**Marcel Proust** (1871-1922)

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Proust was a French novelist and essayist known for his masterpiece *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*), published in seven volumes between 1913 and 1927. Proust was born into a wealthy middle class family. His father, a Catholic, was a prominent physician, while his mother, who was Jewish, was well read and influenced his intellectual development. Though he did not practice the Catholic faith under which he was brought up, it nevertheless informed the penetrating observation of French culture and history that characterizes much of his work. Proust was a precocious student who was introduced to several tony salons by his school friends. His experiences in French Society were to inspire expansive meditations upon aristocracy in the changing social order of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Though Proust’s fiction is not strictly autobiographical, many of his life experiences were altered and reproduced there. From an early age, he suffered pulmonary illnesses that often interrupted his education and professional development, leading to a lifelong reputation for being sickly that bears many echoes in the neurotic narrator of the *Recherche*. He nonetheless served in the military for a year (1889-1890), fought a duel in 1897 with Jean Lorrain over accusations of homosexuality, and gained a reputation as a snob and social climber in the fashionable salons. His illness also made him dependent upon his parents, in whose home he lived until their deaths in 1903 and 1905, living thereafter upon his inheritance and ruminating upon his deep attachment to his mother, much like the narrator of the *Recherche*. Proust never publicly acknowledged his sexuality, though it is clear from his close friends and associates that he was predominantly homosexual. Many of the main characters in his works are homosexual or bisexual.

Among the influences on Proust’s work are Thomas Carlyle, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, George Eliot, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Gustave Flaubert, Michel de Montaigne, Stendhal, Leo Tolstoy, and particularly John Ruskin. Proust made an assiduous study of the English writers beginning around 1895, undertaking a translation of Ruskin’s *The Bible of Amiens*, which he published in 1904, and *Sesame and Lilies*, which he published in 1906. Ruskin’s *The Stones of Venice* is also heavily referenced in the *Recherche* and forms the backbone of its interest in Gothic architecture and travel.

After shifting his attention away from an essayistic novel, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, Proust began the *Recherche* in 1909 as a synthesis of theories of the novel and the social role of the artist that he had been developing for at least the past decade and a half. The novel spans seven volumes and more than 3,200 pages (six volumes and more than 4,000 pages in most English translations), and contains more than 2,000 characters. The first volume, *Du côté de chez Swann* (*Swann’s Way*), was published in 1913, but Proust re-worked it and labored on the rest of the novel in declining health throughout World War I, leaving the final volume unfinished at his death on November 18, 1922. During the final few years, Proust slept during the day and worked at night, in a famously cork-lined room, to bring the work to completion.

*À la recherche du temps perdu* is an extended meditation on the nature of time, memory, identity, and the salvific power of art. It is told through the memories of a narrator who recalls the seminal events of his childhood, his rising status in aristocratic salons, his relationships with famous authors and artists, the vast social changes wrought by the French Third Republic, and the cataclysm and aftermath of World War I. The narrator bears autobiographical resemblances to Proust and at one point identifies his name as Marcel. The novel is largely set in Paris while the plot vacillates between a series of journeys to Combray, based on Proust’s family vacations at Illiers; Balbec, based on the Norman seaside resort at Cabourg; and Venice, where he goes to view art and architecture with his mother. Along the way, Marcel, who is excessively attached to his mother and grandmother, engages in a series of repetitive obsessions and relationships with women including Gilberte, the daughter of Charles Swann for whom the first volume is named; Mme de Guermantes, an aristocrat from Combray who lives next door to the narrator’s Paris flat; and Albertine Simonet, the young girl who forms the central relationship of his adult life and induces his pivotal crisis. Amid the experiences and memories that are recounted in exquisite detail, the *Recherche* often veers into novelistic moralizing and theories of art predicated on a theory of vision for the appreciation of painting. As such, the style is impressionistic, bearing many resemblances to phenomenology of Henri Bergson and the painting of Monet and Cézanne, with long flowing sentences and indiscreet temporal shifts that are purposely disorienting.

Proust’s other major works include *Les plaisirs et les jours* (1896), *Pastiches* (1919), and the unfinished *Jean Santeuil* and *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, both published posthumously.

Les Plaisirs et les Jours (Pleasures and Days) 1896

Pastiches et Mélanges (Pastiches, or The Lemione Affair) 1919

Jean Santeuil (Jean Santeuil) 1952

Contre Sainte-Beuve (Against Sainte-Beuve and Other Essays) 1954

Chardin et Rembrandt (Chardin and Rembrandt) 2009 \*

Le Mensuel *retrouvé* (The Monthly *rediscovered*) 2012 \*

Du côté de chez Swann (The Way by Swann’s | Swann’s Way) 1913

À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs (Within a Budding Grove| In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower) 1918

Le côté de Guermantes I et II (The Guermantes Way) 1921-1922

Sodome et Gomorrhe I et II (Cities of the Plain | Sodom and Gomorrah) 1922-1923

La Prisonnière (The Captive | The Prisoner) 1923

Albertine disparue | La Futigive (The Sweet Cheat Gone | The Fugitive) 1925

Le Temps retrouvé (The Past Recaptured | Finding Time Again | Time Regained) 1927

\*Entry has not been translated into English (translated title is A. Christie’s)

\*\*English translations for the titles in *À la recherche du temps perdu* include all versions of each title.

Further Reading:

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