Marcel Proust (1871-1922) made remembering into a modern literary genre. We mostly forget, and remembering is an arduous and frustrating process of researching and reconstructing piecemeal recollections of bygone times. Yet it can also happen unintentionally and without effort, inundating us with the power of past emotions. For Proust, the taste of a madeleine set off the involuntary recall of a forgotten childhood memory, setting the stage for the fictional autobiographic novel *In Search of Lost Time* (published in seven volumes between 1913 and 1927). While the recall event was certainly true (save for the catalyst being really tea and a rusk biscuit), Proust’s interest in the power of objects to provoke or assist memory began earlier when he read John Ruskin in 1899 and awoke to the mnemonic power of historic architecture, becoming especially obsessed with Gothic churches and the liturgical rituals for which they were built. He theorized the continued use of churches for their original purpose as intrinsic to the visitor’s ability to grasp their full import and historic meaning. He saw each ritual act as a precious vessel for forgotten memories. Like eating a madeleine, ingesting the Holy host in a Gothic cathedral offered communion not just with God, but also with a cultural community and its collective memories. To use a building for anything other than its original use, he argued, was to kill it by turning it into a museum. The son of a Catholic-Jewish couple, Proust began to actively and publicly weigh in on current debates about preservation when he realized the very real possibility that priests would be denied officiating services in churches—the buildings, most of them historic monuments, belonged to the state since the French Revolution. Émile Combes (1835-1921), Minister of Public Instruction and Cults of the Third Republic, was an atheist and militant anti-clericalist, who pushed the idea of the separation of Church and State to close Catholic schools and expunge clergy from public schools (1902) and to expel monks and nuns from their convents by military force (1903). Proust published this essay in *Le Figaro* in 1904. The same year, he published his translation of Ruskin’s *The Bible of Amiens* in 1904, amidst a high stakes religious and political crisis that led France to break off diplomatic relations with the Vatican. The Law on the Separation of Churches and State (1905) withdrew all state subsidies to Churches, but attempted to appease enraged Catholics by recasting the clergy into privately financed “Cultic Associations” and granting them the right to exercise their rituals in government buildings and historic monuments. Proust emerged from these experiences convinced of the impossibility of fully recovering the past, as well as a new sense of the value of attempts, however futile, to reconstruct it through personal memory. He spent the rest of his life devoted to his seven volume masterpiece, a monumental reflection on the nature of temporal experience, but took time off to reprint this essay in 1914 at the outset of WWI, to denounce the German shelling of historic monuments.

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