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# INTRODUCTION

Received opinion dictates that Proust is a 'difficult' author. Is this really so? After all, everyone knows something about him, even if it is only at second hand. On the level of Proust the person, the (in)famous cork-lined room he inhabited for a number of years is deemed to epitomise an ivory-tower existence far removed from the harshness of everyday life. The fact is, of course, he lived on the bustling street side of a modern building in the heart of the business and social district of the Parisian right bank, and was in rapid and frequent contact with the world outside. He even had a telephone, a means of communication he would memorably immortalise in his novel. Installing the cork was only intended to be a temporary measure, to shield him from builders hammering away in the next apartment. Not much of an ivory tower, really. But the elitist image is surprisingly persistent, and still biases opinion: Proust, in moving in high bourgeois and aristocratic circles, and in dealing with them in his novel, is assumed to be a snob, not an appropriate stance from which to speak with universal authority. And of course his demeanor as a sickly individual, sexually suspect, sleeping during the day and 'working' at night, is frowned upon: these are not features which add up to greatness. Being wealthy, too, is a distinct disadvantage on this score: as one of the 'idle rich', Proust can hardly be expected to speak for the generality of human beings.

In truth, though, the general public knows a lot more about Proust than this comic-strip picture suggests. He is *the* author when it comes to treating the theme of time, time which can be apprehended in unexpected ways, the most spectacular being sudden resurrection of the past, triggered off by tasting a madeleine cake dipped in tea, or by tripping over uneven paving-stones – moments of literary anecdote which have become familiar to those who have never read a word of the novel. Are they so well known because they are great literature, or because the experiences, being so everyday, could easily have been ours? Both perhaps. For if the old notion that *A la recherche du temps perdu* is Proust's scarcely-veiled autobiography has long been



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superseded, the fact that there is an unusually close proximity between personal experience and the literary expression of it is an attractive proposition for a reader. Far removed from the so-called remoteness of much of Proust's subject-matter, the famous flashes of insight chime with widespread perception, the more so as it is common knowledge that the early sections of the novel dwell on areas of childhood experience which are bound to overlap in essence with many a reader's own memories. Above all, the episode of the goodnight kiss – at first withheld by the Narrator's mother, then granted – has become a celebrated icon of childhood traumas as universally lived.

No one nowadays would waste time trying to prove that Proust the man went through an identical childhood drama, or that later on in his life there was an identifiable day on which he savoured a madeleine and underwent an overwhelming metaphysical vision. The temptation towards autobiographical interpretation – and sometimes it is strong – needs to be eschewed, and these days it routinely is. For although Proust clearly built his fiction out of what he had known in his own life, it is manifest that *A la recherche du temps perdu* is one of those fictions which, once set in motion, behaves according to its own internal rules, and not those of the world outside it. Searching for keys – who *really* was Charles Swann? who *really* was the duchesse de Guermantes? – has long since been considered an idle occupation: even if one can point to real-life individuals who possessed similar traits to those of Proustian characters, this activity can never acquire higher status than that of informed speculation. Today's readers, armed (perhaps unwittingly) with the critical priorities and expectations of recent decades, exercise greater sophistication than that: just as Proust thought Sainte-Beuve's method of judging authors by their personality wrong, so alert readers of the present day cannot allow unprofitable conjecture to enter into evaluation of works of art, whose autonomy is nowadays automatically granted (and applauded).

A particularly instructive feature of *A la recherche du temps perdu* arises from the small roll-call of places the novel moves within: Combray, Paris, Balbec, Doncières, Venice. Not many for a three thousand-page book. And note the mix of real localities and fictional ones: this is a world where the solidity of what is known and verifiable coexists with towns of the imagination which figure on no map one can buy. By being part and parcel of a work of fiction, Paris and Venice, while retaining features which can readily be checked physically, take on fresh substance which springs from the life of the fiction. Likewise, Combray, Balbec and Doncières, even if they are imaginary, assume the solid familiarity of French provincial towns to such an extent that it feels we could go out and check physical features there too.



