Adam Watt

The Cambridge Introduction to Marcel Proust

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Marcel Proust

Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*, 1913–27) changed the course of modern narrative fiction. This *Introduction* provides an account of Proust's life, the socio-historical and cultural contexts of his work and an assessment of his early works. At its core is a volume-by-volume study of *A la recherche*, which attends to its remarkable superstructure as well as to individual images and the intricacies of Proust's finely stitched prose. The book reaches beyond stale commonplaces of madeleines and memory, alerting readers to Proust's verbal virtuosity, his preoccupations with the fleeting and the unforeseeable, with desire, jealousy and the nature of reality. Lively, informative chapters on Proust criticism and the work's afterlives in contemporary culture provide a multitude of paths to follow; the book charges readers with the energy and confidence to move beyond anecdote and hearsay and to read Proust's novel for themselves.

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For Stace
Mon amour, ma chérie

Contents

Texts and abbreviations

All quotations are taken from the Vintage Classics edition of *In Search of Lost Time* in six volumes, translated by C. K. Scott Moncrieff (except for *Time Regained*, translated by Andreas Mayor and Terence Kilmartin), revised by Terence Kilmartin and D. J. Enright (Vintage, 2000–2). Page references are also provided to the single-volume 'Quarto Gallimard' edition of *A la recherche du temps perdu* which, although it does not have the admirable critical apparatus of Jean-Yves Tadié's four authoritative *Pléiade* volumes (Gallimard, 1987–9), reproduces the same text in handle-able and considerably more affordable format. The following abbreviated forms are incorporated in the text (the roman numerals refer to the Vintage volume numbers):

I	*SW*	*Swann's Way*	*SW*	*Du côté de chez Swann*
II	*BG*	*Within a Budding Grove*	*JF*	*A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*
III	*G*	*The Guermantes Way*	*G*	*Le Côté de Guermantes*
IV	*SG*	*Sodom and Gomorrah*	*SG*	*Sodome et Gomorrhe*
V	*C*	*The Captive*	*P*	*La Prisonnière*
	F	*The Fugitive*	*AD*	*Albertine disparue*
VI	*TR*	*Time Regained*	*TR*	*Le Temps retrouvé*

Where the abbreviated form is the same for both English and French texts, it only figures once, the English page number preceding the French. I have at times modified the Vintage translation (indicated by 'trans. mod.' in the text). References to Proust's essays and shorter writings are taken from *Against Sainte-Beuve and Other Essays*, translated by John Sturrock (Penguin, 1988) and *Contre Sainte Beuve précédé de Pastiches et mélanges et suivi de Essais et articles*, ed. by Pierre Clarac and Yves Sandre (Gallimard, 1971) and are incorporated in the text in the form *ASB* or *CSB*, each followed by page numbers.

All references to Proust's correspondence (abbreviated to '*Corr*', followed by a volume number and page reference) are to the *Correspondance de Marcel Proust*, ed. Philip Kolb, 21 vols. (Plon, 1970–93); translations from the correspondence, and from all other works in French, unless otherwise stated, are my own.

Introduction

By anyone's standards, Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*, 1913–27) is a very long book: seven novels combine into a single overarching narrative, whose multiple strands keep even the most committed readers occupied for months, even years. *Time*, therefore, is an integral part of the enterprise. The story is relatively simple: an individual narrates his life in the first person, seeking to determine what it amounts to and whether he has it in him to become a writer. To read the novel, however, involves relearning our experience of time, not only in the novel's radically unconventional structuring but in its themes and the ways in which it takes over our empty minutes, fills our cramped commuter journeys and our soaks in the bathtub with expansiveness and capaciousness previously unknown in literature. A single evening party stretches out to fill scores of pages; and the fleeting real-time duration of sensations – a smell, a sound – are drawn out and intensified by the onward rush of prose that seeks tirelessly to capture every conceivable contour of human experience. This is not time wasted. It is time revitalized or, rather, it is the novel sensitizing us to literary time and, through this, to a store of experiential riches in the real world that might otherwise pass us by.

The novel's original translator, C. K. Scott Moncrieff, rendered Proust's title as *Remembrance of Things Past*, a phrase borrowed from Shakespeare's Sonnet 30, which begins 'When to the sessions of sweet silent thought/I summon up remembrance of things past'. Moncrieff's title is often still heard, but the voluntary, willed nature of 'summoning' runs counter to the importance granted by Proust to *involuntary* memory; 'Remembrance of Things Past' also loses the original balance between the 'temps perdu' (lost time) of the overall title and the 'temps retrouvé' (time regained) of the final volume. *In Search of Lost Time* was adopted as the novel's English title in 1992 when D. J. Enright revised Terence Kilmartin's 1981 revision of Moncrieff's translation. The *Search*, however, was not Proust's only work. Interested readers can dip their toes, even immerse themselves, in his early writings if they are so minded: the results are mixed, but the overall impression we come away with is that of a writer gradually honing a voice, refining his material and seeking a form that will let one

express the other. Proust's generic experimentation was vitally instructive and the hybridity of his efforts in the determining year between 1908 and 1909 – pastiches, essay, dialogue, novelistic fragments, theoretical reflections on art – was never wholly eradicated from the *magnum opus*, whose corrections were still unfinished when its author wheezed his last shallow breath in 1922.

