PART I

Life and works

CHAPTER I

Life

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On 10 July 1901, Marcel Proust called on his friend Léon Yeatman in his law office and announced: 'Today I'm thirty years old, and I've achieved nothing!' (*Corr*, II, 32). Yeatman must have protested, but Marcel had good reason to be discouraged. Nearly all his friends had established themselves as writers or launched other successful careers. Although he held university degrees in literature, philosophy and law, he had never entered a profession. He had stubbornly rejected the advice of his father, Dr Adrien Proust, one of France's most distinguished physicians and scientists. After one of their heated discussions about his failure to choose a career, Marcel wrote: 'My dearest papa . . . I still believe that anything I do other than literature and philosophy will be just so much wasted time' (*Corr*, I, 237).

Dr Proust was a self-made man from the little town of Illiers. His fortune had greatly increased when he married Jeanne Weil, the daughter of a wealthy Jewish family. Proust adored his mother, who, though modest and discreet, quoted with ease from the classics in several languages. Her influence was the strongest in Proust's life. From the age of ten, he suffered from asthma and other ailments and was regarded by his parents as neurasthenic if not neurotic. In the *Recherche*, Proust has a physician say: 'Everything we think of as great has come to us from neurotics. It is they and they alone who found religions and create great works of art' (3: 350; II, 601). But neither he nor his parents had such confidence; his childhood ailments prevented him from enjoying many activities and even caused him to miss an entire school year.

Proust's *lycée* professors and classmates, many of whom later became writers themselves, recognized his talent early. Jacques Bizet gave his cousin Daniel Halévy a letter from Marcel describing the scene that had erupted when his father caught him masturbating: 'this morning, dearest . . . my father . . . begged me to stop masturbating for at least four days'. He goes on to say that if his parents refuse him permission to invite Jacques, then he will 'love' him 'outside the walls' of the family prison.

This letter amazed Daniel not only because of the glimpse into Marcel's private life and the revelation of his homosexual proclivities, but also as a text. Halévy recorded that Proust had written it without crossing out a single word: 'This deranged creature is extremely talented, and I know NOTHING that is sadder and more marvellously written than these two pages.'[1] Years later, when asked if any of Proust's schoolmates had a premonition of his genius, Halévy answered that no one believed he had 'the will power ever to achieve a masterpiece'.[2]

In 1896, Proust published his first book, *Pleasures and Days*, consisting of stories and poems written in his early twenties. He persuaded a society hostess, Madeleine Lemaire, to illustrate the volume, which was prefaced by Anatole France. Prior to publication, *Le Gaulois* and *Le Figaro* carried on their front pages France's preface that praised Proust's 'marvelous spirit of observation, a supple, penetrating and truly subtle intelligence'.[3] Although the book received several laudatory reviews, few took Proust seriously as a writer.

A year earlier, Proust had vacationed in the seaside village of Beg-Meil in Britanny, where he began writing *Jean Santeuil*. Despite its fragmentary state, this manuscript is, after the *Recherche*, his most important work, because it represents his first attempt to write a novel and contains many themes and characters that he was to refashion for his masterpiece. One finds in *Jean Santeuil* episodes of memory ignited by a physical sensation, a phenomenon that he was to call involuntary memory in the madeleine scene in *Swann's Way*. He recognized the potential of such experiences, but was years away from discovering how to make them serve a plot. In *Jean Santeuil*, Proust indicates his uncertainty about the genre of the work he was struggling to create: 'Should I call this book a novel? It is something less, perhaps, and yet much more, the very essence of my life' (*JS*, 2; 181). Proust saw what he wished to achieve, but did not yet know how to transpose the essence of his life into a work of fiction.

In October 1899, Proust went to the Bibliothèque nationale to consult the works of John Ruskin. A short time later he wrote to a friend, informing her of his failure at novel-writing and announcing his new project: 'For the last fortnight I have been busy with a little piece completely different from what I usually do, about Ruskin and certain cathedrals' (*Corr*, III, 377).

After Ruskin's death in early 1900, Proust decided to expand the 'little piece' into a more ambitious undertaking. He devoted most of the following five years to translating and annotating works by Ruskin. As was typical of him during this period, he often stalled and became

frustrated. But when his father died suddenly in 1903, his mother urged him to finish translating *The Bible of Amiens*. Proust took her advice and, in 1904, published the work, dedicated to Adrien Proust.

