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

David Ellison

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A READER'S GUIDE TO PROUST'S  
*IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME*

Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*) is many things at once: a novel of education, a portrait of French society during the Third Republic, a masterful psychological analysis of love, a reflection on homosexuality, an essay in moral and aesthetic theory, and, above all, one of the great literary achievements of the twentieth century. This *Reader's Guide* analyzes each volume of the *Recherche* in order and in detail. Without jargon or technical language, David Ellison leads the reader through the work, clarifying but not oversimplifying the intricate beauty of Proust's imaginary universe. Focused both on large themes and on narrative and stylistic particularities, Ellison's readings expand our understanding and appreciation of the work and provide tools for the further study of Proust. All extracts in French are translated, making this an ideal guide for students of comparative literature as well as of French.

DAVID ELLISON is Distinguished Professor in the Humanities at the University of Miami, Florida.

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A READER'S GUIDE TO  
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*LOST TIME*

DAVID ELLISON

*University of Miami*



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*Pour la famille nombreuse*

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## *Preface*

This *Reader's Guide* to Marcel Proust's 3,000-page magnum opus, *A la recherche du temps perdu* [*In Search of Lost Time*], is intended not only for advanced undergraduates and graduate students in the humanities, but also for the intellectually curious reader who has heard of Proust's remarkable literary achievement but has not had the time, the courage, or the discipline to undertake a reading project of rather considerable scope. My purpose has been to analyze and to clarify Proust's text without having recourse to specialized vocabulary and without engaging at great length in dialogue with those critics who, from the early twentieth century until the present moment, have enriched our understanding of a beautiful but complex work. From Ernst Robert Curtius, Walter Benjamin, and Samuel Beckett to Antoine Compagnon, Julia Kristeva, and Malcolm Bowie, passing through stages of progressive insight brought to us by readers such as Germaine Brée, Georges Poulet, Jean-Pierre Richard, Gérard Genette, Gilles Deleuze, Roger Shattuck, Jean-Yves Tadié, and many others, Proust's text has been a testing ground for critical and theoretical meditation, an unavoidable point of reference for any serious reflection on literary modernity. It is incumbent upon the contemporary critic doing conceptually or philologically rigorous work on Proust to place his or her own thoughts within the large perspective opened up by these distinguished readers and the questions they have posed.

The present study is more modest: its focus is on the immediate experience of reading Proust, word by word, line by line. Whatever else Proust may have intended his work to be, it is first and foremost a novel, a long narrative composed of multiple intersecting and divergent threads. The role of the reader is, at first, simply to follow these threads and to see where they lead. For this reason, after an introductory chapter devoted to Proust's life, his literary career, and his early writings, I have followed the sequential movement of the novel, from its first to its seventh and final volume, devoting individual chapters to the volumes as they unfold in the forward

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thrust of the narrative (the exception being Chapter 5, which covers two volumes). My method has been that of close reading, and I have quite consciously chosen to have Proust “speak” as much as I do, which explains why this book contains many quoted passages from the *Recherche* (both in the original French and in English translation, so that the text can be accessible to a broad readership). My goal has been to accompany Proust, to remain within the imaginary universe he has created, and not to cast my own shadow over this universe. If a *Reader's Guide* is to succeed as an invitation to reading, it seems to me that the guide himself should emulate Virgil to his reader's Dante, and disappear once he has pointed out salient areas of the landscape, leaving the more arduous, but also more rewarding stages of the peregrination to the literary pilgrim, who must necessarily make the essential choices and discoveries individually. That pilgrim, dear reader, is you. It is for you that I have written what follows.



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## *Acknowledgements*

I am grateful to Linda Bree and to Cambridge University Press for having entrusted this volume on Proust to me. After some years of nomadic wandering away from Proust's universe, I was enticed to return to its charms by the late Richard Bales, who asked me to contribute an essay to *The Cambridge Companion to Proust* (2001). I have based both the Chronology and the Select bibliography in the present study on those provided for the *Cambridge Companion* by Professor Bales, whose erudition in all matters Proustian was exemplary.

I am also indebted to the University of Miami, and in particular to Michael Halleran, Dean of Arts and Sciences, for having granted me a semester's leave for the completion of the project. My thanks go to the Richter Library, and in particular, to Mr. Kyle Rimkus for his help in securing permissions for the photographs and other illustrative material in this book. For her unfailing technical and humanistic support, I would like to express my appreciation to Greta West. And last but certainly not least, I am happy to take this opportunity to state my gratitude to those colleagues and graduate students who have listened, read, and responded to early versions of this work.