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A wonderful example of this fictional cohabitation of the real and the imaginary – itself a sort of template for the whole novel – occurs early enough on in the novel for many novice readers already to have reached that far. In day-dreaming about catching the train which will, he hopes, one day take him to his desired destination of Balbec, the young Narrator encapsulates so much that is emblematic of his personality, of the novel, and of what may generally be recognised as a Proustian sensibility. The train departs at a fixed time of day, 1.22 in the afternoon, but in doing so it 'opens out' time as it advances in space, permitting desires and fantasies to be gratified, in the Narrator's case visiting places which in his mind have acquired mythical status. Not just Balbec, whose fantastical 'Persian' church is the avidly wished-for goal, but the real towns through which the train progresses, each of them possessing poetic dimensions invented by the Narrator's imagination alone: Benodet, for example, 'nom à peine amarré que semble vouloir entraîner la rivière au milieu des algues' (I, 382) ['a name scarcely moored that the river seemed to be striving to drag down into the tangle of its algae' (I, 468/553)]; or Pont-Aven, 'envolée blanche et rose de l'aile d'une coiffe légère qui se reflète en tremblant dans une eau verdie de canal' (*ibid.*) ['pink-white flash of the wing of a lightly posed coif, tremulously reflected in the greenish waters of a canal' (*ibid.*)]. And the order in which the places traversed are listed carries another, but similarly poetic, message: at first the itinerary is via Bayeux, Coutances, Vitré, Questambert, Pontorson, Balbec, Lannion, Lamballe, Benodet, Pont-Aven and Quimperlé (I, 379; I, 464/549); the second time, the order is jumbled (I, 381–2; I, 468/553). But whatever the order, a cursory glance at a map of Normandy and Brittany would tell one that not even the bravest of trains could hope to take in all of these places, irrespective of the order. Of course, mention of Balbec here provides the key: this is a voyage which, although seemingly traversing areas of reality, is essentially a journey into realms of the imagination. This is confusion to a purpose, and that purpose is the ongoing construction of a wholly self-defining fictional world, in which the imaginary life of an individual (the Narrator) is mapped onto verifiable and objective realities.

The element of confusion is there right from the outset, of course: just a few pages into the novel, the Narrator baldly lists the localities in which he has occupied rooms, but the reader, having no experience thus far of what will be a potent mix of the real and the imaginary, can only feel perplexed in the face of what has not yet been explained. And this insistence is only one of many such examples one could quote from the opening of *A la recherche du temps perdu* – famously, a byword for vagueness and obscurity. Some early commentators attributed this to a poor writing technique. But nowadays Proust's fame tells us that the uncertainties of this opening are willed,



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and are part of a carefully organised literary strategy, one which withholds as much as it discloses. In a way, the reader's initial difficulties are also the Narrator's, so closely do we accompany his emergent being. They are even, by extension, the novel's itself, stuttering into existence as it does in a series of disjointed trial efforts. In all cases, sense needs to be made out of chaos. But if a certain brand of difficulty is in some degree inscribed within the very fabric of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, it has also to be said that there are counterbalancing features of great comfort, 'welcoming' aspects which rarely hit the headlines. Paramount amongst these must be the reader's development in intimate tandem with the Narrator's. This proximity is more often than not taken for granted, as is the simple trajectory the novel pursues – the unfolding of a life in all the ups and downs of a sort we ourselves know all too well. Empathy is acquired in the very process of reading and continuing to read.

The physical appearance of the novel repeats this same combination of the difficult and the easy. Its stupendous length is, of course, a formidable challenge; but the very title, in its wonderfully transcendent directness, positively demands investigation. Then the titles of the various volumes, combining as they do hints at characters one will encounter (Swann, the Guermantes, Albertine) and at aspects of narrative development (*La Prisonnière*, *Albertine disparue*, *Le Temps retrouvé*), tantalise by being simultaneously informative in what they reveal and sketchy in what they leave unexplained (who are the 'jeunes filles'? what lies behind the biblical *Sodome et Gomorrhe*?). Closer in, there are smaller subdivisions which are reassuring ('Combray', 'Un amour de Swann') but then there are also headings which are decidedly unhelpful. *Le Côté de Guermantes*, for instance, is divided into two parts: part I, consisting of about 300 pages, has no sub-headings. But part II, some 280 pages long, is subdivided into two chapters, each of which is prefaced by a summary of its contents: chapter one is only about thirty pages long; chapter two, some 240. Why this imbalance? And why does the short part II, chapter one get a list of contents when the much longer part I gets none? A mystery. But even when the contents are supplied, the result is scarcely what one might today call 'user-friendly'. Take, for example, the summary of part II, chapter two:

> Visite d'Albertine. – Perspective d'un riche mariage pour quelques amis de Saint-Loup. – L'esprit des Guermantes devant la princesse de Parme. – Etrange visite à M. de Charlus. – Je comprends de moins en moins son caractère. – Les souliers rouges de la duchesse. (II, 1987)

> [A visit from Albertine – Prospect of rich brides for certain friends of Saint-Loup – The wit of the Guermantes as displayed before the Princesse de Parme



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> – A strange visit to M. de Charlus – His character puzzles me more and more – The duchess's red shoes.] (Omitted from the current English editions; translation taken from earlier editions.)

