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Marcel Proust

The Prisoner

Translated with an Introduction
and Notes by Carol Clark

GENERAL EDITOR:
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PENGUIN BOOKS

Introduction

The Prisoner is the first part of what is often called the *roman d'Albertine*, the Albertine novel, an intense, two-handed story of love and jealousy set within the larger social fresco of *In Search of Lost Time*. This novel-within-a-novel did not form part of Proust's original plan for the work, but the idea for it seems to have come to him in 1913, and to have occupied more and more of his writing time between then and his death in 1922. The "prisoner" is Albertine Simonet, a young woman whom the narrator first sees at the seaside at Balbec in the second part of *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*. Then in her late teens, she is the lively, indeed almost rowdy, ring-leader of a group of young girls referred to as "*la petite bande*," the little gang, who fly around the resort on their bicycles and dominate the beach and promenade with their racy style. The narrator also meets her at the studio of the painter Elstir. She does not appear in the next volume, *The Guermantes Way*, Part I, and only briefly in *The Guermantes Way*, Part II, when she visits the narrator in Paris, at a time when he is wholly preoccupied with another young woman, Mme de Stermaria. In the second part of *Sodom and Gomorrah*, however, the narrator returns to Balbec, meets Albertine again and begins to think that he is in love with her. He goes into society with her, notably into the Verdurin circle at its summer quarters at La Raspelière, introducing her as his cousin. His is a complicated and reluctant love, however: he is fascinated by the whole "little gang," and wonders intermittently whether he would not do better to love a different member of it, Andrée; also he suspects the girls, and particularly Albertine and Andrée, of being attracted to each other, and even of having lesbian relations. His love really

takes hold only when he has a conversation with Albertine in the little stopping train (the "slowcoach" or "tram") which winds its way along the coast, and learns from her that when even younger she was a close associate of Mlle Vinteuil and her friend, whom he knows to be lesbians. He feels a desperate need to keep Albertine away from these dangerous contacts, and, convincing her of his deep unhappiness (for which he supplies a false motive), he persuades her to come and live for the time being in his family's apartment in Paris where he can keep a constant watch on her. He also holds out the prospect of marriage to her, and briefly believes in it himself: indeed, the final words of *Sodom and Gomorrah*, addressed by the narrator to his mother, are "*il faut absolument que j'épouse Albertine*" (I absolutely must marry Albertine). Thus from the beginning his love is grounded in jealousy and a project of control.

The opening of *The Prisoner* finds Albertine and the narrator living in the family apartment, watched over only by the old family servant Françoise, since the narrator's mother is detained in their home village of Combray by the illness of an aunt. The story is told exclusively from the narrator's point of view and we are never allowed to learn of Albertine's reactions to his behavior toward her: like him, we can only guess at them. Indeed, nowhere in the whole work are we given any fully reliable information about Albertine, apart from her name, family situation (she is an orphan, brought up by an aunt, Mme Bontemps), build and coloring (tall, plumpish, dark). Most strikingly, we do not learn, any more than the narrator does, whether she is exclusively lesbian in her tastes, or indeed actively lesbian at all. Indeed, what does "being lesbian" mean to the narrator? He sees lesbians everywhere, and attributes to them a kind of promiscuous, predatory sexual behavior (see, for example, p. 334) which, nowadays at least, we are told is not at all characteristic of female homosexuals.

But against the narrator's image of a vicious Albertine, Proust allows the reader to set his or her own image, formed from Albertine's kindly actions (beginning with her agreement, at the end of *Sodom and Gomorrah*, to

leave Balbec and come to Paris to comfort the narrator), and above all her speech. Her rather slangy language with its simple sentence constructions (all the more striking by contrast with the narrator's highly complex written style) establishes her as a modern girl, emancipated for the period, not very reflective, affectionate, fond of the narrator but (it seems) genuinely unable to follow the tortuous pathways of his jealous thinking. A healthy, outdoor girl—golfer, cyclist—who says what she thinks: on the face of it the most unsuitable of matches for an aesthete—indoor, sedentary, physically frail—like the narrator. Can a girl like this really be the sexually rapacious incorrigible liar that the narrator imagines?

It is true that at the time of the action (not precisely specified but before 1914) middle- and upper-class young girls were strictly chaperoned and never allowed to be alone with young men: in such circumstances sexual contacts between girls might have been commoner than they would be today. Very late in the story (p. 380) the narrator admits the possibility that the young Albertine might have had sexual contact with other girls while seeing in this only "*des jeux avec une amie,*" games with a friend, and believing that the moral crime of "being a lesbian" was something different. As well as a tragedy of possessive love, *The Prisoner* is also a dreadful comedy of misunderstanding.

