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978-0-521-89577-4 - A Reader's Guide to Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*

David Ellison

Excerpt

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Introduction: At the threshold of Proust's novel

APPRECIATING PROUST'S STYLE

Marcel Proust's vast novel of recollected human experience, *A la recherche du temps perdu* [*In Search of Lost Time*] (1913–27), has enjoyed the esteem of writers and literary scholars for many years. After an initial period of incomprehension in France (Proust's sentences seemed too long, the narrative line of his story too slow to unfold), the *Recherche* gained an international reputation as one of the masterpieces of modernism, largely thanks to a discerning foreign audience. Toward the end of Proust's life, and in the two decades following his death in 1922 at the age of fifty-one, European writers from a wide variety of backgrounds and nationalities acknowledged their debt to the French writer, indicating in their statements of admiration and affiliation the degree to which their own texts could not have been possible without their discovery of Proust's beautiful but strange fictional universe. Although many examples of such statements could be brought forward, I would like to cite three writers who had very little in common with each other, but for whom the act of reading Proust constituted an event in their lives and in the development of their own writing styles.

The first quotation is from Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), author of *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves*, *Orlando*, *A Room of One's Own*, and other important works of fiction and essayistic prose, whose life overlapped with that of Proust, and who read him with discernment from the very beginning of his career as a novelist. The second is from Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), the German-Jewish essayist, translator, and philosopher, author of the vast *Arcades* project, and the reader who best understood the importance of Charles Baudelaire for the nineteenth century. The third is from Jean Genet (1910–86), the thief-turned-writer whose prose style is perhaps second only in importance and distinctiveness to that of Proust for twentieth-century France, and whose florid metaphorical discourse owes much to his predecessor.

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1 Marcel Proust, twenty years old, with his mother and his brother, Robert

Virginia Woolf, writing in May 1922, six months before Proust's death:

Proust so titillates my own desire for expression that I can hardly set out the sentence. Oh, if I could write like that! I cry. And at the moment such is the astonishing vibration and saturation and intensification that he procures – theres [*sic*] something sexual in it – that I feel I *can* write like that, and seize my pen and then I *can't* write like that. Scarcely anyone so stimulates the nerves of language in me; it becomes an obsession.¹

Walter Benjamin, writing in 1929:

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The thirteen volumes of Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* are the result of an unconstruable synthesis in which the absorption of a mystic, the art of a prose writer, the verve of a satirist, the erudition of a scholar, and the self-consciousness of a monomaniac have combined in an autobiographical work. It has rightly been said that all great works of literature establish a genre or dissolve one – that they are, in other words, special cases. Among these cases, this is one of the most unfathomable. From its structure, which is at once fiction, autobiography, and commentary, to the syntax of boundless sentences (the Nile of language, which here overflows and fructifies the plains of truth), everything transcends the norm.²

Jean Genet, in an interview from 1975:

I read *Within a Budding Grove* [*A l'Ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*] in prison, the first volume. We were in the prison yard trading books on the sly. It was during the war [World War II], and since I wasn't very concerned about books, I was one of the last and someone says to me, "Hey, you can take that," and I see Marcel Proust. And I said to myself: "That should be a pain in the butt" ... I read the first sentence of *Within a Budding Grove* which is when Monsieur de Norpois is introduced at a dinner at the home of Proust's – or rather the narrator's – father and mother. And it's a very long sentence. And when I'd finished the sentence, I closed the book and said to myself, "Now I'm calm, I know I'm going to go from one marvel to another."³

Although Woolf, Benjamin, and Genet appear to be sensitive to quite different aspects of the *Recherche*, and although the rhetorical tone of their declarations cannot be said to resemble each other in the least, there are nevertheless some common threads that run through their reactions to Proust's particular mode of writing. Foremost among these, for want of a better word, is *style*. For Woolf, style is Proust's signature, the fact of his individuality, the way he writes, "like that": it is something intensely physical, even sexual, which has the effect of fueling her own desire to write. For Benjamin, the *Recherche*, like all great works of literature, breaks previously established molds and structures, and does so, in large part, through style – especially Proust's notoriously long sentences, his convoluted syntax, which Benjamin compares, quite strikingly, to the overflowing "Nile of language." For Genet, style as apprehended by the reader of Proust has a double effect: it is, at first, surprising (one's initial expectation was that the book would be "a pain in the butt," yet, to use Benjamin's language, it "transcends" that expectation); and then, precisely through the meandering of its long sentence structure, it produces "calm." It is this calm that makes possible the reader's capacity to open him- or herself to the Proustian text and to "go from marvel to marvel."

