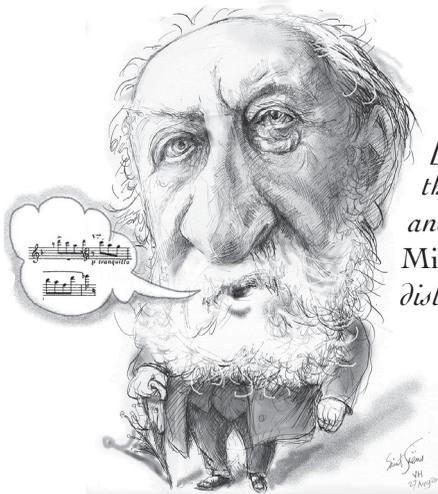


Swann in Love  
Gilberte, Odette, Charlie

Vinteuil, who has recently died, taught piano to Marcel's family. At one point, Marcel finds himself watching Vinteuil's daughter with a friend in what might be a lesbian frolic; they discuss spitting on a photograph of her father.

At another juncture, while travelling in the countryside, Marcel catches sight of two church steeples in Martinville. He experiences a "special pleasure, which bore no resemblance to any other" and, "overpowered by a sort of intoxication, ... could no longer think of anything but them." He tries to write about the experience and thinks he has succeeded "as though I myself were a hen and had just laid an egg." (I: 247–250)

**In Swann's second section, "Swann in Love,"** we move back in time to around 1879 and Swann's affair with Odette. His emotions ride a roller coaster, in part because of himself, in part because of the nature of love, and in part because Odette has a colorful past. A "little phrase" from a sonata by Vinteuil becomes an "anthem" for their love.



*[T]he little phrase from this Sonata ... is ... the charming but mediocre theme from a Violin and Piano Sonata [Violin Sonata No. 1 in D Minor, Op. 75] by Saint-Saëns, a composer I dislike.* —Proust, letter, April 20, 1918

**I**N THE THIRD, relatively short section, titled "Place Names—The Name," Marcel has come to Paris. Swann and Odette have married, and their daughter Gilberte has been born (around the same time as Marcel, 1880). Marcel experiences feelings for Gilberte.



# Within A Budding Grove

*À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*

*Within a Budding Grove* (later Moncrieff)

*In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower* (Penguin)

*Within a Budding Grove* (early Moncrieff)

*Im Schatten junger Mäechenbluete*

Years: 1896–1897, Narrator 16–17 years old, to 1898.

THIS VOLUME HAS TWO PARTS, “Madame Swann at Home,” and “Place Names—The Place.” The first part traces Marcel’s variegated and ultimately futile course of love with young Gilberte. The Swann household otherwise attracts him because there he meets the novelist Bergotte, who can discuss literature with him, and because there he can be infatuated with Mme. Swann. None of this prevents Marcel from allowing his creepy Jewish school friend Albert Bloch from taking him to a brothel where he might enjoy the charms of the Jewess Rachel. (Bloch: “Think of that, my boy, a Jewess! Wouldn’t that be thrilling? Rrrrr!”) When Marcel meets Rachel, he finds that her boudoir contains a couch resembling one belonging to his Aunt Léonie, and the memories it rouses prevent him from performing.





While Marcel waits for Françoise to use a public water closet, the air around the entrance triggers another version of his madeleine moment. The “cool, fusty smell” fills him with a “pleasure that was solid and consistent, on which I could lean for support, delicious, soothing, rich with a truth that was lasting, unexplained and sure.” (II: 88) Marcel correlates it to a humid odor from his Uncle Adolphe’s sitting room in Combray.

**I**N THE SECOND PART OF *GROVE*, two years have passed since Marcel’s passion for Gilberte. He takes a vacation in Balbec with his grandmother, who encounters a childhood friend named Mme. Villeparisis. She happens to be a Guermantes and introduces Marcel to her nephew, Baron de Charlus, and great nephew, Robert Saint-Loup.

Marcel finds Baron Charlus strange, and things will grow even stranger. Saint-Loup’s gentlemanly character is contrasted to that of Bloch, who is seen trying to advance his reputation through anti-Semitic imprecations and claiming to have enjoyed the charms of Mme. Swann. And while Marcel finds Saint-Loup accommodating, he is led to conclude that “friendship is ... an abdication of self. Even conversation, which is friendship’s mode of expression, is a superficial digression which gives us nothing worth acquiring.” (II: 664)

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ABOVE: One of various Paris public toilets photographed by C. Marville (1813–79).

RIGHT: Gustave Moreau, one of several contemporary artists on whom Proust is believed to have modeled his Elstir character.