Yet it is not the straightforward kind of ironic fiction (like, say, the first part of John Fowles's *The Collector*) in which the reader's sympathy goes to the narrator's victim rather than to the narrator himself. For a start the narrator—what Proust called "*le monsieur qui dit je*"—is at least double: he is the (presumably) middle-aged, older-and-wiser character who is telling the story in the past tense and who shares reflections with the reader about love, jealousy, the characteristic behavior of men and women and so forth, and also the very young man living through the episode with Albertine: his speech is presumably meant to reproduce that of the young man. The way the story is told suggests that a reader's sympathies are expected to lie largely with the male character, even though, in his youthful incarnation, he is

sometimes presented in a mildly comic light. In the many generalizations about how "we" feel in our dealings with "them," "we" are always men and "they" women. Yet Proust had close women friends, and must have hoped for many female readers for his book: how are women to take these generalizations, and the narrator's behavior?

Albertine cannot be seen as a character of equal weight with the narrator, even in *The Prisoner*, since for about half of its duration she is offstage, and, for the greater part of that time, forgotten. The narrator returns into Paris artistic society for a long musical evening at the Verdurins' (pp. 190-331) and the dramatic focus of this part of the book is the relationship between the Baron de Charlus, an elderly homosexual who has played an increasingly important role in previous volumes, and his protégé Morel, the violinist, who is finally persuaded to reject him publicly. If the book's subject were simply the narrator's "imprisonment" of Albertine then all this part would be irrelevant. But it is not: the *roman d'Albertine* is inextricably involved with the larger novel's themes of time, memory, art, social and class relationships, fashion, snobbery, and human irrationality generally. More specifically, it is located almost from the beginning within the world of "unnatural" sexuality: the hero's love develops in *Sodom and Gomorrah*, and it is in the company of M. de Charlus that he spends the evening preceding the climactic quarrel that opens the last part of the book. Indeed, his return home is delayed by a lengthy discussion with the Baron and Brichot, the elderly don, about homosexuality from ancient Greece to the present day.

There is a temptingly easy explanation for the preponderance of this theme: Proust himself was a homosexual. Though he never admitted his orientation in his writings, it was an open secret among his Parisian friends, and the topic has been extensively explored by biographers since his death. From this it was a short step to interpreting the relationships in his novels as disguised versions of homosexual relationships in his life. As the joke went, "In Proust, you have to understand that all the girls are boys." In particular, *The Prisoner* was seen as a rewriting of Proust's relationship with his chauffeur Alfred Agostinelli, to whom he undoubtedly had a strong, possessive

attachment and with whom—though this is not certain—he may have had sexual relations. A certain amount of trivial gender reassignment does seem to be going on in *The Prisoner*: it is very curious that in the narrator's Paris all the young people who bring goods to the house and whom he watches from the window, and all messengers except telegram boys, are girls: were there no delivery-boys in Paris in 1900? But one really cannot accept Albertine as a chauffeur in a wig. The narrator is too obviously fascinated by her very femininity: her shape and coloring, her clothes, hair, speech, pursuits, her relationship to other women (and also, alas, other more stereotyped traits like her impulsiveness, fickleness and economy with the truth). Proust had several close emotional friendships with women, and seems to have been particularly fascinated by young girls. It is almost as if in this book he is conducting a thought-experiment, trying to imagine what it would be like to have such a being sharing one's living-space.

The narrator's physical relations with Albertine are shrouded in a mystery only partly explained by the conventions of what was and was not publishable in 1923. They have separate rooms, but clearly spend part of many nights in each other's beds. They appear not to have penetrative sex (Albertine says that they are not "really" lovers, p. 85), but see each other naked and caress each other in a clearly sexual way, using sexual language to excite each other (p. 324). There is a thinly veiled description of the narrator reaching orgasm next to Albertine (but without her help) (p. 63) and it is suggested that she sometimes does so with his help (p. 74). At the end of the book, when they are increasingly at odds, Albertine withdraws sexual favors ("[I was] no longer receiving from her even the physical pleasures that I valued," p. 385). All this can be explained in commonsense terms by the fact that Albertine is an unmarried girl and the narrator wishes to keep open the possibility of her marrying someone else: he would not therefore wish to take her virginity. But it is an additional irony that the "shameful" practices the narrator imputes to Albertine and her friends and the ones in which he himself engages with her should be so similar. Strange, too, is the way that throughout a relationship of considerable intimacy, the young people go on calling each other *vous*