What a curious way to signpost 240 pages of text!

After registering initial bafflement, the reader can at least cling onto the names of characters with whom he or she is becoming familiar; but even so, how their activities are to fill out so many pages, given the thinnest imaginable indications, is impossible to predict. And the registers of each notation are puzzlingly disparate: what could be less helpful than 'A visit from Albertine'? Why not an element of evaluation such as occurs when the Narrator intriguingly anticipates about Charlus? And what about the ridiculously bathetic effect of 'The duchess's red shoes'? But by now the alert reader knows not to expect short-cuts from an author who has hitherto abundantly displayed his greater interest in respecting the idiosyncratic unfolding of impressions than in providing an initial explanatory framework. In this respect, the confused opening pages of *A la recherche du temps perdu* stand as a sort of motto for the whole novel. So the innocuous-sounding 'Visit from Albertine' is probably going to reveal very much deeper involvement on the part of the Narrator than the bland words convey; and the 'more and more', qualifying puzzlement about Charlus, looks as if with him the Narrator is further advanced on the path of acquaintanceship, if not of knowledge. But how? As for 'The duchess's red shoes', those who know the anecdote alluded to will draw in breath at the mere reading of these words: their perfunctoriness masks one of the great episodes of the novel, a scene where Proust's characters, in their interaction, provide one of the hardest-hitting analyses of human behaviour, of an exceptional degree of profundity. (The episode is partially dealt with in Chapter 9 of this *Companion*; but for the full effect the reader needs to stalk ahead to its powerful location at the end of *Le Côté de Guermantes*.)

So, if Proust's novel appears weird and wonderful from the outside, that is largely because the inner goings-on heavily dictate the structural appearance. The moral is: the sooner one enters the world of the text, the better. This is where critical works such as the present one come in: while not in any way attempting to substitute for the novel – each contributor will prove that that is impossible – outside help can facilitate access from within, as it were. Our *Companion* is just what it claims to be – an accompaniment taken on a voyage of discovery. If, like the Narrator on his own imagined – then realised – train-journey into Normandy and Brittany, the potential reader of Proust has an approximate idea of the geography which lies ahead, then the staging-posts which each of our chapters represent can only help in giving



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body to that geography. And again, as in the novel, the order in which places are passed through is variable: while we present the chapters in an order which follows a certain sort of logic, that is not to say it is the only possible logic. On the contrary, Proustian fluidity almost demands selective gleaning. Sometimes, familiar textual territory is re-traversed: that is because the landscape of Proust's novel is criss-crossed with intersecting tracks, and famous quotations operate as so many junctions which redirect trajectories along fresh lines.

Once embarked on the journey, the reader of *A la recherche du temps perdu* soon learns what to look out for, without the assistance of specialist guides. For getting to know Proust is not the acquisition of a bundle of facts, it is familiarity with a world of the imagination in which one gradually feels at home, easy in the company of a Narrator who is as normal – and as eccentric – as ourselves. It is the growing realisation that humanity is a frail, yet durable thing, subject to an enormous range of vicissitudes, but obedient also to recurrent laws. It is the recognition that life, drab though vast swathes of it may be, can be transfigured in rare moments of insight. It is above all the acknowledgement, in our intimate association with the Narrator, that what is humble and what is sublime cohabit in indissoluble symbiosis. For if there is just one lesson one retains from a reading of Proust it is that what seems trivial is often what is most significant and revelatory. And if experiences of transcending time represent events of great moment, so too do the duchess's red shoes.



