
Review: Time to Read Proust

Reviewed Work(s): Remembrance of Things Past by Marcel Proust, C. K. Scott Moncrieff, Terence Kilmartin and Andreas Mayor

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Time to Read Proust

DELAYED FOR HALF A CENTURY, why shouldn't the Age of Proust begin now? Partly because this age has become so eclectic that no single author could lend it a name; and partly because Joyce still seems to hold, particularly for us Anglo-Saxons and Celts, some formal insights worth developing. *Finnegans Wake* of course bowed more than once in Proust's direction, not just by noting that "the prouts will invent a writing" and mentioning "swansway" but also by adapting Proust's clockwise-circular narrative form and extending the principle of involuntary recall to the entire history of our "collective unconscious." The UN inclusiveness of *Finnegans Wake* and its oneiric Esperanto incidentally guarantee it an audience among French linguistic-textual critics; but this privileged position it now has to share with *A la recherche du temps perdu*, if with no other twentieth-century novel.

The rapidest glance backward makes clear why the Proust era didn't begin in the twenties for either French or English-language literature. The complete *Ulysses* appeared first—published in cosmopolitan Paris under the benevolent regard of an important group of cosmopolitan writers. A French translation was undertaken immediately. Also, Joyce was still alive, still writing. Even when the *Recherche* appeared in 1927—posthumously—it seemed like the end, not the beginning, of something. The wind in French writing had shifted toward Breton's Surrealism, on one hand, and then Nietzschean thought (atheist, Dionysian, agonized), developed in fiction by Gide, Céline, Malraux, Sartre and Camus. Proust never lacked readers but still had no disciples among his younger contemporaries up to the apostolic succession. In England, the vogue for Proust had begun even before the twenties among writers who read French, but did not grow widespread until C. K. Scott Moncrieff's translation began appearing. Scott Moncrieff died in 1930 before taking up *Le Temps retrouvé*. This last volume was translated by "Stephen Hudson" (Sidney Schiff) in England and by Frederick A. Blossom in the U.S., and then once more by Andreas Mayor. To what degree English writers like Forster, Woolf, Waugh, Bowen, Greene and Green were influenced by Proust, scholars can debate; however small that influence, it has still weighed more heavily with the English than with the Americans or even the French. (Do we have *any* American Proustians? Auchincloss comes to mind; and Nabokov, if he was American; and then Edmund White, who is certainly that. Also, one poet, in the Jamesian mid-Atlantic tradition, stands out as a preëminent Proustian: James Merrill.)

It's not surprising that the English felt an affinity with the work of an admiring reader of Shelley, Ruskin, George Eliot and Hardy; by the same argument, Americans could expect to feel strong sympathies with this French disciple of Emerson, once they paused to notice the overlap of Romantic philosophy and retrospective temperament in Proust. The length of the *Recherche* and its language may have been a barrier; but those who understand the importance of a great work will always answer its requirements; and those who cannot read French now have an adequate translation¹ of the greatest novel written in the twentieth century so far.

To say "adequate" instead of "superb" needs justifying; but first I should retell the story of this translation. After Scott Moncrieff's version appeared (I use one name to designate the three hands that worked on that version because Schiff and Mayor tried to imitate Scott Moncrieff's style and texture in their renderings of the last volume), most readers praised its accuracy and its sensitive, idiomatic English. Yet others disliked the archaizing, "Edwardian" sound of Scott Moncrieff and pointed out inaccuracies, euphemisms, and bowdlerizations. Those objections, however, led to no attempts at retranslation until the present one. Meanwhile, a new French edition of the novel appeared in 1954, published by the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade. The Pléiade edition corrected textual errors of the NRF Proust, added valuable passages discovered by the editors in the jumble of Proust's manuscripts, supplied textual notes and variants, and included both a plot résumé with page references and a place and name index for the gigantic work. Now, twenty years later, we have an English version in conformity with the current French Proust. The Random House edition, published in three volumes, follows the Pléiade text, with the new interpolations tipped in unobtrusively and the same plot résumés added at the end of each volume, though without a place and name index. Some of the textual variants appear in an appendix; and the text notes, different from the Pléiade's, have been composed with English and American readers in mind.