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In the pages that follow, I shall be taking quite seriously the centrality of Proust's style – understood in the broadest sense, as his quite personal and particular use of grammar, of syntax, and of figural language (especially metaphor, about which Proust theorized at great length). According to Proust himself, it is only the greatest attentiveness to the individualized style of a writer that allows the reader access to the essential literary contribution of that writer's work. In one of his late essays, entitled “A propos du ‘style’ de Flaubert” (1920), Proust penned a rejoinder to an article by the noted critic Albert Thibaudet, who had written that the author of *Madame Bovary* “was not a born writer; verbal mastery in its very nature had not been granted him.”⁴ In Proust's view, not only was Flaubert's style revolutionary for the history of French literature in its often unusual use of the imperfect (*imparfait*) verb tense, but his quite original manipulations and occasional distortions of the laws of grammar, while stylistic in origin, in fact implied a new *vision*. Proust contends that Flaubert's “completely new and personal use ... of the imperfect, the preterit, the present participle, certain pronouns and certain prepositions, *has renewed our vision of things* nearly as radically as Kant, with his Categories, his theories of Knowledge and of the Reality of the exterior world.”⁵ What Proust is saying here is not that literature is to be confused with philosophy (which some literary critics have done in attempting to reduce Proust to one or another philosophical position, or in linking his thought with excessive facility to that of Schopenhauer or Nietzsche), but rather, that literary language is deserving of the same level of scrupulous analysis as is the conceptual discourse of philosophy.

In practical terms, as far as this *Reader's Guide* is concerned, in order to remain as close as possible to the specificity of Proust's novel, that is, its stylistic particularity, I shall be as attentive as possible to the novelist's use of language. Quoted passages will appear first in the original French,⁶ then in English.⁷ Each chapter will begin with a brief plot summary as well as an indication of the general interpretative and narrative issues that will confront the reader in the course of his or her perusal of the text; but the bulk of each chapter will consist of close readings of specific episodes along with commentary concerning the ways in which episodes relate to each other, not only within one of the novel's seven volumes, but also from one volume to another. In the analysis of any novel, there is a built-in tension between the particular and the general, the microcosm and the macrocosm. This tension is exacerbated in a novel possessing the bulk of the *Recherche*, which, occupying some 3,000 pages, is approximately twice the length of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1865–69). An understandable temptation on the part of the critic would be to emphasize the macrocosm at the expense of

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the microcosm, simply in order to respect the overall design of a highly structured text. I shall attempt not to succumb to that temptation, and, in spending time on detailed readings of shorter sections of the novel, shall attempt to respect, and in some ways, to recreate, the word-by-word, sentence-by-sentence experience we all have as readers of Proust.

PROUST'S LIFE AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR HIS
LITERARY WORK

In his monumental account of Proust's life and work, *Marcel Proust: Biographie*, Jean-Yves Tadié lists not only sixteen formal biographies that have preceded his, but also fifty-two volumes of informal "remembrances" or "souvenirs" written by friends and acquaintances of Proust. Even if one were to limit oneself to the very best recent biographies of Proust for detailed information on the writer, it would be necessary to take into account not only Tadié's contribution (generally considered to be definitive in its scope and in the power of its overall argument), but what should be called the earliest "modern" Proust biography, G.D. Painter's two-volume *Marcel Proust: A Biography*, as well as the scrupulously well-documented and readable *Marcel Proust: A Life* by William C. Carter, and Edmund White's concise and witty *Marcel Proust*, which has a strong focus on Proust's homosexuality. When one adds to this vast library of information and speculation about Proust's life the existence of a treasure trove of letters – the twenty-one-volume *Correspondance de Marcel Proust* scrupulously edited and annotated by the late Philip Kolb – it becomes difficult not to see Proust as a thoroughly examined, if not dissected, individual about whom everything essential has been said, recast, repeated, and submitted to the utmost scrutiny.

