

RECENT FRENCH BOOKS

Proust the Much-Discussed and Others

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PROUST'S "A l'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs" and the discussion it has aroused constitute a document—of what importance only the future can tell—for the history of twentieth century civilization: it sheds light upon the aspirations of our day. It suggests a new outlook upon life and is written according to a new method: and for these reasons mainly it has proved highly congenial to a large group of persons. Coming after the same author's "Du Côté de chez Swann", it has made of Proust a constant subject of debate: individual critics, newspapers, magazines, have been for him or against him; none has found it possible to ignore him. He is, according to a competent observer, one of the two writers with whom every enlightened person in France must be familiar; and this last volume has won him the Goncourt prize.

Strange to say, "A l'Ombre" seems at first absolutely unreadable. In style it goes counter to the virtues we most admire in the French,—their precision, their brevity, their clarity. Its sentences are involved and more than half a page in length; its plan is elusive; and it is long, fearfully long: not only do its two volumes total six hundred pages of the closest print;

but, what is more, to understand them thoroughly, we must remember that these two volumes are only the second instalment of a work in five parts, of which "Du Côté", already mentioned, is the first; and of which the third, fourth, and fifth are announced as already in press. If this plan is carried out as it has been begun, Proust will be the author of the longest novel yet written!

The general title covering the whole series is "A la Recherche du Temps Perdu" and it is precisely in Proust's method of recapturing the past that lies the originality of his work. "A l'Ombre" describes events in the life of a young man, presumably the author, during a short period of his adolescence, stressing particularly his thoughts and feelings—thoughts and feelings so described as to produce a novel and striking effect upon the reader.

There are many different ways in which an author may recall the past of his youth, as the works of Anatole France, Loti, P. Margueritte, C. L. Philippe, and others amply show. But the ways used heretofore have one characteristic in common: an object or incident once described remains, generally speaking, unchanged to the end of the story. This is not the case

with Proust. The past and the things of the past have, according to him, highly contingent attributes; an object or incident met with twenty years ago is one thing; met with nineteen years ago, it is another, the intervening twelvemonth having changed the youth who perceived it. Thus, to take examples from "A l'Ombre" itself, the hero sees the celebrated Berma play "Phèdre"; he makes the acquaintance of an aristocrat, Saint-Loup; he meets a young girl named Albertine. All three are vividly described as they struck him at the time; but there is nothing more final about these descriptions than about the judgments and feelings of the ordinary man as he lives from month to month and year to year: they are changed with time. A striking comment upon Berma's acting, heard some hours after the performance, so impresses the young man's imagination that her art takes on an added charm; the discovery that Saint-Loup is related to certain persons known some years earlier, makes the aristocrat less admirable; and as for Albertine, how conditional is the first portrait Proust gives of her, may be seen by the following quotation (from which I eliminate several dependent clauses for the sake of clarity!):

Je devrais donner un nom différent à chacune de ces Albertine qui apparaissent devant moi, jamais la même; surtout, de la même manière qu'on dit dans un récit le temps qu'il faisait tel jour, je devrais donner toujours son nom à la croyance qui, tel jour où je voyais Albertine, régnait sur mon âme, l'aspect des êtres, comme celui des mers, dépendant de ces nuées à peine visibles qui changent la couleur de chaque chose.

Proust, however, is no impressionist. If he adopts, in part, the methods of the impressionist, he does so only in so far as they permit him to reverse the usual process of literature. For there is a difference between the

observation of the man who lives and that of the author who recalls. These men look at the story of their lives from opposite ends and, as a consequence, see it differently. The author who recalls, impressed with results and latest aspects, makes a choice among many details and emphasizes in each event that feature only which leads most directly to these results or aspects. On the other hand, the man who lives cannot so choose and simplify. The future alone can explain the permanent characteristics and the real significance of any particular event. Ignorant of this future, he must perforce study the various appearances of the moment; and he is as keenly alive to the several possibilities which they contain as the traveler who has taken one road at a fork in an unknown country, is struck by the presence of the other road to which he may be forced to return later. Consequently his observation is more varied and richer.

Proust reproduces the approach of the man who lives. Having reached a particular point in his story, he is careful not to correct the impression of the moment by knowledge acquired at a later date. Thus far, then, he follows the method of his painter, Elstir, who, before painting, "se faisait ignorant". But it is necessary to note that Proust "se fait ignorant" of the future alone; the past, he keeps constantly in mind. The feelings and perceptions of his hero are constantly affected by what he has known before. For instance, he becomes interested in Mlle. Simonet. Contrary to what might be expected, he is not distressed at finding her less broadminded than he had at first supposed; and the reason for this is that, when in love with another young girl earlier in the story, "J'avais entrevu qu'en étant amour-

eux d'une femme, l'important n'est pas la valeur de la femme mais la profondeur de cet état"!