(the formal, polite mode of address) and not the *tu* which would be expected between lovers. This strangeness, and perhaps Albertine's wish for a closer relationship, are pointed up when she signs a note to the narrator "*Toute à vous, ton Albertine.*"

The Prisoner is a strange mixture of the improbable and the painfully realistic. A man's story of his carnal passion for a woman, written by a man who had probably never experienced such a passion, its plot rests on two large implausibilities: first, Albertine's presence in the narrator's house, and second, the narrator's almost limitless financial resources. At the time of the action no family with any pretensions to respectability would have allowed its unmarried daughter or ward to live unchaperoned under a man's roof as Albertine does here. We see Proust acknowledging this difficulty on p. 39:

"A young dressmaker go into society?" you will say, "how improbable." If you stop to think, it was no more unlikely than that Albertine should formerly have come to see me at midnight and should now be living with me. And that would perhaps have been improbable in anyone else, but not at all in Albertine . . .

His solution is to present Mme Bontemps as an almost unbelievably neglectful guardian, who tolerates Albertine's irregular behavior in the hope that she will marry a rich man, some of whose money will then find its way to the aunt. But this is not convincing: a family like the narrator's would be less, not more, likely to agree to their son's marrying a girl if her family had been so lax as to allow her to live with him beforehand. And once devalued by her association with the narrator, Albertine would find it more difficult to catch another husband.

In any case, how rich is the narrator? He thinks he can hold on to Albertine until he is ready to leave her by showering gifts upon her: couture dresses, furs, jewelry. He keeps a car and chauffeur (in some passages, a carriage and coachman) so as to send her on daily supervised outings, and even talks of buying a yacht for her: not a small sailing-boat but presumably a steam yacht,

as it is to have living quarters equipped with English furniture and French eighteenth-century silver! It is difficult to imagine such riches in the hands of the young son of an upper-middle-class professional family such as the narrator's seems to be, and Proust's own family was. The origin of his fortune is left unclear. Mention is made of a legacy from an aunt, but we have already met the narrator's aunts in *The Way by Swann's* and seen the modest way in which they live. Also, we have already been told in *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower* that the narrator, when hardly more than a schoolboy, was already squandering his aunt's legacy, selling a Chinese vase to buy flowers for the girl with whom he was then in love, and parting with his aunt's silver so as to send daily baskets of orchids to the girl's mother. The mother's response is to say that if she were the narrator's father, she would assign him a *conseil judiciaire*, a legal trustee with complete control over his fortune. (Baudelaire's family, among others, had already taken this step.) But, though we are never told that the narrator's father has died, he plays no role whatever in *The Prisoner*. The narrator's mother from time to time expresses anxiety about his extravagance, but to no effect.

Even quite a modest legacy will buy a good many orchids; a yacht suggests a completely different level of affluence. But practical considerations of money, which would be at the center of a novel by Balzac or Zola, seem to be of little importance here. Again, one feels that Proust is carrying out a thought experiment: let there be a young man M and a girl A, living in apartment F. Let the money available to M be infinite . . .

If we accept the terms of the experiment, however, we shall find that the relationship and its developments are worked out in the most careful and convincing psychological detail. Obsession, dependence, revolt, wishful thinking, despair: the whole spectrum of human irrationality is explored by a supremely rational and analytical narrator, none of whose reason or power of analysis offers him the least protection against his propensity to "make a hell in heaven's despite." The question of sexual orientation becomes irrelevant: anyone can read the account of the narrator's "love" for Albertine with a shudder of recognition.

Reading the book is not a penance, however; indeed it is often extremely funny. The closet drama between the narrator and Albertine (almost all of the scenes between them take place in enclosed spaces, his or her bedroom, the back of the car or carriage) alternates with large scenes for many characters, notably the Verdurins' music party, around which the narration travels as a film camera would do, stopping for a moment to eavesdrop on one small group or other, or simply focusing on a visual "shot"—Mme Verdurin sleeping through the music, for example, with her little dog under her chair, or M. de Charlus silencing the fashionable audience with an imperious glare. The sequences at Mme de Guermantes's and Mme Verdurin's offer a wider comic panorama of human folly, but all of it, from the Duc de Guermantes's offended pride to Mme Verdurin's pretension and the hubris of M. de Charlus, is still grounded in what Charlus's famous ancestor, the Duc de la Rochefoucauld, would have called *amour-propre*, self-regard. Yet it is in the Vanity Fair of Mme Verdurin's party, surrounded by this supporting cast of more or less likable grotesques, that the narrator has an intimation, through the music of Vinteuil's septet, of the possibility of escaping human pettiness and finding a kind of salvation through art. This new faith in art will be the concluding theme of his final volume, *Finding Time Again*.