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## *Chronology*

- 1871 July 10: birth, at Auteuil in the Paris suburbs, of Marcel Valentin Louis Eugène Georges Proust, son of Adrien Proust, a distinguished professor of medicine, and Jeanne-Clémence Weil. The father is Catholic, the mother Jewish.
- 1872 The Proust family takes up residence in the fashionable boulevard Malesherbes (Paris 8e). Proust will always live in this area, except at the end of his life.
- 1878–86 Family holidays at Illiers (now Illiers-Combray) in the *département* of Eure-et-Loir.
- 1882–89 Attends the Lycée Fontanes (renamed Lycée Condorcet in 1883); poor health often keeps him absent.
- 1888 Proust is strongly influenced by his philosophy teacher, Alphonse Darlu.
- 1889–90 Proust performs his military service at Orléans.
- 1890–95 Student years (law and political science). *Licence en droit* (1893); *licence ès lettres* (1895).
- 1891 Co-founds a short-lived journal, *Le Banquet*. Is an active contributor to this and other journals.
- 1894 Beginning of the Dreyfus Affair.
- 1895 Begins a novel, *Jean Santeuil* (unfinished).
- 1896 Publication of *Les Plaisirs et les jours*, a collection of stories, essays, and miscellaneous pieces.
- 1897 Proust begins to read the works of the English writer John Ruskin.
- 1898 Publication of Zola's "J'accuse." Proust rallies to the Dreyfus cause.
- 1900 Death of Ruskin. Proust devotes the next few years to translating and annotating selected works of Ruskin's. Two trips to Venice. The family moves to the rue de Courcelles.

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- 1902 Artistic pilgrimages to Belgium and Holland; sees Vermeer's *View of Delft*.
- 1903 Death of Proust's father.
- 1904 *La Bible d'Amiens*, translation of Ruskin.
- 1905 Death of Proust's mother.
- 1906 Proust moves to 102, boulevard Haussmann. *Sésame et les lys*, translation of Ruskin.
- 1907–14 Summer holidays at Cabourg, on the Normandy coast.
- 1908 Writes *Pastiches* of other authors, based on an amusing extortion racket known as "L'Affaire Lemoine." Begins what is now known as *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, an essay.
- 1909 The essay transforms itself into a novel; it will eventually become *A la recherche du temps perdu*.
- 1910 Goes to see the *Ballets russes*. Has his bedroom lined with cork, because of building work in an adjoining apartment.
- 1911 The novel's title at this time is *Les Intermittences du coeur*. Proust employs a secretary to type up his work, more than 700 pages to date.
- 1912 Proust seeks a publisher, in vain.
- 1913 *Du Côté de chez Swann* is published by Grasset, at Proust's own expense. The general title of the novel is changed to *A la recherche du temps perdu*.
- 1914 The second volume of the novel as it then existed is being set up in proof when the outbreak of war stops the printing presses.
- 1914–18 During the war, with no possibility of publication, Proust vastly expands his novel, notably amplifying the role of the character Albertine.
- 1916 Publication rights are transferred from Grasset to Gallimard.
- 1918 Publication of *A l'Ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*.
- 1919 Proust is forced to move from 102, boulevard Haussmann, first to the rue Laurent-Pichat, then to what will turn out to be his final residence, 44, rue Hamelin. He is controversially awarded the *Prix Goncourt*, France's premier literary prize, for the publication of *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*.
- 1920 Proust is named Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur. Publication of *Le Côté de Guermantes I*.
- 1921 Extracts from the novel are regularly published in journals, mainly *La Nouvelle Revue française*, continuing into 1922. Proust visits an exhibition of Dutch paintings at the

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- Orangerie in May: he sees the *View of Delft* again. *Le Côté de Guermantes II – Sodome et Gomorrhe I* is published.
- 1922 *Sodome et Gomorrhe II* is published. Proust develops bronchitis, then pneumonia, and dies on November 18. He is buried in Père Lachaise cemetery on November 22.
- 1923 Publication of *Sodome et Gomorrhe III – La Prisonnière*.
- 1924 Publication of *Albertine disparue*.
- 1927 Publication of *Le Temps retrouvé*.
- 1952 Publication of *Jean Santeuil*.
- 1954 Publication of a version of *Contre Sainte-Beuve*.
- 1954 Publication of *A la recherche du temps perdu* in the first Gallimard-Pléiade edition (three volumes), Pierre Clarac and André Ferré editors.
- 1987–89 Publication of *A la recherche du temps perdu* in the second Gallimard-Pléiade edition (four volumes), Jean-Yves Tadié *et. al.* editors.