The *Search* is perhaps the greatest achievement of twentieth-century literary modernity, an improbable feat of individual creativity. It incorporates numerous traits of style and technique of nineteenth-century literature: romantic reflection and self-absorption; realistic accounts of people, places and events; naturalistic studies of genealogy and vice. It also takes in a vast sweep of history and culture, from cave paintings to Carpaccio, Mozart to music hall, Napoleon to Nietzsche and Nijinski, Leonardo to Lloyd George, Socrates to Sévigné. Proust's penchant for Russian doll-like clausal constructions, sentences that sprawl unhurriedly over several pages, sets him apart from his immediate forebears, yet his equally frequent habit of formulating laws and maxims puts one in mind of the seventeenth-century *moralistes* La Bruyère and La Rochefoucauld.

This remarkable stylistic palate and expansive range come to us from a narrator who turns his gaze outwards to the proliferating multiplicities of the material world but just as often looks inwards, at times with increased intensity, at the tensions and traumas, real and imagined, of his own subjectivity. A large measure of Proust's radical modernity stems from the non-linear unfolding of the novel. Prolepsis (anticipation) and analepsis (flashback) are narrative devices familiar to us in film and fiction nowadays but Proust was among the first to use them systematically in structuring a literary work. Using them, as well as subtle, sometimes unmarked shifts in perspective (movements between the Narrator's older and younger selves) in a novel as expansive as the *Search* tests readers to their limits and foregrounds the importance – and the fallibility – of memory, the mental faculty Proust prizes above all else. The result is a reading experience unlike any other in the Western tradition.

Most famously, near the start of the novel the Narrator's childhood, long thought to be a forgotten, and therefore inaccessible, chapter of his past, is recaptured for him as an adult when he tastes a *madeleine*, a small, sweet cake, dipped in lime-blossom tea. This sense experience, far more powerful than any willed act of the mind, revitalizes involuntarily the experience of tasting the same concoction as a child; this memory opens the floodgates and a crucial period of his existence is vividly restored to him.

Also key in the Proustian world are the complex workings of habit. Habit can dampen our senses to the stimuli of the outside world, cocoon us in an

environment that is anodyne, in*habit*able. For Proust's Narrator, an absence of habit brings with it anxiety, uncertainty and fear. Coming to terms with a new environment (such as an unfamiliar room in which he must sleep) requires the Narrator to re-establish from first principles his identity and his relation to the world at large. While with time habit anaesthetizes the hyper-sensitive Narrator to the fears by which he is assailed, a routine existence shaped solely by habit (like that of Aunt Léonie in Combray) is one which threatens to limit his experience of the world and the things in it to a purely superficial level, dictating patterns of behaviour that curtail spontaneity and opportunities for real discovery. As a result the Narrator treads a treacherous path between his fear of being damaged by a complex, threatening world and his unparalleled thirst for knowledge. Whether we seek knowledge of a sonata or a salon, of how our lover finds his or her pleasure or, harder still, of his or her intimate thoughts and desires, we run the risk of ridicule by revealing our ignorance, our vice or our obsession. Worse, we might discover truths we are not equipped to handle, knowledge that with enlightenment brings suffering.

The conception of love and relationships that emerges from the *Search* is a pessimistic one. The Other is unknowable; what we call 'love' is a projection that comes from the self and whose reflection we mistake for reciprocal affection. Desire is all-powerful until the object of desire is possessed; then 'love' withers, our interest diminishing directly as intimacy with the Other increases. Although in the novel satisfaction from relationships is scant and suffering in love is the lot of individuals of every social station, there is in the many of the novel's lovers the same streak of resilience and tenacity that we find in Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, that keeps the embers of optimism aglow: against the odds they go on in the hope that happiness, or at least a cessation of suffering, may yet be near at hand.

The Narrator's compulsive knowledge-seeking together with his fear of the unknown combine to produce one of literature's most engaging and at times infuriating monologists. His urge to understand states of mind, impressions and sensations makes the *Search* a remarkable *roman d'analyse* or psychological novel, a sustained, rhapsodic study in interiority. Yet the Narrator's quest is not only for his own identity and vocation. He seeks an understanding of art, sexuality and worldly and political affairs: he is a snoop and a voyeur; he comments and classifies; his taxonomic impulse makes the novel appear to be a vast compendium, replete with burrowing wasps and bedsteads, military strategies, stereoscopes, asparagus and aeroplanes. The metaphors and analogies the Narrator persistently uses act as conduits between the realms of mind and matter and remind us of the fluidity of their boundaries for the creative artist.

Proust's Narrator is at times an incisive thinker, a virtuoso splitter of intellectual hairs and an accomplished cartographer of the human heart and mind. Frequently, however, his greatest insights come from fumblings in the dark, wrong turns and contingent revelations. He swings between confidence and neurosis, is a dupe and an ignorer of good advice, often because of the blinding force of jealousy. He is a sensitive aesthete seeking affection and happiness who sequesters his beloved and slowly suffocates her with a brutal regime of surveillance and interrogation.

With the caveat that an *Introduction* can never be a substitute for the labour of reading and rereading Proust's work itself, what follows offers a crutch for the weary and a set of access routes for those setting out on the journey for the first time. *In Search of Lost Time* is a unique achievement and reading it is a life-changing process. The novel explores the ragged, shifting nature of subjectivity; it abounds in beauty, intelligence, cruelty and suffering. It is hoped that this volume will stimulate the readerly appetite of those jaded or misled by the much-peddled '*madeleine*-induced bliss', 'cork-lined room' conceptions of Proust and his work. This *Introduction* reminds readers that Proust's novel offers sustenance far longer-lasting, richer and more nourishing than cork or crumbs.