As he explains in his prefatory note, Terence Kilmartin has done not an entirely new translation but a *rifacimento* of Scott Moncrieff, with additions from the Pléiade newly translated. He hoped to satisfy both admirers and detractors of the earlier version, and I think at least the admirers of Scott Moncrieff will be satisfied; this new version hews closely to the earlier. But the detractors? Despite some updating laid over the old text, the prose still sounds ninetiesish. For a second translator to retain Scott Moncrieff's "the morrow" as a translation for "le lendemain," or "frightfully good" for "très bien" is not to measure up to the proclaimed intention of modernizing the text, and these tokens can stand for a problem apparent

¹ REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST, by *Marcel Proust*. Trans. by *C. K. Scott Moncrieff*, *Terence Kilmartin*, and *Andreas Mayor*. Random House. 3 volumes. \$75.00.

throughout Kilmartin's version. Proust doesn't sound moldy in French; why should he in English? Also, American readers must be prepared for English spellings—"programme," "connexion," "labour"—though I notice, too, a few American "judgments" and "acknowledgments" scattered inconsistently throughout. Tiny flaws, surely; they deserve mention only because the fanfare around this new edition, so handsomely bound and printed, so expensive, so heavy and unwieldy, led me to expect perfection.

Considering that fanfare and that expense, what accounts for the much more serious problem of persistent mistranslation? Kilmartin corrected some of Scott Moncrieff's errors—bravo. Without sorting out who first perpetrated the errors that remain, I would still say the new text should have none at all and am baffled that more checking wasn't done. Reading the first sentence, for example, I was disappointed to see that Scott Moncrieff's mistranslation had been let stand: "For a long time I used to go to bed early." Among several possibilities for translating the most famous decasyllabic sentence in French fiction, this is the last acceptable. "Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure." In a recently published article (*Grand Street*, No. 1), Kilmartin justified the retention as a way of making the verb tense—*passé composé*—blend with the overall imperfect tense of the opening paragraph. But Proust knew grammar and had an acute syntactic ear. The little jolt between the temporal suspension of the first sentence (comparable to verbs in the aorist aspect in Greek) and the flowing, imperfective aspect of the second is part of the intended effect and should be left. "For a long time now, I have gone to bed early," comes closer to the original. (Then the pluperfect tense Kilmartin imposes on the second sentence would have to go; but he could easily have fixed that.)

The grammar of this translation is sometimes substandard. "Cannot help but" is too careless a locution to use for so exact and formal a writer as Proust. I wonder if others object to this sentence: "And nothing reminds me so much of the monthly parts of *Notre Dame de Paris*, and of various books by Gérard de Nerval, that used to hang outside the grocer's door at Combray, than does, in its rectangular and flowery border, supported by recumbent river-gods, a 'personal share' in the Water Company." "So much" should be changed to "more strongly" or else "than" to "as"; Proust's sentence uses the right connectives, and the translator has only to follow them.

Among the dozens of wrong translations I noticed before hopes for a superb translation waned, I will mention one; and perhaps this anecdote will help explain it. On my first trip to France, the language program I had enrolled in billeted its students in French homes—room, board, and conversation. This was in Avignon, and my hosts lived three miles outside town. The locals called the house, with modest irony, "le château"—a solidly built pile about 150 years

old, with a classic pediment over the front entrance (seldom used) and bean fields that came up to within a few paces of the back door. The ceilings were high, the furniture unremarkable. My first evening there I sat down to talk with my hosts over a thimbleful of homemade *pastis*. Twenty years old and still disoriented, I meant to learn to speak French. I turned to the smiling, florid gentleman (wearing a leather jacket but no tie) who gave me my drink, and asked him “what he did.” “Ma foi, je suis paysan,” he laughed. France is not nineteenth-century Rumania; it’s thoughtless to translate “paysan” as “peasant.” There have been no peasants in France since the Revolution, no more than there are in England. If I had been Kilmartin, I would have ruled out the obvious and then chosen among “farmer,” “yeoman,” “bumpkin,” or perhaps “farmhand,” depending on context.