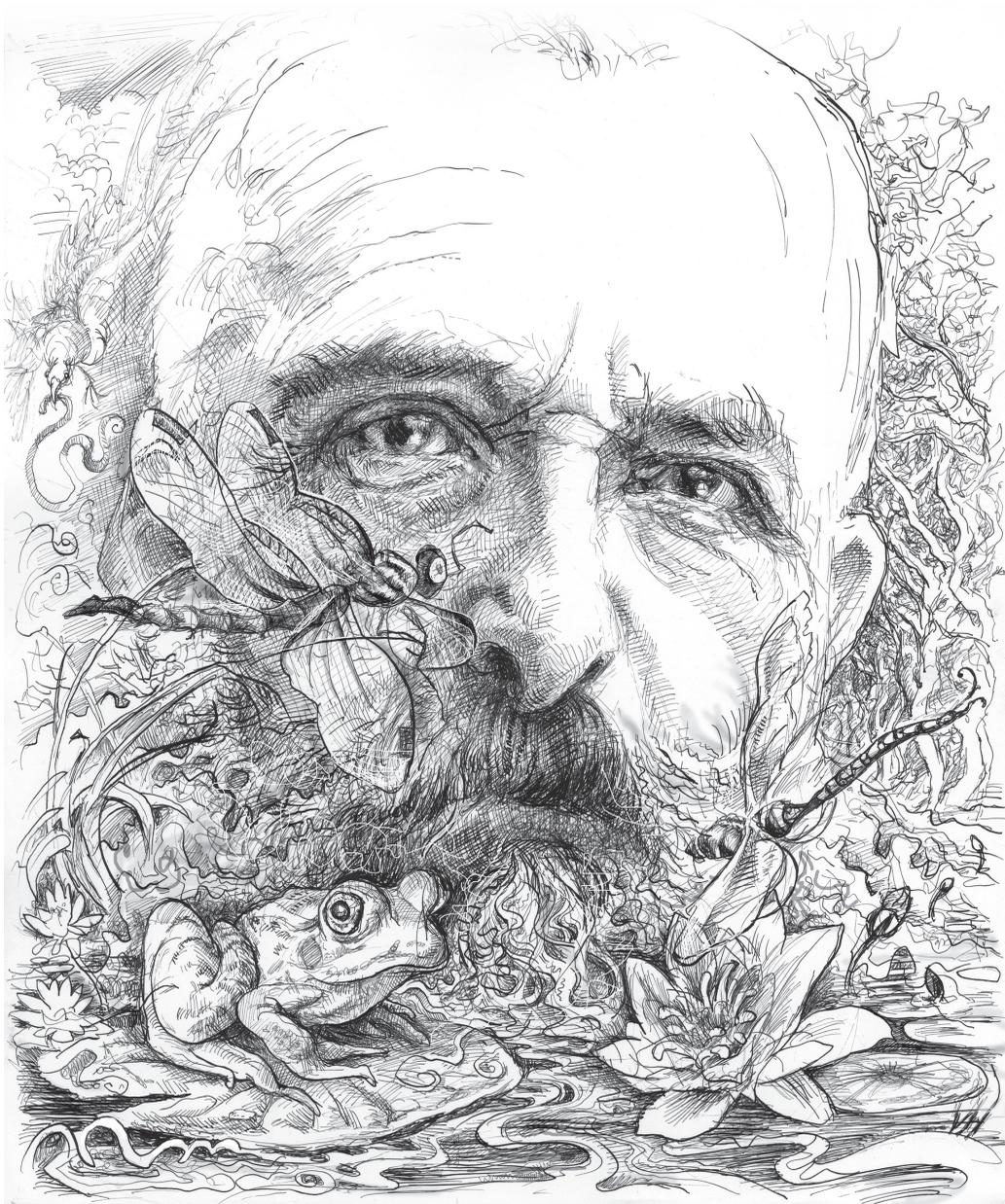
MARCEL MEETS ALSO MEETS A PAINTER NAMED ELSTIR, who leads him to further thoughts on artistic creation:

*[I]f God the Father had created things by naming them, it was by taking away their names or giving them other names that Elstir created them anew. The names which designate things correspond invariably to an intellectual notion, alien to our true impression.... (II: 566)*



SKETCH FOR SELF-PORTRAIT AS CHIMERA

DISPUTED ATTRIBUTION TO MOREAU



AND THROUGH ELSTIR, Marcel meets a young lady whom he had encountered earlier with a group of young girls. Her name is Albertine Simonet. For the time being, she refuses to kiss him.

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ABOVE: Claude Monet, said to be another inspiration for "the famous artist Elstir:"