The reasons for this intense interest are fairly obvious. Although born in the upper middle-class, Proust circulated easily in Parisian aristocratic circles; many of his readers are interested in gaining access, however indirectly, to the rituals and social codes of these circles. Proust was born of a Catholic father and a Jewish mother; this double origin, in and of itself, exercises a certain fascination. And, perhaps most importantly, Proust was homosexual, at a time when the stark alternative of living within or coming out of the "closet" was no simple matter. The discomfort that he endured as a practicing-but-at-the-same-time-closeted homosexual in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is of inevitable interest to twenty-first-century readers living in an era characterized by the recent development of gender and queer studies.

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This being said, there is a delicious irony in the obsessive interest in Proust the man (whether Proust the social climber, Proust the ambivalent figure caught between two religions, or Proust the active but melancholy homosexual), considering that Proust himself, in the period immediately preceding the composition of the *Recherche*, had developed a coherently articulated theory directed *against* the excessive interest in writers' lives (as opposed to their works). Proust located this tendency to overvalue the possible impact or "influence" of an author's life on his writings in the work of Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve (1804–69), the greatest of France's nineteenth-century critics, whose massive influence on the *homme et oeuvre* approach to literature lasted well into the mid-twentieth century.⁸ In the fragmentary series of essays and novelistic sketches that prefigure the earliest stages of the *Recherche* and which have been published under the title *Contre Sainte-Beuve* [*Against Sainte-Beuve*], Proust establishes his critical position in contradistinction to that of his nineteenth-century predecessor. Sainte-Beuve had written:

Literature is not for me distinct or separate from the individual and his constitution [i.e., personality, temperament] ... One should not hesitate to approach a man from various angles to understand him, that is, as something other than a pure spirit ... What were his opinions on religion? How was he affected by the spectacle of nature? What were his relationships with women, with money? Was he rich, poor; what was his daily routine? What were his vices, his weaknesses? None of the responses to these questions is indifferent if one wishes to judge the author of a book and the book itself, if this book is not a treatise of pure geometry, if it is essentially a literary work. ("La Méthode de Sainte-Beuve," *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, 221; my translation)

Proust, on the other hand, in an assertion that would be difficult to interpret otherwise than as a warning against the excesses of biographical reductionism, after criticizing Sainte-Beuve for getting lost in a sea of documents surrounding the writer he is studying, states:

This method [that of Sainte-Beuve] ignores what our own insight into ourselves teaches us: that a book is the product of another self than that which we manifest in our habits, in society, in our vices. If we wish to locate and understand that deeper self, we must seek to recreate it within ourselves. ("La Méthode de Sainte-Beuve," 221–22; my translation)

Much could be written about these two countervailing critical views, each of which represents an extreme position on a continuum. Sainte-Beuve's emphasis on the study of all aspects of the writer's life could easily lead to confusion between knowledge of him or her as a human being and purported knowledge of the work in question. Proust's absolute

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division between two completely separate selves might be a clever ploy on the part of a writer who, for strategic reasons, would prefer to keep his compulsive social aspirations and homosexual identity out of view. At the very least, however, Proust's theory can serve as a warning to us as we stand at the threshold of his novel. An over-emphasis on establishing one-to-one correspondences between what we know of Proust's life and what we read in his fiction is an act of reduction and of impoverishment. At the same time, however, whereas in "La Méthode de Sainte-Beuve" Proust simply dismisses the Beuvian critical method out of hand in an intellectual argument, he will reinscribe his debate with Sainte-Beuve within the pages of his novel and will allow it to unfold in a narrative evolution.