On a less elevated plane, what seems above all to make the narrator's life worth while is the simple sensory experience of living: variations in the weather, the sound of street cries, the sight of landscapes, architecture or human features, even—perhaps especially—those of people he does not know. He can appreciate all these better, it seems, in the absence of the person with whom he is in love, or indeed of any person he knows well, or who knows him. The excitement of freedom and the joy of one's own company are among the strongest themes of *The Prisoner*.

When Proust died in November 1922 only *The Way by Swann's*, *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, *The Guermantes Way* and *Sodom and Gomorrah* had been published; *The Prisoner*, *The Fugitive* and *Finding Time Again* were still

in manuscript. But the phrase "in manuscript" gives a wholly inadequate idea of the task facing his original editors. Proust composed by an immensely complex process of writing and rewriting, weaving together passages sometimes composed years apart, filling his margins with additions and, when the margins ran out, continuing on strips of paper glued to the pages. (Some of the most memorable passages in *The Prisoner*, the death of Bergotte, for example, appear for the first time only in these last-minute "paperoles.") After a time he would have a clean copy typed, but this by no means marked the end of the rewriting process, which might continue to the proof stage and beyond. As he never saw proofs of *The Prisoner*, the only thing of which we can be certain is that, had he lived to sign the *bon à tirer* (ready to print), the book would have been considerably different from the one we have now. All editions of it are based on three typescripts held in the Bibliothèque Nationale (now Bibliothèque de France) in Paris: the first quarter of the first typescript had been corrected by Proust before his death and further clean copies made, but it had not yet been given the *bon à tirer*. Consequently his first editors, the novelist and essayist Jacques Rivière and the author's brother Robert Proust, had to correct the rest and establish a text as best they could. Later editors, Pierre Clarac and Andre Ferré for the editions de la Pléiade in 1954 and Jean-Yves Tadié (general editor) and Pierre-Edmond Robert (for *The Prisoner*) for the same house in 1988, have relied on the same typescripts, supplemented by an increasing quantity of manuscript material which has become available as collectors have died and left it, or their heirs have sold it, to the Bibliothèque Nationale. The distinguishing characteristic of the 1988 edition, from which this translation is made, is the inclusion of a large number of *esquisses*, preliminary sketches for passages which the assiduous reader can compare with the versions adopted for the main text. The Pléiade editions are scholarly in a way the original edition was not. Rivière and Robert Proust were more concerned to produce a readable text which would please critics and buyers, and so they ironed out a considerable number of inconsistencies and, as they thought, faults of style which the later editors have reinstated.

In the case of Proust, such editorial decisions are much more difficult to make than one might suppose. His composition is very rarely linear or chronological: most of the events described take place in a timeless or repetitive past indicated by the use of the imperfect tense: only from time to time is an episode narrated in the past historic, indicating that it happened only once. (These alternative past tenses present a real problem to the translator.) In one paragraph the narrator can be years older than in the preceding one or, for that matter, younger. (Evelyn Waugh noticed this and facetiously complained to John Betjeman: "Well, the chap was plain barmy. He never tells you the age of the hero and on one page he is being taken to the W.C. in the Champs-Élysées by his nurse & the next page he is going to a brothel. Such a lot of nonsense" (letter, February 1948).) Characters can be both masculine and effeminate (M. de Charlus), odious and kind (the Verdurins), corrupt and conscientious. For most of the time this is deliberate. Proust may be showing the passage of time (M. de Charlus is originally very masculine in his bearing, then becomes increasingly effeminate), or the complexity of human character (M. Verdurin bullies Saniette abominably and then supports him when he loses all his money, and it is Mlle Vinteuil's friend, the very personification of depravity throughout the preceding volumes, who proves to have saved the composer's music for posterity by her patient deciphering of his manuscripts). At other times the same characters can be seen differently by different people, either because some are more observant than others, or because they have had some particular revelatory experience. By the time of the Verdurins' music party, the narrator sees M. de Charlus as the caricature "old queen," no doubt partly because he has overheard his sexual encounter with Jupien at the beginning of *Sodom and Gomorrah*. But the more knowing members of the Verdurin circle share this view of him. On the other hand, the more conventional members of the audience have failed to notice his transformation, and the innocent young girl in Brichot's lecture audience sees only "a stout, white-haired man with a black mustache, wearing the Military Medal," and is disappointed that a baron looks just

