

MONSIEUR PROUST: WHERE DID THE TIME GO?
A Collection Devoted to "À la recherche du temps perdu"
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Some creative artists and works, one loves instantly and forever; for me, these would include Dostoyevsky, Shakespeare, George Eliot, El Greco, Rembrandt, Chopin, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Vladimir Horowitz, Ray Charles, and "All in the Family". Other artists and works may not make as immediate an impact, but later become lifelong, admired companions; in this category, I place Hector Berlioz, Van Gogh, historian H.W. Brands, "Taxi", and Marcel Proust's incomparable "À la recherche du temps perdu", translated variously as "Remembrance of Things Past" and "In Search of Lost Time". M. Proust (1871-1922) profoundly changed my life, thought, and perspective on time in a way unequalled by any other writer of fiction (a close second is George Eliot/Mary Ann Evans, whom he worshipped).

At roughly 4,200 pages and seven volumes, the *Recherche* is the longest novel yet written. It appears that Proust has tried to circumscribe every experience he ever had, every person he ever met, and every emotion he every experienced, within its pages. I had tried to read the old Moncrieff translations several times over the years, but I could never get through even one volume. I assumed that Proust simply eluded me. Later on, after studying the French language and reading other authors in French, I thought I would try Proust in the original. French friends warned me that he was the Mount Everest of authors, and they were right--in the original, the man was beyond me. Just about that time, around 2013, I discovered the new Penguin translations, only four of which were available here in the United States. Somehow, everything 'clicked', and I was transported. I burned through the four volumes in several months, promptly ordered the remaining two from England, and impatiently waited for two months. When the remaining two volumes arrived, I tore through them, barely able to do anything else for two weeks. I read, and reread, taking breaks to digest, then reading constantly for days. All told, I spent 14-18 months with Proust, and it was during this time that I acquired the bulk of the collection. In the several years since, I have steadily acquired more, and bought the latest item, a fresh copy of the old Moncrieff translations, only last week.

Marcel Proust is akin to Mahler in music. Just as Mahler was the consummation of a line that started with J.S. Bach and ran through Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann, Brahms, Wagner, and Bruckner—the quintessence of the Austro-German Symphonic Line—so Proust is the very pinnacle of French literature. He takes in the three great classic playwrights (especially Racine), Madame de Sévigné, Saint-Simon, Balzac's "Comédie Humaine", all the great poets, and all the great essayists, and transmutes them, by the force of his genius, into his own unique gold. As well, Proust has assimilated George Eliot, Dostoyevsky, Ruskin, and Pater; he has drunk deeply from the wells of Rembrandt, El Greco, Vermeer, the Italian Renaissance, the Impressionists, and Greco-Roman architecture.

Proust is also quite quixotic, in that he gives the narrator his own first name, but no last name. Some characters are lifted directly from life (Count Robert de Montesquiou and Baron de Charlus share many characteristics!), while others are amalgams (there were at least three models for the Duchesse de Guermantes). Reams of scholarship have been written, many by M. Tadié, on how much of 'the Narrator' is actually 'Marcel Proust'. As well, Proust plays with time and memory and forgetting and re-remembering in an unparalleled way. He is the literary equivalent of the theory of relativity, and one can feel time bending much as Einstein described it, at speeds faster than the speed of light.

At St. John's, we look at the text *qua* text, and attempt to learn it from the inside out, yet I am continually fascinated by the question of the importance (or unimportance, as the case may be) of an artist's life to his work. Proust had very strong opinions on this last question, and entered into a famous literary debate with the critic Sainte-Beuve. Sainte-Beuve felt that one must investigate an artist's personal life in order to really understand his art, whereas Proust believed only the work was relevant. Ironic, for this most autobiographical of authors! Despite my new literary best friend's protestations to the contrary, I wanted to know as much about him as possible. Was he someone whose life truly had no bearing on his work, like Mozart, or someone in whom the two were intimately interrelated, like Shostakovich? Who were his parents? Was he an anomaly in his family? Who were his influences, and whom did he influence?

