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A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

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Marcel Proust  
SWANN'S WAY



THE MONCRIEFF TRANSLATION  
CONTEXTS  
CRITICISM

*Edited by*

SUSANNA LEE  
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY



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## Swann's First Critic: A Confidential Report, 1912<sup>†</sup>

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

<sup>†</sup> From *Marcel Proust: The Critical Heritage*, edited by Leighton Hodson (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 75–81. Reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis Books UK.

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. Vinton. Several pages on M. Vinton 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. Vingtou, whose death we hear about. And we are present (p. 187–190) at a sadistic scene where Mille Vingtou, 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.

Put like this the story seems relatively simple. But in the manuscript it is interrupted by as many further unrelated incidents and cluttered with as many further unbelievable complications as we have seen in the first part. Here's a sentence from it. (p. 302):

'In the army . . . I had a friend that the gentleman reminded me of a bit. Take any old subject, I don't know, say, this glass, he could rattle on about it for hours, no, not about the glass, which of course is silly, but about the battle of Waterloo, anything you like and as he went along he could come out with things you would never have thought of.'

Isn't the author afraid we might apply it to him?

One would be sorely tempted! 'For hours . . . about this glass, or about the battle of Waterloo . . . as he goes along he brings out things you would never have thought of' . . . i.e. things which, to be fair, are not any sort of thoughts, but new ones, sharp, full of observation and insight, aimed at you, however, 'for hours as he goes along his road', in other words without your ever seeing where his road is leading you.

Furthermore, this sentence happens to be typical of all the other sentences. It is full of all the confusion, all the complexity that is already evident just in the letter attached to the manuscript and this makes reading unbearable beyond five or six pages.

And the 'rattling on' gets into everything. Swann happens, on one occasion, to go 'into society'. And this goes on for thirty pages (369 to 401). And there are three pages on the flunkeys lined up on the staircase and suggesting 'the predellas of San Zeno and the frescoes of the Eremitani . . . Albrecht Dürer . . . the Staircase of the Gaints in the Ducal Palace . . . Benvenuto Cellini . . . the watch-towers of a castle keep or cathedral . . . etc. etc.' As much again about each guest. . . . And there's no end to it, it's sheer madness.

There are some tiresome preparatory sections of this kind at the beginning of Balzac's novels. But once the characters are planted, that's it. The characters act. And they are characters.

Here it's nothing of the sort. Swann now goes somewhat into the background. If there is something useful in all this hotchpotch one would really like to know what purpose he, Swann, does serve or what he represents. Certainly, we shall not be spared his presence in the third part. And we cannot entertain the hope that he will not crop up again in the second manuscript. Meanwhile, we know from the letter that he will not be the main character and that he will only be able to play an episodic role.—What is more serious is that we have no means of knowing what part this fellow who has been

sending us to sleep for so long with his memories and speculative musings will have in it.

*Everyone Goes Away*

P. 422–436. Fourteen pages on Bricquebec, where there is a church in Persian style, on Venice, on Florence. . . .

P. 436–471. On the Champs-Élysées and the public conveniences. In the Champs-Élysées the little boy plays with some little girls, including Gilberte, daughter of Swann and Odette de Crécy; she fills the little boy's heart with a great passion.

P. 472–520. Concerns M. de Norpois, or de Montfort, diplomat. And the little boy goes to see a Sarah Bernhardt-type actress called La Borma. There is talk of Swann's marriage. Then a piece on the great writer, Bergotte.

P. 521–528. Concerns La Borma.

P. 529–569. Continuation of the story of the little boy and Gilberte in the Champs-Élysées. Then the little boy is invited to the Swanns', first to the children's tea-parties given by the young lady for the little girls who are her friends, then to the private apartments of Mme Swann, who arouses a very special feeling in the little boy. The parents in the meantime keep out of each other's sight. The little boy joins in all the outings. He meets up with the famous Bergotte.

After this, we will not, for the time being at least, hear any more about a single one of all these previous characters—not one, no more about Swann, Gilberte or Bergotte than any of the others—except for the appearance, incidentally for no special reason, of a Mme de Villeparisis about whom there has been vague, though long-winded, talk five hundred pages earlier.

P. 569–655. The little boy goes to Bricquebec with his grandmother. Interminable psychologizing on the journey, the hotel room, the church in Persian style, the guests at dinner, the excursions in Mme de Villeparisis' carriage etc. etc. etc.

P. 656–672. A nephew of Mme de Villeparisis, called sometimes M. de Beauvais and sometimes M. de Montargis, comes to Bricquebec and develops a close friendship with the little boy (incidentally, how old is this little boy? We're never told).

