In recent criticism, Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* is increasingly being qualified as a novel about subjectivity. But there is no trace of agreement as to the nature of this subjectivity: some, stressing the strength and significance of the I-formula, see this I as an absolute, almighty subject similar to the Hegelian self-consciousness (Campion 1992). Seen as the act of knowledge, that is of reappropriation of the world to the self, writing here becomes a way of mending the original division between these two. Others, more adequately, show how the act of self-consciousness uncovers only a part – and the least essential one – of the I. For the eminent Proust-critic Luc Fraisse, the *Recherche* is a “novel of consciousness – and of unconsciousness” (1988: 89), it opens “the era of doubt projected onto the individual consciousness” (ibid.), revealing a fragmentary, intermittent I. Yet another critic defends the surprising viewpoint that subjectivity degenerates into subjectivism, even into solipsism in Proust's novel (Terdiman 1976). He sees Proust as the culmination of a progressive isolation of the individual in the French novel from 1850 to 1920. Proust's radical critique of social intercourse (friendship and love) leads in his view to consider writing as a flight
from the world and from fellow men. Since human relations are structurally impossible, since there is no experience of anything outside the self, the Proustian I implies a “paroxystic recoil into total subjectivism” (Terdiman 1976: 231).

How to explain the great diversity of these views? At this stage, one should remember that, from the beginning, readers and critics have experienced the Proustian subjectivity as a mystery. Back in 1928, Leo Spitzer stated that the main character of the *Recherche* is a “mysterious self” (1988: 461). Keeping secret his name, his age and his other distinguishing features, at no point in the novel does he unveil himself. For instance all readers know that the I in *Combray* has no definite age: he is now a small boy playing, now a young man reading Bergotte in the garden, now a mature man reflecting on the past.

This one example already makes clear where the “mystery” comes from: it is the complexity of the I, who is on the one hand what is commonly called the "hero" – the man who is, in the present, living through the experience – and on the other hand the narrator, that is the one who, afterwards, recalls the past and reflects upon it. This distance in time and knowledge between hero and narrator is of course inherent to any story: narration itself cannot do without it. But in Proust, even though the hero and the narrator are the same character seen at different stages, the distance between them has become an abyss, and the overcoming this or at least measuring it is the main theme of the novel. It can take on such an importance because the I who tells the story – his own story – is not only, strictly speaking, a narrator, but also a writer, an artist. Thus it is not the history of his life that he is telling but, more selectively, the history of his vocation as a writer. As Genette stated, the main theme of the *Recherche* is: “Marcel [i.e. the hero] becomes a writer” (1972: 75), it is a novel about the birth and development of literary creativity.

When we turn now to other writings by Proust, we find that this abyss between the hero and the narrator, between the one who lives and the one who writes, is the keystone of Proustian aesthetics. In a famous passage in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* – in fact an earlier,