We should note also, when discussing this distinctly original work, that Proust makes another departure from the usual in literature. As a result, no doubt, of this same desire to approximate real living, he shows himself to be neither a rationalist, a sensationalist, an intuitionist, nor any other "ist". He feels that no normal man is solely mind, senses, feeling, or intuition. Here at last, then, is a writer who, discarding the annoying exclusions and overemphasis of this or that school of novelists or philosophers, presents a synthesis of all, or nearly all, the forces which the average individual knows to be potent in his life.

The fundamental ideas of "A l'Ombre" are therefore both novel and, apparently, sound. Unfortunately in working them into his book, Proust has sinned grievously from the point of view of art—so grievously, as I have already pointed out, that I am a little surprised to find any but the professional student of letters reading more than his first half-dozen pages. That he has become so popular is evidently due to the fact that his ideas fit in with the spirit of the times. For some years now our civilization—and more especially that of Europe—has been in a curious dilemma. It is still determined to resist the reintroduction of the tenets discarded a quarter-century or so ago; yet it feels the need of a discipline of some kind. In its view of man, as in its politics, it is inclined to be neither bolshevik nor reactionary; it nevertheless craves some principle by which to direct its irrepressible instinct to observe and investigate. In this dilemma certain individuals have, to be sure, turned

back in practice—and in practice only—to the accepted religions, finding in them a ready guide for the expression of their energies. The bulk of society, however, has been too scrupulous to do this: feeling, as an anonymous writer very recently put it, that "involuntary obedience corrupts the soul", it has sought to achieve its own "reconciliation with the universe". Failing in this, it has fallen back upon a disordered, though none the less passionate, worship of life.

To such persons, "A l'Ombre" may well appeal. It supplies them with a systematic principle for the interpretation of our acts and feelings, without robbing life of its variety, its richness—all the intellectual and emotional stimulus that comes from passing on eternally to new and fuller aspects and uncertain consequences. Proust's idea is this: at any particular moment, we are all compounds of previously acquired ideas, sensations, and sentiments; these determine our approach to this or that person, object, or event; and each succeeding experience of life modifies in its turn the predisposition with which we face the following experience. We who read his book, have the sense of growing with his hero. We are interested in this youth, not so much because we are made familiar with the persons, objects, and incidents that he meets, as because we develop with him in his knowledge and feelings concerning them. In other words we discover the world, we live, with him. And there is much exhilaration in this vicarious second life. Therein lies the appeal of "A l'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs" to the civilization of our day.

There is a tone of faded rose leaves and yellowing lace to Raymond Escholier's "Dansons la Trompeuse".

Mme. Lestelle is a relic of a bygone civilization: music, dancing and art, bright conversation and innocent *galanterie*, the cult of joy and beauty, these are the breath of her being. Unfortunately she falls upon a modern bourgeois community where the graces and pretty trifling of an aristocratic day are turned to ridicule. One person alone has taste and humanity enough to appreciate her—I'abbé Roumens. Soon, however, she is deprived also of his respectful sympathy. And finally she dies, not so much because of her poverty (though it is extreme, she refuses to take it seriously), as because she has outlived her age. But she dies true to her ideals. Finding her very ill, Mme. Ambrosine suggests that she dress more comfortably: "Ce manteau a l'air de vous écraser et cette voilette vous étouffe." "Non", replies the plucky Thérèse, "j'ai trop mauvaise mine."

Those who recall the love of John Stuart Mill for Mrs. Taylor before he married her in 1851, and the inspiration afforded him by her grave as he watched over it from his residence in sunny Avignon, will not deny the power of a respectful and mystic affection to deepen profoundly and without melancholy the inner life of an active and superior man. It is good to remember this when reading Edouard Estaunié's "L'Ascension de M. Baslèvre". Estaunié enjoys an enviable reputation as a writer who thinks and observes vigorously. In this novel, he shows how Baslèvre, the dry and ma-

chine-like head of a government bureau, is awakened to an interest in his fellow men by his love for Mme. Gros. The author describes the stages which lead Baslèvre to an ever purer feeling for this wife of a shiftless *bon garçon* until, after her death, the Sundays he spends in the house and amid the furniture which once were hers give him the heart to look with joy upon the beauties of the world and to direct with human kindness and sympathy the work of his busy office.

In the competition for the Goncourt prize won by "A l'Ombre des Jeunes Filles" discussed above, the "runner up" was Roland Dorgelès's "Les Croix de Bois". This book won the Vie Heureuse prize and, though by no means so interesting philosophically and socially as "A l'Ombre", it is far easier reading. It is, indeed, a highly entertaining, well-written collection of more or less connected stories of the war, to be recommended especially for two features that distinguish it from most collections on the same subject: having a better perspective, it is marked by a greater emphasis upon what will appeal to the average reader; and, though it does not avoid the pathetic, it contains a large measure of red-blooded merriment and fun.

A l'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs. By Marcel Proust. Paris: Nouvelle Revue Française.

Dansons la Trompeuse. By Raymond Escholler. Paris: Grasset.

L'Ascension de M. Baslèvre. By Edouard Estaunié. Paris: Perrin.

Les Croix de Bois. By Roland Dorgelès. Paris: Albin Michel.