CHAPTER TWO

COURAGEOUS VULNERABILITY AND
THE BERGSONIAN ARTIST

Introduction

In this chapter, I will give a first sketch of the attitude of courageous vulnerability. I will use Henri Bergson’s description of the artist as the framework for my discussion, and show that the ethical attitude I propose is analogous to the aesthetic attitude described by Bergson. The sensitivity of the artist, Bergson argues, makes him or her open to impressions that escape the rest of us. The artist perceives otherness and individuality where the rest of us merely see different degrees of the same phenomenon, and makes use of this special ability in the creation of a work of art. Bergson does not make explicit the ethical aspects of the artist’s openness to difference, but it appears that the artist would most likely be a successful moral agent as well if he or she could make use of this special skill in the interaction with other people. In Chapters Four and Six, I will discuss the fact that the narrator of À la recherche, the Bergsonian artist par excellence, is unable to use the insights gained through his aesthetic sensitivity to change his actions concerning other people. His sensitivity allows him be acutely aware of the way in which he (mis)treats others, but this awareness does not cause him to treat them differently. The present chapter sets up the debate of these later chapters and argues that the openness required for the attainment of felt knowledge becomes a moral obligation when the felt knowledge concerns a person.

As was shown in Chapter One, most privileged moments in À la recherche provoke some kind of aesthetic pleasure: all the privileged moments of the imagination are joyful impressions of something beautiful, and many of the privileged moments of memory are, like the madeleine episode, marked by a pleasure similar to the state of mind brought about by a work of art. The issue becomes more complicated when the narrator’s privileged moments involve memories of individuals, not in the way that the madeleine episode involves aunt Léonie, but in the way that the narrator remembers his grandmother when
he bends over his boots in the hotel in Balbec. Here one encounters the often disregarded subcategory of privileged moments that bring pain instead of pleasure. The pain is in each instance connected to the fact that the person remembered has been, in some way, lost. The experience of this kind of privileged moment has a decidedly moral character: as was shown in the Introduction, the narrator acquires felt knowledge marked by guilt, shame, and regret when he thinks back on his grandmother.\footnote{It is important to bear in mind that, according to the narrator, this moral component is present in all privileged moments: one has an obligation to regain the time lost, hidden by a couvercle. The narrator believes we have an obligation to the forgotten past to remember and restore it; to him, this obligation does not change in nature when it concerns a person. The aesthetic, for the narrator, is mixed up with the ethical. In chapters Four, Five, and Six I will discuss the problems which arise as a result.} Courageous vulnerability is the attitude appropriate to the pursuit of this kind of knowledge, and I will show how this attitude can be best described as analogous to the aesthetic disposition described by Bergson and exemplified by the narrator of À la recherche.

**Bergson: Intuition and Intellect**

For the narrator of À la recherche, art harbors truth and the artist’s obligation is a moral obligation to this truth. He claims: “At every moment the artist has to listen to his instinct, and it is this that makes art the most real of all things, the most austere school of life, the true last judgment.” [À tout moment l’artiste doit écouter son instinct, ce qui fait que l’art est ce qu’il y a de plus réel, la plus austère école de la vie, et le vrai Jugement dernier.]\footnote{Proust, *Time Regained*, 275; *Le temps retrouvé*, 458.} The realities which the narrator suspected beneath the couvercles described in Chapter One, and which, he felt, appealed to him to be regained, form the subject matter which the artist conveys in his work. The artist is sensitive to couvercles, to privileged moments, and follows his or her instinct to get to the core of these moments. The artist’s instinct, praised by the narrator of À la recherche, can be better understood through an account of what Bergson calls (artistic) intuition. In what follows, I will sketch the relevance of Bergson’s notion of intuition and show how it is an epistemological condition for the ethical attitude of courageous vulnerability.