In June 1905, the *Renaissance latine* printed the preface to his translation of *Sesame and Lilies*, which begins:

> There are no days of my childhood which I have lived so fully perhaps as those I thought I had left behind without living them, those I spent with a favourite book. . . . If still, today, I chance to leaf through these books from the past, it is simply as the only calendars I have preserved of those bygone days, and in the hope of finding reflected in their pages the houses and the ponds which no longer exist. (*ASB*, 195; *CSB*, 160)

The readers of the *Renaissance latine* did not know – nor did Proust himself – that they were receiving a foretaste of Combray.

In the preface, Proust gives the different meanings of *sesame* employed by Ruskin that create not only a structure but also layers of meaning, a method that will be characteristic of Proust's style. He describes Ruskin as passing

> from one idea to another without any apparent order. But in reality the fancy that leads him follows his profound affinities that in spite of himself impose on him a superior logic. So that in the end he happens to have obeyed a kind of secret plan which, unveiled at the end, imposes retrospectively on the whole a sort of order and makes it appear magnificently arranged up to this final apotheosis.[4]

Although Proust had not yet begun *In Search of Lost Time*, his method of composing was to be similar to Ruskin's.

On 26 September 1905, Proust's mother died. For the next two years, depressed and ill, he seldom rose from his bed. His 1907 summer vacation in Cabourg marks his resumption of an active schedule. He wrote an article for *Le Figaro*, 'Impressions de route en automobile' ['Impressions of riding in an automobile'], that related an excursion to Caen, where, as Alfred Agostinelli's red taxi sped along, the writer observed the rapidly shifting positions of the church steeples of Saint-Étienne and Saint-Pierre. One aspect of this article is remarkable: Proust twice mentions wanting to arrive before nightfall at the home of his parents, who were deceased. Here, as in the preface to *Sésame*, he is transposing his life into a fictional work, but remains uncertain as to its exact nature and content.

On New Year's Day 1908, Mme Geneviève Straus gave Proust five little notebooks. On thanking her, he said that he had a new project in mind and was eager 'to begin a fairly long piece of work' (*Corr*, VIII, 39). He chose the largest notebook (now referred to as *Le Carnet de 1908*), and

began jotting down ideas and sketches that were to converge and lead to the *Recherche*. One scene described the anger of his little brother Robert when forced to part with his pet goat. The locale is inspired by childhood memories used to create Combray. Eventually, Proust dropped Robert and reduced this scene to twenty-five lines in which the Narrator bids farewell to his beloved hawthorns. He made entries about themes and characters in the notebook for several years and listed sensations capable of reviving the past.

Having written the poems, sketches and short stories published in *Les Plaisirs*, drafted over a thousand pages for *Jean Santeuil*, translated Ruskin, and written society articles and parodies for *Le Figaro*, Proust had completed his long apprenticeship. Yet he still found it impossible to focus on one topic or genre. In May 1908, he listed his projects:

> a study of the nobility
> a Parisian novel
> an essay on Sainte-Beuve and Flaubert
> an essay on Women
> an essay on homosexuality (not easy to publish)
> a study of stained-glass windows
> a study of tombstones
> a study of the novel. (*Corr*, VIII, 112–13)

These are the topics that interested him when he began the earliest drafts of his novel, which contain many of the same elements as *Jean Santeuil* and his early stories: the child's nervous dependency on his mother, obsessive jealousy, snobbery in the world of high society, and meditations on the arts, especially literature and music. The essay on homosexuality will form part of the beginning of *Sodom and Gomorrah* and be linked to the novel's themes of sexual obsession and jealousy, elaborated in the loves of Swann and Odette, the Narrator and Albertine, and Charlus and Morel.

In July 1908, Proust listed the six parts already written. Among these was 'the Villebon Way and the Méséglise Way'. He soon changed 'Villebon' to the more euphonious Guermantes. The two place names, the first from a chateau near Illiers and another from a nearby village, indicate he had found the 'two ways', one of the major unifying elements of his novel, destined to become Swann's way and the Guermantes way. Another key episode was the drama of the goodnight kiss, in which the child Narrator, unable to sleep, places his mother in the position of making concessions and spending the night in his room. This primal scene of all Proustian narration, sketched in a story in *Les Plaisirs et les jours* and reprised in the drafts of *Jean Santeuil*, became the scene in the *Recherche* where the

Narrator as a child loses his will. He will spend the rest of his life trying to regain the independence and strength in order to become a writer. The last episode on the list indicates the story's conclusion: 'What I learned from the Villebon Way and the Méséglise Way.'[5] He had conceived an apprentice novel, in which the Narrator becomes neurotically dependent as a child, grows up to explore the two ways of his world, that of the landed gentry and Paris salons, and fails to find happiness in erotic love. But soon he stalled again, unable to see that he had found the 'sesame' that would open the doors to a new world of fiction.