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# 1

CYNTHIA GAMBLE

# From *Belle Epoque* to First World War: the social panorama

*A la recherche du temps perdu* spans the period in France between the 1870s and the years of the 1914–18 war, together with an ill-defined post-war period: this represents more or less Proust's own life (1871–1922). Navigational aids are sparse in this work of fiction which is essentially non-linear and which moves rapidly and often imperceptibly backwards and forwards as in cinematographic flashbacks, but there are occasionally some markers to help the reader traverse the political and social seas. Balzac's aim as a novelist had been to paint a sociological canvas of his time, to produce an inventory of French society in the first half of the nineteenth century. Proust, however, observes and analyses essentially the interior world of his characters set against a background of selected exterior, actual events which provide an authentic sociological backcloth to his novel in the period commencing some twenty years after Balzac's death. As early as 1894, in his introduction to his first published work *Les Plaisirs et les jours*, he identified the best vantage point for observing social behaviour as from within an enclosed space, in this case Noah's Ark: 'Je compris alors que jamais Noé ne put si bien voir le monde que de l'arche, malgré qu'elle fût close et qu'il fît nuit sur la terre' (*JS*, p.6). ['Then it was I understood that Noah could never have had so clear a view of the world as when he gazed upon it from within his ark, sealed though it was, and when darkness was over all the earth'].[1] Proust's technique is to portray, throughout the whole of *A la recherche du temps perdu,* an interplay between life and fiction, the encounter between reality and imagination, what can be called 'l'imaginaire'. So successful is this method that boundaries become blurred and the reader may easily be lulled into believing that a fictional character, such as Mme Verdurin, actually existed.

The *Belle Epoque*, so-called retrospectively – Vincent Cronin suggests that the term was current from the 1920s[2] – is akin to 'the good old days', a golden age which never really existed, or a period which, if it did exist, did so for the affluent classes. It is chronologically ill-defined but is generally



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regarded as that period of euphoria at its zenith in the centenary year of 1900 and the years of insouciance preceding the outbreak of the First World War. The expression immediately triggers an impression which has been deliberately cultivated of luxurious, carefree living, especially in Paris, of a romanticised, idyllic vision of a hedonistic society with great wealth and much leisure. It reflected a lost paradise, and bathed in a romantic afterglow in contrast to the horrors and grim realities of the slaughter of the war. To what extent is this true and how is this period depicted in *A la recherche du temps perdu*?

A main character who is present throughout, is the courtesan Odette de Crécy (who ascends in society through her sexual favours with wealthy men), later to become Mme Swann and subsequently Mme de Forcheville: the sense of stability she gives to the novel by her continued, yet changing presence, allows Proust to attach temporal markers to and around her. In 'Un amour de Swann', the love affair between Charles Swann, the Jewish dilettante, writer *manqué*, art collector, wealthy man about town, son of a stockbroker, and Odette de Crécy is analysed. A moment when Swann's passion is intensified is his receipt of an impassioned letter from Odette, written at midday, from the non-fictional, fashionable Parisian restaurant *La Maison Dorée*, at 1 rue Lafitte in the 9th *arrondissement*, and beginning: 'Mon ami, ma main tremble si fort que je peux à peine écrire . . .' (I, 222) ['My dear, my hand trembles so that I can scarcely write . . .' (I, 271/319)]. That particular day, Swann recalls, was the day of a charity event in aid of those who had suffered in the floods in the coastal province of Murcia in South East Spain. In reality, the flooding occurred between 14 and 15 October 1879, and a charity ball, presided by the Queen of Spain, was held at the Hippodrome in Paris on 18 December 1879. The day of the ball was also the very day when Odette had been with another of her lovers, the Comte de Forcheville, a fact which she half reveals and half conceals when under interrogation by her jealous suitor Charles Swann (I, 364–5; I, 446/526–7).

Many years later in wartime and post-war Paris, in *Le Temps retrouvé*, the Narrator, on encountering Odette, now Mme de Forcheville, superimposes on her ageing body – she is soon described as being 'gaga' (IV, 530; VI, 325/383) – the memory of her youthfulness at the time of the Paris Exhibition of 1878 (IV, 526; VI, 321/377) and also his preferred image of her as the extremely elegant, fashionably dressed Mme Swann, in her carriage, in the Allée des Acacias in the Bois de Boulogne in 1892 (IV, 528; VI, 323/380). But on another occasion Mme Swann is depicted in the same Allée des Acacias, being pursued not by Charles Swann but by the Narrator of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, who is eager for a glimpse of Mme Swann,



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the mother of Gilberte with whom he is in love. He overhears an un-named man, in the crowd, boast that he had slept with Odette, in fact on the very day on which President Mac-Mahon resigned, that is to say, 30 January 1879 (I, 413; I, 505/597). Mac-Mahon, with monarchist tendencies, was elected President of the French Republic in 1873, and Proust uses his period of office between 1873–9 to situate certain events in his novel and thereby give it also a greater sense of authenticity. Odette's early life of pleasure, in Baden-Baden, Nice and the Côte d'Azur, and her sexual relationship with Uncle Adolphe, the Narrator's uncle, before her marriage to Swann, belong to that period (I, 307–8; I, 376–7/444–5). Mac-Mahon is presented in Proust's novel as a cousin of the fictional Mme de Villeparisis (II, 46; III, 305/360).