Some of the most fascinating of Proust's fictional characters will incorporate and enact the tendency to confuse man and work, superficial and deep or authentic self. The strange and outrageous Baron de Charlus, one of the three or four most developed characters in the novel, is guilty, on a constant basis, of the fall into that confusion. The fact that Charlus is, at one level, a rather transparent caricature of one of Proust's closest friends, the poet and dandy Robert de Montesquiou (1855–1921), further complicates the question of the relation between the individual human in his or her lived existence and the transposition of that human into a fictional "equivalent." Is it really possible for the informed reader to set aside his or her knowledge of the writer and of the real background of that writer's fictional characters, in an effort to focus exclusively on the "deep self"? Whatever the answer to this question, it is clear that in moving from the form of critical essay to that of the novel, Proust was able to present his intellectual disagreement with Sainte-Beuve not as a Manichean choice, but rather as the narration of a temptation, of a seduction. We know better than to confuse a person with his or her work, reality with fiction, but it is that very confusion that generates the psychodrama through which one large strand of Proust's narrative is woven.

As I move now to a brief overview of the salient events in Proust's life and career, it is with the preliminary understanding that knowledge of these facts and factors is important but not sufficient for an understanding of the work itself. For purposes of clarity and practicality, I shall divide my biographical sketch into six parts: 1. Childhood; 2. Adolescence and early adulthood; 3. Early writings; 4. Proust as translator; 5. The *Recherche* from its inception until World War I; 6. The *Recherche* after World War I.

CHILDHOOD

Marcel Proust was born on July 10, 1871, shortly after the conclusion of the Franco-Prussian War and at the very beginning of the Third Republic. Proust was to live most of his life during the so-called “belle époque” or “golden era,” so designated because of the relative political stability that prevailed in Europe between 1871 and 1914, and because of the combined developments of the sciences, technology, and the arts. The flourishing of the Impressionist aesthetic during this period, featured in large sections of Proust’s novel, seemed, on the surface at least, to liberate the arts from realism and from the depiction of an often violent political and social reality, and to open up new perspectives for formal experimentation. Proust grew up during what was, for the upper bourgeoisie, a happy phase of the late nineteenth century. His family was not rich, but was very comfortable financially, and its values expressed themselves both in a certain middle-class social conformity, and also in a profound interest for culture – literature, music, fine art, dance, and theater. But among these, literature and music were dominant. It was Proust’s mother, Mme Adrien Proust, née Jeanne Weil (1849–1905), who inculcated in her son a love for literature and a strong sense of aesthetic appreciation.

Although little is known of Proust’s childhood, if we allow ourselves for a moment the luxury of establishing the kind of link between life and work that Proust himself refused to admit, we can surmise that the young Marcel’s life was characterized essentially by happiness and tranquility. It is the pages of *Combray*, the first of the three parts of *Du Côté de chez Swann* [*The Way by Swann’s*], which in their depiction of a stable, regular, sun-infused universe tempt us to draw this conclusion. Although not devoid of drama and of the fears a child would have in facing the world, the universe depicted in *Combray* is one of familial stability, of witty conversation, of the joys of reading, and of an incipient artistic apprenticeship. In real life, however, there is one event that interrupts this happy picture, tingeing it with a somber tone: Marcel’s first asthma attack, in 1881, at the age of nine. Proust was to suffer from respiratory problems, at times severe, throughout his adult life. His complaints about these problems, which punctuate his *Correspondence*, need to be taken seriously, not as the sign of hypochondria, as some skeptical readers have surmised. Asthma and its attendant complications kept Proust out of school during fairly large stretches of his childhood and adolescence, but did not hinder him from developing, from an early age, an obvious talent as a writer.