P. 672–675. The arrival of a brother or brother-in-law of Mme de Villeparisis is announced. His Christian name is Palamède; he has possibly a princely title; he goes by the name of Baron de Fleurus or de Charlus. We are given his portrait. We hear that he has given a thrashing to a 'homosexual' who had propositioned him.

P. 675–690. The Baron de Fleurus arrives. He is strange and disconcerts the little boy by his manner. He disappears.

P. 691–706. The intimate friendship of the little boy and Montargis continues. Then Montargis goes away.

P. 706–712. A few more pages on the stay at Bricquebec. Then everyone goes away. And page 712 is the last; why this page rather than any other one?

### *Curious and Out of All Proportion*

The author concedes that his first volume could end at page 633. There's nothing lost and nothing gained, after all, give or take eighty pages out of the whole number . . . !

And again all this could be reduced by half, by three quarters or by nine tenths. Besides, there's no reason why the author should not have extended his manuscript to twice or ten times its length. Given the procedure he favours of 'rattling on for hours, as you go on your way', writing twenty volumes is as normal as stopping at one or two.

Taking all in all, what have we got here?

For someone with no outside knowledge it's the study of a sickly, abnormally nervous little boy whose sensitivity, impressionable nature and reflective subtlety are in a state of irritation.

It's often of curious interest. But too long, out of all proportion. In fact one could say that you will not find a reader strong enough to stay with it more than a quarter of an hour, especially since the author does not help with the nature of his sentences—which leak all over the place.

And then what indeed do the endless stories of aunt Léonie, uncle Charles, M. Legrandin and many more matter to the study of the sickly little boy? or the quite separate story of M. Swann? This has no influence on the little boy's abnormal condition.

Yet that's all that anyone who perseveres to the end of the present manuscript can see in it.

But are we alerted in the letter as to the subject the author claims to deal with in the second volume or even in the two volumes?

It's hardly worth taking into account the very brief and misleading appearance of the future 'homosexual', Baron de Fleurus.

There remains one question that has to be put: is the little boy eventually destined to be just what the Baron de Fleurus is looking for? There seems to be nothing in the study to indicate it. The letter only mentions a concierge and a pianist.

If the little boy does not become a homosexual what is the point of the whole book? If he does—and we ought to hope so for logic's sake—the study is justified, but there is for all that an unbelievable lack of proportion.

Certainly—provided you persevere for a while with the reading—there are in the detail of the text many things of curious, even



outstanding interest, and the work cannot be accused of insignificance or lack of solid worth.

In the work as a whole, indeed, and even in each unit taken on its own it is impossible not to see here an extraordinary intellectual phenomenon.

### Élie-Joseph Bois and Proust's Defence of *Swann*<sup>†</sup>

Extracts from an article on *Swann*, *Le Temps*, 13 November 1913.

Élie-Joseph Bois (1878–1941), journalist and literary reviewer of the newspaper *Le Temps*, introduces *Swann* with high praise the day before its publication and goes on to quote an interview with Proust in which he is presented for the first time as the inaccessible invalid of popular mythology. Proust attempts to forestall misunderstanding by a vindication of his style, method of work, and aesthetic.

*A la recherche du temps perdu*—This enigmatic title belongs to a novel, the first volume of which is about to appear and concerning which considerable curiosity has been aroused. A fair number of pages have been privately circulated and those privileged to read them speak about them with nothing but enthusiasm. This anticipatory success is often an advantage, but sometimes an obstacle. I cannot say what tomorrow's public opinion will be, whether it will, as I have heard it said, hail this first volume of *A la recherche du temps perdu* as a masterpiece . . . however, I barely take any risk at all in predicting that it will leave none of its readers indifferent. It will perhaps disconcert some. *Du côté de chez Swann* is not to be described as light reading for a train journey, to be merely glanced at while the reader skips pages; it is an original work, rather strange, profound, requiring the reader's whole attention, even demanding it utterly. It is surprising, gripping, disorientating and overwhelming. As for action—the kind usually found in most novels, that carries you along, with some degree of excitement, through a string of adventures till you reach the tragic dénouement—there is none. And yet action there is, but its strings are, as it were, discreetly hidden with an almost exaggerated concern and it is up to us, as we breathlessly follow it, to realize that we are emotionally overwhelmed by the development of the characters who, in situation after situation, have been etched with a pitiless pen. It is a psychological novel, but I do not know many psychological novels where the psychological analysis has been more profoundly pursued. . . .

<sup>†</sup> From *Marcel Proust: The Critical Heritage*, edited by Leighton Hodson (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 82–85. Reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis Books UK.