In late 1908 Proust began an essay attacking Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve. Some of the drafts of *Contre Sainte-Beuve* constitute parts of the first version of the future novel. In the passages containing the early versions of the madeleine scene, Proust describes the past resurrected through involuntary memory, summoned by toast and tea, and follows with another involuntary memory evoking Venice. These rare moments are triggered by the chance encounter with an object unconsciously connected to a past impression. The draft continues with a series of such experiences. In the novel, he places the toast and tea episode, replacing the mundane toast with a madeleine, in *Combray I*, where it serves as an example of the 'true life' and the type of vivid recollection the Narrator needs to capture in his writing, when he feels such joy at being outside time. All the other involuntary memory experiences from *Contre Sainte-Beuve* were placed near the story's end, where these felicitous moments create a crescendo effect as the Narrator, after many years of idleness, reclaims his will, forfeited long ago in childhood, and finds his vocation:

> And I understood that all these materials for a work of literature were simply my past life; I understood that they had come to me, in frivolous pleasures, in indolence, in tenderness, in unhappiness, and that I had stored them up without divining the purpose for which they were destined or even their continued existence any more than a seed does when it forms within itself a reserve of all the nutritious substances from which it will feed a plant . . . And thus my whole life up to the present day might and yet might not have been summed up under the title: A Vocation. (6: 258–9; IV, 478)

In spring 1909, Proust abandoned the critical essay and devoted himself entirely to the novel. If he had had such difficulty in finding his genre, it was because ultimately he had to reinvent it. By the time he finished, Proust had created what is perhaps the richest narrative voice in literature, a voice that speaks both as child and as man, as actor and as subject, and weaves effortlessly between the present, past and future.

In 1912, after receiving rejection notices from Fasquelle, Ollendorff, and the *Nouvelle Revue française* (Gallimard), Proust signed a contract with Bernard Grasset and agreed to pay all the publishing costs. On 8 November 1913, one week before publication, Proust received a reporter from *Le Temps* and explained his views on time, characters and style. During the interview, he quoted from passages from *Swann* and future volumes, perhaps hoping to thwart criticisms about the lack of a plot by showing some of the lessons the Narrator learns at the end of his quest. And he insisted on the importance of time: 'I have attempted to isolate the invisible substance of time, but to do that the experiment had to be able to be long-lasting' (*ASB*, 234; *CSB*, 557).

The year 1914 proved to be a terrible one for Europe and especially for Proust. Gaston Calmette, editor of *Le Figaro*, to whom *Swann* is dedicated, was assassinated in March. In May, Proust's beloved secretary, Alfred Agostinelli, perished in an aeroplane crash. Then in August, came the outbreak of the First World War. Welcome news arrived in a letter from André Gide: 'My dear Proust, for several days I have not put down your book; I am supersaturating myself in it, with delight, I am wallowing in it.' Then Gide confessed: 'The rejection of this book will remain the gravest mistake of the NRF – and (for I have the shame of being largely responsible for it) one of the bitterest, most remorseful regrets of my life.' Gide had been prejudiced by the image of Proust, based on a few social encounters years earlier: 'I thought you – shall I confess it? – were from the "Verdurin way," a snob, a dilettante socialite – the worst possible thing for our review.' Gide admitted that he had only glanced at a few sentences before tossing the manuscript aside. Saying that he would never forgive himself, he begged Proust 'to be more indulgent towards me than I am myself' (*Corr*, XIII, 50–1).

Proust replied immediately: 'My dear Gide, I have often felt that certain great joys are conditional on our having first been deprived of a lesser one, which we deserved, but without the denial of which we could never have known the other, greater joy.'[6] He told Gide to feel no remorse, 'for you have given me a thousand times more pleasure than pain' (*Corr*, XIII, 57). Proust now had what he had always wanted: to be read and respected by the group of men at the *NRF* whom he considered his peers. Gide and Gaston Gallimard began planning, with Proust's aid, to secure his release from the contract with Grasset.