Of the major biographies, George Painter's gives the most compelling portrait of Proust's early years, although Painter is somewhat transparently Freudian. The Carter biography is a bit too focused on prurient interests, but is thorough enough. Jean-Yves Tadié, who, it is fair to say, probably knows more about Proust than anyone living, has written the standard research biography. The Tadié, and its bibliography, is dense, comprehensive, and thorough. However, I am most impressed with the little biography by novelist Edmund White, who captures the essence of Proust in a mere 165 pages. Proust never wrote an autobiography *per se*, but his longtime housekeeper and confidante, Celeste Albaret, wrote a heartfelt memoir, "Monsieur Proust". The *Recherche* is hard going at times, and there are several guides to it; the best, in my opinion, is Roger Shattuck's "Proust's Way: A Field Guide". After the first volume, Mr. Shattuck was my Beatrice. Everyone in Proust's epic, from the servants to the aristocrats, reads, and Anka Muhlstein's wonderful "Proust's Library" is a study of how Proust's deep and comprehensive reading shaped him. Visual art was extremely important to Proust, and references to it abound. Therefore, Eric Karpeles' "Paintings in Proust", a work of art in itself, is an absolutely essential companion piece; it contains beautiful reproductions of every painting Proust mentions. Music was no less important to Proust, and is no less important in the novel, and here Jean-Jacques Nattiez fills in any gaps in our musical understanding in "Proust as Musician".

Ultimately, *pace* Proust, I believe my reading of the *Recherche* was enhanced by my deep affection for the man and his life, and I do believe a certain degree of

biographical knowledge is essential to understanding this author. (For example, the fact that he wrote the whole thing while quite ill, barely able to breathe much of the time, confined to a cork-lined room in his Paris apartment, makes his achievement all the more remarkable.) Nevertheless, I confess that my reaction to this allegedly most high-minded and intellectual of epic novels was quite visceral. I was working as a freelance musician and miraculously had two weeks free. Good thing--Proust pulled me in completely. I did not practice piano or voice or watch television. I did not eat or sleep enough—normally not an issue! I spoke to my partner, mother, and closest friend only. Many nights, I fell asleep on the couch and woke up with the book splayed out on the floor. When I finally reached the end of “Time Regained”, I felt a great exhilaration but also a great sadness. (This had happened only once before, with Eliot’s “Middlemarch”). I could not restrain my tears. As I am not a big crier, my partner was awakened, and came shuffling out at 4:00 a.m., thinking someone had died. I had the book pressed to my chest, and kept saying, “I don’t want to leave his world. I don’t want to leave these people. I don’t want to leave him.”

I had to leave Proust, didn’t I? I had a life. But for almost six months *he* did not leave *me*. I felt I was carrying him and his characters and his narrator (is it him, or a different person, or both simultaneously?) around like a radiant cloud, a Belle Epoque force field. I practiced, I ate and slept normally, I worked, I talked to people—but Proust & Co. were always right there, through a veil as thin as that between the living and the dead in El Greco’s “Burial of Count Orgaz”. Eventually, the cloud lifted, and the force field became less intense, but Proust had imprinted himself on my soul. I cannot speak highly enough of his rarefied, time-bending, passionate, Gallic, melancholic, humorous, shocking, unpredictable, beautiful world; nor of his eight-dimensional characters. I would be remiss if I did not share one passage, which haunted me for weeks:

Near the church we met Legrandin, who was coming in the opposite direction escorting the same lady to her carriage. He passed close to us, did not break off his conversation with his neighbor, and from the corner of his blue eye gave us a little sign that was in some way interior to his eyelid and which, not involving the muscles of his face, could go perfectly unnoticed by the lady he was talking to; but seeking to compensate by intensity of feeling for the somewhat narrow field in which he had circumscribed its expression, in the azure corner assigned to us he set sparkling all the liveliness of a grace that exceeded playfulness, bordered on mischievousness; he overrefined the subtleties of amiability into winks of connivance, insinuations, innuendos, the mysteries of complicity; and finally exalted his assurances of friendship into protestations of affection, into a declaration of love, illuminating for us alone, at that moment, with a secret languor invisible to the lady, a love-smitten eye in a face of ice.

--*Swann’s Way*, tr. Lydia Davis (2002)

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For many years the only translations available in English; as I said above, Proust did not 'click' for me until I read the Penguin translations; now, I see the beauty and value in the old Moncrieff/Kilmartin as well.
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Best introductory biography, and a mere 165 pages! A tribute from one novelist to another. Charming, concise, and thought-provoking.