“An Impious and Secret Hand: The Effect of Bedtime Habit Throughout In Search of Lost Time”

In the first bedroom scene of Proust’s In Search of Lost Time, Marcel convinces his mother to mollify his insomnia with a bedtime kiss. She objects but eventually concedes, and Marcel realizes that his perfect world will never again be the same: with his newfound agency he traces “in her soul a first wrinkle.” For the next seven volumes he develops habits to ease his subsequent fears of death and the unceasing flow of time, and he does not recover an understanding of the first bedroom scene, nor does he prevail over its implications, until the novel’s final pages. Throughout the kaleidoscopic Search, Marcel reveals the lingering presence of his fears in other bedroom scenes but also tries to overcome them by breaking the habits of his childhood. In tracking the evolution of the bedroom scenes, I argue that we can follow the narrator’s emotional and intellectual development, for Proust’s bedtime routines center Marcel’s reliance on habit, and his release from habit becomes a release from the terror of death and a new freedom in searching for lost time. In my two short stories that follow the critical essay, characters cope with the tyrannies of time, of death, and in mirrored settings, they, like Marcel, attempt to grow beyond them.