We can, therefore, place the *demi-mondaine* Odette de Crécy in the 1870s, and as Mme Swann she was already the mother of a precocious daughter, Gilberte, by 1892, and a well-known society hostess by 1896 at the time of the visit of the Russian Tsar Nicolas II to Paris (I, 533; II, 134/159). Mme Swann finds herself in the middle of a *cause célèbre*, the question of the innocence or guilt of the wrongly accused French army officer, Captain Dreyfus, in the late 1890s. As Mme de Forcheville, and also the mistress of the aged Duc de Guermantes to whom she is shamelessly unfaithful, Odette remains a monument to the *Belle Epoque*, at the very end of Proust's novel.

This fairly long time-scale, although imprecise, enables Proust to chart the rise and fall of fortunes, families and values, and to show the fragility and collapse of a hedonistic upper-class society living an illusion of being impregnable. No one is prepared for any adversity, and any impending danger or sign of mortality is rejected: when Swann, seriously ill with cancer, announces to the Duc and Duchesse de Guermantes that he has only three or four months to live, his remark is brushed aside as being preposterous (II, 882–4; III, 689–91/817–19). Similarly, the death of Dechambre, Mme Verdurin's favourite pianist, is a taboo subject in her *salon* (III, 288; IV, 340/399). Death, in this pre-war society of the *Belle Epoque*, is something which the bourgeoisie and aristocracy depicted by Proust prefer, if possible, to ignore and is, therefore, not prominent in his novel, with the striking exception of the long account of the illness and death of the Narrator's grandmother.

## Salons

The *salons* formed an important part of French society and Proust owed much of his literary and social success to the important network of influential contacts he made there. He was a regular visitor to 12, avenue Hoche,



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the *salon* of Mme Arman de Caillavet, mistress of the writer Anatole France, and soon became a close friend of Mme de Caillavet's son, Gaston. He also frequented the glittering *salon* of the painter Madeleine Lemaire in the rue de Monceau where he first met Comte Robert de Montesquiou. Few people are spared in his acerbic vignettes of the *salons*. In *A la recherche du temps perdu*, through the *salons* in particular, Proust depicts the preoccupations and attitudes of much of upper-class, and aspiring upper-class society, toward political events such as the Dreyfus affair. There are, broadly, two contrasting sets of *salons*, that of the upwardly mobile bourgeoisie of Mme Verdurin, and those of the aristocracy, the Guermantes family.

Mme Verdurin is first described at the beginning of 'Un amour de Swann' as 'vertueuse et d'une respectable famille bourgeoise excessivement riche et entièrement obscure avec laquelle elle avait peu à peu cessé volontairement toute relation' (I, 185) ['a thoroughly virtuous woman who came of a respectable middle-class family, excessively rich and wholly undistinguished, with which she had gradually and of her own accord severed all connection' (I, 225/265)]. Through ruthless control over her guests, through single-mindedness, a degree of *savoir-faire*, a superficial but nevertheless adequate knowledge of art and politics, Mme Verdurin manages to acquire a varied assortment of followers at her first *salon* in the rue Montalivet in the 8th *arrondissement*, not far from the Elysée Palace (III, 706–7; V, 225/265). These include fictional characters such as the painter Elstir, the musician Vinteuil, Professor Brichot, Dr Cottard and many others. She moves astutely with the times, favouring intelligence and the arts, whereas the Guermantes *salons* despise intelligence and tend to ossify. Her *salon* evolves as a Temple of Music (III, 263; IV, 309/363): Mme Verdurin is a fervent supporter of Wagner, Russian Ballet, Nijinsky and Stravinsky (III, 140; IV,165/193), music that was fashionable in Paris, driven by the prevailing spirit of Franco-Russian *rapprochement* favoured at governmental level. There was a Russian pavilion, among others, at the Great Exhibition of 1900, and the Alexander III bridge across the Seine was inaugurated in the same year in honour of the Emperor who had signed the Franco-Russian alliance. Russian Ballet became the craze, for Diaghilev had promoted his troupe vigorously in Paris, even persuading the Comte and Comtesse Greffulhe and other wealthy patrons to provide financial support for the performances. The dazzling Russian Ballet season opened in Paris in May 1909 and continued on a regular basis for several years. Proust, with his close friend the composer Reynaldo Hahn, saw a performance of *Scheherazade*, choreographed by Baskt and Fokine, with music by Rimsky-Korsakov, on the opening night, 4 June 1910, when Nijinsky was the slave, and Ida Rubinstein the Sultan's favourite wife. It was described as an orgy never before witnessed, the stage



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