Proust followed the progress of the war by reading seven daily newspapers. Given the circular structure of the *Recherche*, it was relatively easy to incorporate the war years into his story. As a result of Agostinelli's death,

Proust greatly expanded the part known as the Albertine cycle. When peace came in November 1918, Proust worried that readers would not remember or even care about the long, meditative story he had begun in *Swann* five years earlier. He received the answer on 10 December 1919, when *Within a Budding Grove* won the Goncourt Prize, France's most prestigious literary award.

As his health worsened, Proust worked to complete the remaining volumes. Although he lived to see *The Guermantes Way* and *Sodom and Gomorrah* in print, he had revised only the first hundred pages of *The Captive* when he died on 18 November 1922. The final volumes appeared posthumously: *The Captive* (1923); *The Fugitive* (1925); *Time Regained* (1927).

In *Time Regained*, the Narrator gives a pessimistic forecast about the fate of the book that he at long last intends to write:

> No doubt my books too, like my fleshly being, would in the end one day die. But death is a thing that we must resign ourselves to. We accept the thought that in ten years we ourselves, in a hundred years our books, will have ceased to exist. Eternal duration is promised no more to men's works than to men. (6: 445; IV, 620–1)

Now nearly a century after the publication of *Swann*, we know the fate of Proust's book. *In Search of Lost Time* has not merely survived, it has triumphed and continues to provide its readers with the rejuvenating energy and joy that resides in great works of genius.

Notes

1 *Marcel Proust: Correspondance avec Daniel Halévy*, ed. Anne Borrel and Jean-Pierre Halévy (Paris: Éditions de Fallois, 1992), pp. 42–4.
2 *Letters of Marcel Proust*, trans. and ed., with notes, by Mina Curtiss, with an introduction by Harry Levin (New York: Vintage, 1966), p. 4.
3 See *Pleasures and Days*, trans. by Andrew Brown (London: Hesperus, 2004), p. 3; *Les Plaisirs et les jours* in *Jean Santeuil* précédé de *Les Plaisirs et les jours*, ed. by Pierre Clarac and Yves Sandre (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 3.
4 John Ruskin, *Sésame et les Lys,* preceded by *Sur la lecture*, trans. with notes by Marcel Proust, ed. Antoine Compagnon (Paris: Éditions Complexe, 'Le Regard littéraire', 1987), p. 104, n. 1.
5 *Le Carnet de 1908*, transcribed and edited by Philip Kolb, *Cahiers Marcel Proust*, n. s., 8, (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), p. 141 and n. 61.
6 Proust, *Selected Letters*, trans. by Terence Kilmartin, ed. Philip Kolb (London: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 226. Translation slightly altered.

CHAPTER 2

Correspondence

Luc Fraisse, translated by Lesley Lawn

When readers of *À la recherche* come to examine Proust's correspondence, they are struck by two contradictory facts: on one hand, the considerable size of the task taken on by the editors of the letters and, on the other, the perplexing issue of the importance that might be attributed to these documents. The most extensive edition of the correspondence, completed by Philip Kolb, consists of more than five thousand letters written between 1879 and 1922 by an author who, in the last years of his life, was a total recluse and capable of writing up to eighteen letters in one day. Thanks to this outstanding editorial achievement, the importance of Proust as a letter-writer has been proven beyond doubt. Although more letters or collections of letters come to light quite regularly from various sources (Kolb was of the opinion that he had discovered perhaps only one letter in twenty) the general basis for their publication is henceforth firmly established. On the other hand, the interpretation of the letters is an area that remains largely unexplored, representing for criticism as-yet-uncharted waters.

The publication of Proust's letters

To some extent, the publication of the letters is partly called into question by a ban imposed by the author himself. On one occasion in January 1921, Proust was returning a letter to one of his female correspondents, and expressed in the broadest terms the wish that his letters should not be preserved: 'I insist . . . that no correspondence written by me should be preserved, let alone published' (*Corr*, XX, 35). Such a statement would have carried significant implications if the novelist had followed through his decision. When questioned by myself on the subject, Philip Kolb alluded to the account given by Proust's governess, Céleste Albaret, according to whom a lawyer who was consulted on the matter said that the novelist did