A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

Marcel Proust
SWANN'S WAY

THE MONCRIEFF TRANSLATION
CONTEXTS
CRITICISM

Edited by

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Swann's First Critic: A Confidential Report, 1912†

Report by Jacques Madeleine (pseudonym of the poet Jacques Normand, 1848–1931), reader for the publisher Eugène Fasquelle. This long forgotten and illuminating document, in the possession of Fasquelle's heirs, was communicated to the eminent Proust scholar, Henri Bonnet, who published it in *Le Figaro littéraire*, 8 December 1966, p. 15.

The first version of Proust's novel was to be called *Les Intermittences du coeur* set out in two volumes as *Le Temps perdu* and *Le Temps retrouvé* which he described in 1912 in a letter to Fasquelle (*Corr.* XI, p. 257). The part examined by Madeleine was *Le Temps perdu* corresponding basically, in spite of the difference of names given to some characters, to the present *Du côté de chez Swann* and part of *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*. Madeleine's bewilderment, especially at the impressionism and analysis that characterize the text, reflects certain reactions that are still evident in some readers today. However, he does make occasional slight concession to originality which comes through in spite of comments that clearly show him looking for the wrong things and missing the impact of what now are among the most widely known and admired pages.

At the end of the seven hundred and twelve pages of this manuscript (seven hundred and twelve at least, because lots of pages have numbers graced with a, b, c, d,)—after the utter depression of seeming to drown in fathomless complications and after irritating feelings of impatience at never being able to surface—the reader has simply no idea of what it's all about. What is all this for? What does all this mean? Where is it leading to?—It's impossible to make head or tail of it! It's impossible to comment on it!

The letter attached to the manuscript provides some clarification. But the reader of the volume would not have the letter to consult.

The letter concedes that nothing happens in these seven hundred pages, that no action is entered upon, or at least only in the last sixty pages, and in a manner that could not be perceived by anyone who has not been forewarned. For the intended character does nothing more than show his face, hidden furthermore by the mask of an outward appearance which is the opposite of what he is revealed to

be later. And how could you know it was him? . . . No one will ever guess it!

The whole of the first part, says the letter, is only a 'preparation', a 'poetic overture'. A volume that is longer than one of the longest novels of Zola is surely excessive as preparation. And even more unfortunate, this preparation does not prepare anything, indeed, does not even bring to our attention what the letter, the letter alone, tells us will follow. Even with the information given by the letter we are constantly asking: Why all this? What's the connection? Just what is it all about?

What we have here is in fact a clearly defined pathological case.

The only way to get the measure of it (which is easy) and the only way to give some idea of the work (which is not so easy) is to follow the author step by step, groping along like the blind man one is obliged to be.

The first part falls naturally into three sections: *Twenty Stories! Pages 1–17.* A gentleman is suffering from insomnia. He turns over in his bed, he goes over and over impressions and hallucinations in a half-wakeful state including some that bring back to him the difficulties he had in falling asleep, as a little boy, in his room in the family's country house at Combray. Seventeen pages! where one sentence (bottom of page 4 and page 5) is forty-four lines long and where you lose your foothold. . . .

Pages 17–74. A little boy is unable to go to sleep as long as his mother has not come to kiss him in his bed. She does not come when they have people to dinner. One of these 'people' is M. Vington. Several pages on M. Vington whom we shall never see again. Another of these 'people' is M. Swann. M. Swann is a close friend of the Comte de Chambord and the Prince of Wales; but he keeps these connections in high places secret, and is treated patronizingly by the very bourgeois family of the little boy. There is talk of a Mme de Villeparisis, a close relative of Maréchal de MacMahon, at whose house Swann frequently dines. There are lots of pages given over to these two persons, then to the old servant, Françoise. . . . And all the while we get the analysis of the case of the little boy who cannot go to sleep as long as his mother. . . .

Eventually we come to the end of the memories of childhood which lead back to the gentleman's bouts of insomnia.

P. 75–82. But this same character dips a cake into a cup of tea, and behold a quite new spurt of memories surges up.

P. 82–221. This time it's Combray. It's aunt Léonie who for years has not left her bedroom, then her bed and is now dead. She keeps abreast of the village gossip through old Françoise and a religious girl called Eulalie; she impatiently puts up with the nattering of Monsieur le Curé. There is a digression on an uncle, Charles. Another

interminable one on old pictures. Another on a school-friend, Bloch, who admires a great contemporary writer called Bergotte who could pass for Barrès in certain parts of the description given.—Then a Monsieur Legrandin whom we meet coming out of mass and will not meet again in the whole book for all that he is discussed over and over in a very large number of pages. Then a noble family and a noble lady called Guermantes on whose account we hear the author go into endless finicky detail. Then Swann comes back, rather frowned on because no one can receive the woman of tarnished reputation he has married. Then it's a question again of M. Vington, whose death we hear about. And we are present (p. 187–190) at a sadistic scene where Mille Vington, before yielding to the embraces of a 'woman friend', becomes excited as she gives her a portrait of this dead father for her to spit on. Then, once again, the Duchesse de Guermantes.

At last the first part comes to an end here. It alone would make a volume of average size. We have here the memories and the whole childhood of the character who narrates, interrupted by thousands of subtle disquisitions and encumbered with twenty stories full of people who for the most part will not recur. . . .

As for any idea where all this is leading to, that's quite another question.

New Elements

This story, covering two hundred pages, retails facts already dating back fifteen years, which were previously told to the little boy and which now the grown man remembers in improbable detail.

Monsieur and Madame Verdurin have a salon the main adornments of which are Doctor Cottard and his wife, a little pianist and his aunt, a painter and a few other puppet figures. They entertain a lady of ill repute, Odette de Crécy, who brings Swann, already getting on in years, to see them. Swann is in love with Odette, who is quite prepared to be kept by him and achieves this without Swann (who in the meantime is giving her from three to ten thousand francs a year) coming to terms with the idea that he is in fact maintaining her. Meanwhile he reads the situation differently, viz. that he is being outrageously deceived. He is even completely dropped and still goes on paying out.

Eventually, when all the facts have been made plain to him and he has, what is more, realized that he did not like Odette de Crécy and she 'was not his type', he leaves her.

At least the reader thinks he leaves her. But it appears it was not the case. For in the childhood memories of the first part we have seen Swann married many a long year to Odette de Crécy, having fathered a little girl called Gilberte.