I have to object to another detail, not a translation but an addition: Scott Moncrieff’s subtitle *Overture*, for the first fifty pages of the novel, should not have been retained. Proust gave the section no title; and, while the translator’s argument for doing so has merit, it covers only half the case. Stressing the musical analogy for this novel’s structure comes only at the expense of another just as important: architecture or, more exactly, cathedral architecture, “frozen music.” Proust once called Ruskin’s prose (in a review of the French translation of *The Stones of Venice*) a “nef enchantée,” an enchanted ship or cathedral nave. The repertory of associations—miraculous ark, medieval ship of faith voyaging down the river of Time—he would certainly have wished to appropriate for his own work; and he suggested the cathedral analogy for his *Recherche* more than once. In that metaphor the reader can be thought of as moving through a series of chapels, volume after volume, under the vaulted roof of the whole structure, all the way to the apse and the *Adoration perpétuelle* of the Host—or *Time Recaptured*. Letting Scott Moncrieff’s *Overture* stand tends to erase one of this novel’s metaphorical support systems, just as replacing it with *Narthex* would have erased the other.

The remaining secondary titles, and the overarching Shakespearian tag, have been left as Scott Moncrieff translated them, except that *Albertine disparue* is now *The Fugitive*—Proust’s original title, and one that suits a novel based on the truth that *Tempus fugit*. The older translations are familiar, and sound right, even though strict accuracy might ask for *Over Toward Swann’s Place* for the first volume, and *Toward the Guermantes’s* for the third. The title of Volume Two actually means something on the order of *In the Shadow of Maidens in Flower*, but in this case Scott Moncrieff kept a firm grip on inaccuracy, settling for *Within a Budding Grove*, and no one has ever blamed him for the discretion.

Albertine’s gang of young beauties as Flower Maidens? Marcel never spells out the connection in precise terms; but the smiling

bouquets of young women with lofty titles and deep décolletages that he meets on his first evening at the Guermites's, he compares, with delicate emphasis, to the "filles fleurs" of *Parsifal*. Wagnerian opera, its "endless melody," *Leitmotiven*, and cyclic form helped Proust compose a large-scale human and historical drama, and float it down the symphonic river of Time. (The French word for "saga novel" is *roman fleuve*.) If we see it as a cathedral, then we might also listen to the *Recherche* as an opera, a Parisian *Parsifal*, with the Narrator as an archetypal Pure Fool sent forth on a quest for redemption. Other correspondences: Marcel's madeleine and tilleul stand in as a surrogate Eucharist, and we can compare the fateful Mother's Kiss to the one Kundry bestows on Parsifal to set a seal on those quasi-maternal feelings she has for him. The Guermites milieu, that citadel of titles, riches and fashion, makes a seductive Klingsor's Castle, with floral sirens as an added enticement to worldliness and sexual entrapment. For the grotesque Klingsor himself, I nominate the Baron de Charlus—though without insisting that any of these correspondences match in every point.

Proust not only reviewed a Ruskin translation but himself translated *The Bible of Amiens*; and he read most of that magnanimous art critic's works, as the scholarly Ruskin essay in *Pastiches et Mélanges* abundantly shows. It's easy to forget that the pre-World War Proust was known as nothing more than worldling, Ruskin translator, and literary critic. He took the risk, formidable for an imaginative writer, of looking like a pedant, aware that this lightened his opponents' task but less concerned to protect himself than to foster truer readings of texts he revered. (Another more recent novelist drawn to this practice is Nabokov—think of his Pushkin. After letting the impulse to mock subside, I find what either of them has to say on *any* subject, even literature, is always worth hearing.) Proust left brilliant essays on not only Ruskin but also Balzac, Baudelaire, Flaubert, Dostoevsky. If he had never published a novel his essays would still have earned him a place as a critic at least as great as Sainte-Beuve, the "villain" of Proust's anomalous criticism-novel *Contre Sainte-Beuve*. What Proust sought in his sacred texts was the visionary dimension. He opposed "idolatry," the worship of things material and external to the soul. Hence he denied any value to Sainte-Beuve's biographical criticism because it focused on externals and not texts themselves, the most accurate record of spiritual development. He would have lamented those studies of his novel that treat it as a simple *roman à clef*, the sort that present, say, Mme de Guermites as "two parts Comtesse de Greffuhle to three parts Laure de Chevigny," etc.—all of which sounds like some faded recipe for Lady Baltimore cake. Who wants to jingle a bunch of rusty keys when he might simply step inside the cathedral or hear the opera? The metaphysical dimensions to the *Recherche*, the interpretive record of a solitary voyage through life, constitute its real claim on our attention.