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ADOLESCENCE AND EARLY ADULthood

The turning-point in Proust's life – the moment at which he discovered his vocation as a writer and his homosexual identity – occurred in the autumn of 1887, when he was sixteen years old. His first infatuations, including that for Jacques Bizet, the son of Georges Bizet (1838–75), the composer of *Carmen*, were largely “literary” in that they consisted for the most part of letters and of declarations rather than of concrete actions. But from year to year there was a procession of young men whom Marcel pursued, at times quite aggressively, with varying degrees of success and of reciprocity. Marcel's leanings were not only displeasing to his parents; they were the subject of heated debate in his home, and of much anguish for Marcel, who, as of 1888, tried unsuccessfully to resist them. There was a scene with his mother when Marcel showed her a photograph, now frequently reproduced in illustrated biographies of Proust, with the future writer seated in front of his two close friends, Lucien Daudet and Robert de Flers. Daudet, his right arm leaning on Marcel's left shoulder, directs his attention toward the object of his admiration in a way that was unambiguous to Mme Proust (see illustration 2). There were also moments which seem appalling to a modern sensibility, in which Proust's father, the distinguished pathologist and epidemiologist Adrien Proust (1834–1903), sent Marcel along to a local brothel in order to give him experience with women and to “cure” him of his homosexual inclinations.

Proust was not to be “cured,” however, and as he progressed from adolescence to early adulthood, continued to pursue love with the young men he encountered, either in the context of his studies, or in the artistic circles he had begun to frequent. Perhaps the longest and most important of his early liaisons was with the talented musician Reynaldo Hahn (1875–1947), who was his lover from 1894 until 1896, and a lifetime friend after their physical relationship had ended. Half-Jewish like Marcel (Hahn's father was of German-Jewish extraction, while his mother, a Venezuelan, was of Basque origin), Reynaldo developed from child prodigy pianist to composer, conductor, and music critic. He was especially known as a composer of songs, as a brilliant conversationalist, and as an eloquent writer. He was a major influence (and became, barely disguised, a major character) in Marcel's first, abortive novel, *Jean Santeuil*, written from 1895 until 1899 but not published in Proust's lifetime. The letters between Reynaldo and Marcel which we do possess (others have been lost or have been withheld from publication) betray a passionate relationship, with Marcel often in the role of jealous lover. Until the much later relationship between the by then

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well-known novelist Marcel Proust and his chauffeur Alfred Agostinelli in 1913–14, Marcel was not to know a love as deep or as developed in its genuine reciprocity of feelings as that with Reynaldo.

EARLY WRITINGS

The decade stretching from 1889 until 1899 was a long but enriching transitional period for Proust. In 1889–90 he successfully completed his military service at the Coligny Caserne in the city of Orléans – an experience which formed the basis of an episode in *Le Côté de Guermantes* [*The Guermantes Way*], the third volume of the *Recherche*. Between 1890 and 1895 he pursued advanced study in the fields of law and political science, obtaining the degrees of *licence en droit* in 1893 and *licence ès lettres* in 1895. In order to placate his parents, who were concerned that, despite these intellectual efforts and achievements, Proust had no particular career in mind, he obtained a volunteer position at the Bibliothèque Mazarine in Paris in 1896. To say that Proust had no vocation as librarian or archivist is an understatement: he expended considerable time and energy avoiding his job, and managed, in the end, to obtain an extended sick leave.⁹ He was never to have a job or exercise a profession in the conventional sense. Rather, he was beginning to develop his talents as a writer and to become known both in high society and among the literary and artistic élite.

Proust's problem was not that he was a dilettante, as many of his contemporaries assumed during this period, but that he was unable to focus his many talents as social observer, essayist, critic, and burgeoning creator of prose fiction on any one object or project. Until the turn of the century, it could have appeared that Proust was on his way to becoming a French Oscar Wilde – a master of the *bon mot*, social butterfly, very talented but undisciplined writer, polymorphous polymath, a person more memorable as a *raconteur* than as the creator of new and challenging artistic forms. Appearances, in this case, were more than deceiving. Underneath the brilliant but somewhat vapid surface of things, Proust was discovering the social and psychological underpinnings of his future novel, and he was gaining in the life experience from which he was to draw many of his acute political and moral observations.

The use of the term “political” in conjunction with Marcel Proust may seem odd to readers who associate the writer with introspection and an idiosyncratic, isolated existence (most notably, the cork-lined room full of anti-asthma fumigations in which he wrote the bulk of the *Recherche*). This particular image of Proust, which has obtained an iconic status in popular