like anybody else. If Albertine says on p. 92 that the Verdurins have always been kind to her and tried to help her, on p. 323 that Mme. Verdurin has always been vile to her and then again on p. 391 that she has been kind, this tells us something about Albertine, and perhaps about human judgments in general. To eliminate inconsistencies like these would be completely to denature Proust's work. On the other hand, when Brichtot arrives, on p. 184, in a tram which by p. 188 is a bus, when Mme Verdurin's husband is called first Auguste and then, a few pages later, Gustave, or when the vehicle in which the narrator and Albertine are riding through the Bois (pp. 152-161) is alternately a carriage and a motor-car, one wonders if Proust, had he lived, would not have eliminated such variations. Certainly, they are not found in the part of the manuscript that he did correct. The most unnerving concerns Dr. Cottard. Mme Verdurin is "deep in discussion" with him and Ski on p. 216, but at the same party she receives, without apparent surprise, condolences on his death (p. 228). By p. 265 he is alive again, and General Deltour is consulting him about his health. In the same way, two completely different accounts are given of the death of Saniette, its causes, the duration of his last illness and Cottard's involvement in it, though pp. 228 and 252 would suggest that the doctor had died before the patient. These inconsistencies no doubt result from Proust's practice of writing and rewriting sequences individually (again, rather in the way a film is shot), sometimes at considerable intervals of time and not in the order in which they would appear in the finished novel. It is difficult to see that such continuity errors serve any literary purpose, and his first editors eliminated them. Later, more reverential editors, however, have restored them all, including the death and resurrection of Cottard.

One might make the same observation about verbal repetitions, which are frequent in *La Prisonnière*, particularly in the part which Proust did not live to correct. Some of these are plainly deliberate, and represent tics of speech, like the Duc de Guermantes's "bel et bien" (here translated "thoroughgoing") or M. de Charlus's "enchaînement de circonstances." But

others, including some whole sentences repeated with minimal changes, or sequences of two or more sentences all beginning with the same word or words (e.g. "D'autre part," "on the other hand"), are probably accidental. Such repetitions were regarded as very bad style at the time of the first edition, were often corrected by the first editors and have been reinstated by their modern successors. This translation has attenuated them to some degree.

Carol Clark

A Note on the Translation

The present translation came into being in the following way. A project was conceived by the Penguin UK Modern Classics series in which the whole of *In Search of Lost Time* would be translated freshly on the basis of the latest and most authoritative French text, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, edited by Jean-Yves Tadié (Paris: Pléiade, Gallimard, 1987–89). The translation would be done by a group of translators, each of whom would take on one of the seven volumes. The project was directed first by Paul Keegan, then by Simon Winder, and was overseen by general editor Christopher Prendergast. I was contacted early in the selection process, in the fall of 1995, and I chose to translate the first volume, *Du côté de chez Swann*. The other translators are James Grieve, for *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*; Mark Treharne, for *The Guermites Way*; John Sturrock, for *Sodom and Gomorrah*; Carol Clark, for *The Prisoner*; Peter Collier, for *The Fugitive*; and Ian Patterson, for *Finding Time Again*.

Between 1996 and the delivery of our manuscripts, the tardiest in mid-2001, we worked at different rates in our different parts of the world—one in Australia, one in the United States, the rest in various parts of England. After a single face-to-face meeting in early 1998, which most of the translators attended, we communicated with one another and with Christopher Prendergast by letter and e-mail. We agreed, often after lively debate, on certain practices that needed to be consistent from one volume to the next, such as retaining French titles like *Duchesse de Guermites*, and leaving the quotations that occur within the text—from Racine, most notably—in the original French, with translations in the notes.

At the initial meeting of the Penguin Classics project, those present had acknowledged that a degree of heterogeneity across the volumes was inevitable and perhaps even desirable, and that philosophical differences would exist among the translators. As they proceeded, therefore, the translators worked fairly independently and decided for themselves how close their translations should be to the original—how many liberties, for instance, might be taken with the sanctity of Proust's long sentences. And Christopher Prendergast, as he reviewed all the translations, kept his editorial hand relatively light. The Penguin UK translation appeared in October 2002, in six hardcover volumes and as a boxed set.

For this American edition we have adopted American spelling conventions, though we have respected Proust's dialogue paragraphing decisions—sometimes long exchanges take place within a single paragraph, while in other cases each speech begins a new paragraph.

Lydia Davis