The worldly aspect to Proust's novel was nevertheless indispensable, distinguishing it from purely Symbolist works like those of, say, Maeterlinck. Also, the Symbolist dimension likewise distinguishes it from purely realist or naturalist works like Daudet's *Sapho* (a remote ancestor of the *Remembrance*) or Zola's *Nana*. Proust had read Ruskin's *The Two Paths* and registered its insistent message that art must include both "tenderness" and "truth." Proust embodies just this bipolar conception in his novel, allotting "tenderness" to childhood, memory, and spiritual aspiration, and "truth" to adulthood, society, and human evil. The two "directions" of this novel, need it be said, correspond to that twofold apportionment.

All Proust's commentators point out that Swann's and the Guermantes's directions run as parallel supporting structures throughout the seven volumes; and that the two finally join as one. Swann, the cultivated solitary, of Jewish extraction; the Guermantes, a highly connected tribe of nobles: what do they each epitomize for Proust? One link easy to establish is between the Guermantes and history, France's chivalric past, with Merovingian barons, Crusaders, Renaissance châtelaines, courtiers at Versailles, and the snobbery of the nineteenth-century Faubourg St. Germain, consecrated for fiction by Balzac. And Swann? To stroll over toward his place meant taking the *côté de Méséglise*, so, often as not, his direction goes under that designation. In French these syllables are phonetically indistinguishable from the words "mes églises," "my churches." This is the direction of churches, cathedrals even, art works in general, perhaps. But Swann's connoisseurships lean more toward visual art and architecture—the Italian *quattrocento*, Vermeer, the little churches near Balbec that he recommends to Marcel. (Music one hears in the Faubourg, or at the Opéra, from a box overflowing with jewels and titles.) Then, as Swann's very name implies, he is the exotic, a baptized Catholic, but still by inheritance a Jew, a wanderer, a transient; so that, for example, one goes in the direction of "chez Swann," but toward a demesne inseparable from the Guermantes name. Marcel's travels divide in half as well: to the fashionable hotel at Balbec where he first meets members of the Guermantes clan, and to Venice, the southern city of art with a Romanesque basilica sacred (if by form alone) to Ruskin. If we think of these two as being in the directions Northwest and Southeast with respect to Paris, we have no trouble assigning them to their proper controlling names.

The two metaphoric paths cross and recross throughout the novel and finally prove to belong to one structure, genetically fused at the end in the person of Mlle de St. Loup, the daughter of a Guermantes and a Swann. There are many other comparable fusions. Recall the incident of the "steeple of Martinville," in which the young Marcel observes the twin spires of the Martinville church and the single one of Vieuxvicq, during a carriage ride along a winding country road. The shifting vantage point makes the steeples seem

to exchange places, and, finally, to line up behind each other into one silhouette. This excursion inspires the boy Marcel's first piece of prose; and the descriptive essay he writes, recast and expanded, eventually appears in the *Figaro* as the adult Marcel's first publication. To him it represented a tentative step toward his vocation; for us it recapitulates the structure of the *Recherche*, a journey along parallel paths that unite at the end.

In *Time Recaptured* the Narrator, describing the novel he wants to write, speaks of a "psychology in space" he will have to devise in order to render the multifaceted reality he has come to understand. Characters will be inseparable from the "sites" where they revealed themselves—and establish their identities most firmly in their locations with respect to each other. These relative "positions"—social, familial, sexual—shift time and again throughout the narrative. "Fugitive as the years," this succession of spotlight stages comes by the end to constitute the dimension of Time itself. More than once Proust has been called the Einstein of novel-writing; and his vision of the final unity of Space and Time led him to devise an astonishing novelistic treatment of Relativity. My guess is that the earliest glimmering of this insight came not from Einstein but from Wagner. During the first scene-change in *Parsifal* Wagner's stage directions keep the curtain up while forest scenery slides away and the two performers on stage are carried aloft on some sort of escalator into the domed hall of the Grail Castle. Just before this transformation, Gurnemanz turns to Parsifal and says, "Du siehst, mein Sohn, zum Raum wird hier die Zeit." In the Universal Theater, Time becomes manifest as a sequence of fast-moving spatial changes. And of course the Swann and Guermantes ways, at their most general, are Space and Time—something implied but hard to discern when, early in the narrative, the two are respectively characterized as "the ideal view over a plain and the ideal river landscape." The reader who wins through to the last page of *Time Recaptured*, however, will know what inferences to draw when the Narrator compares old age to standing on "living stilts" made of years and tall as steeples.

Somewhere between painting and music lies literature; but, finally, it seems closer to music. Likewise we think of Proust's subject as Time more than Space and sense that in his hierarchy Vinteuil sat higher than Elstir. Moreover, Time, when recaptured, is the dimension of salvation, while lived time, actual spatial experience, can never, according to Proust, save us—far from. And the "black gospel" of Proust's pessimism about human love is only one among many repudiations he made in his long assault on idolatry. For Proust, only the achieved soul merits veneration; the rest is dross—riches, social position, even romantic love, even art. That the Narrator's *via negativa* actually conceals an optimistic faith becomes apparent only in the last pages of the *Recherche*. When things or places or people are materially absent, when they have been taken away from

us, when they exist in no way other than as part of immaterial consciousness, only then do they become sacred. The paradox of involuntary memory points to the central Proustian mystery: how can irretrievably lost moments out of the past return to consciousness as a full, hallucinatory presence? Proust doesn't try to account for the mystery. But it is certainly his surest proof of the immortality of the soul, and presented as such. "The past recaptured" amounts to a trial exercise in redemption, eventually to be repeated at the scale of eternity. If individual consciousness has the power to make vanished times and places present once more, perhaps the soul, after it has entered the long night of death, whether early or late, will be called back involuntarily into universal consciousness by the memory of eternity. Proust wrote as a fool and as a hierophant.

"Men die," said Alkmaion, "because they cannot join the end to the beginning." But just that connection is the task Proust assigned himself. He retreated to a dark chamber (only John Ruskin's self-incarceration at Brantwood during the years of his mental eclipse is comparable), wrote the novel of his life and let it be the resurrection of his truest and most tender memories. The narrative reaches its conclusion as the hero resolves to write a novel identical in every particular with the novel that his resolution concludes. The end joins the beginning; and no sooner had Proust drafted that inaugural conclusion than he died—and became his readership.

The number of his readers, constantly increasing since Proust's death, will probably multiply exponentially from now on. After all, this novel does come close to being a rare instance of modern scripture, making up in comedy and *savoir mondain* for what it loses in prophetic authority. For most readers certain scenes—the duchesse de Guermantes's red shoes, the Queen of Naples' rescue of Charlus from Mme Verdurin's cruelties, Bergotte's death just after seeing Vermeer's *View of Delft* (to mention three)—immediately take on the clarity and permanence of Platonic forms, part of the available stock of our collective memory, sometimes voluntarily, sometimes involuntarily recalled. If Proust's world was a lost Paradise when his novel appeared fifty years ago, it is doubly so now. All the more sacred then? In any case *The Remembrance of Things Past* is due to regain its footing after a period of relative neglect; and, whether or not Proust lends his name to the last part of our century, his novel appears ready to come of age, with a new crop of readers, in the fullest and brightest sense.