



Swann's Way: In Search of Lost Time, Volume 1
Marcel Proust
translated by Lydia Davis
The Viking Press, Penguin Classics

Review by Michael Gottlieb

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Rereading Proust, again, after a long spell, becomes an experience that itself wants to be Proustian. A holy writ revisited, a scripture dusted off: our modern idea of ourselves – of every aspect of what we think of contemporary identity. Our values, our individualism, our self, self-consciousness, sex, snobbism, epicureanism, connoisseurship. Not to mention our valorization of the Mundane, and its transformational capacities and capabilities.

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It all comes back: my first place, a ground floor studio on 19th Street, across from DTW, down the street from that old Cuban Chinese diner. The Cantonese waiters cursing each other in Spanish, throwing down flan and espresso on the tired formica before you; itself across Eighth Avenue from the Elgin – not yet transmuted into the Joyce. Seeing Brakhage for the first time there, projected on its sad screen. Reading Proust sprawled on the bed in that apartment during some lay-off enforced vacation, virtually straight through – all seven Scott-Moncrieff volumes, in about two weeks. Thirty years ago.

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We cannot forget what we have lived through since. The church spires of Combray – the Narrator saw them everywhere, from different angles, in town, from the woods, just like the Twin Towers. In the very same way, no matter what drunk downtown party or assignation gone wrong you stumbled out of – onto the Bowery at 3:00 am, or a deserted Delancey, or Centre or Reade or Hester or Stone Streets... it didn't matter. There they were, looming out of the starless New York night, standing by, ready to help you navigate home. By the by, you could also tell the weather by them, by how much of them you could see. So, depending on how they stood in relation to each other in a thrice you could triangulate yourself, orient yourself to the street grid or lack thereof, and begin to heigh yourself home.

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We start the novel again with the knowledge that we gained only upon finishing it the first time, three decades ago. Now we know about that realization described on the very last page of the last volume. It has prepared us, has propelled us (though it has taken 30 years to reopen the book) back to the first page. In the selfsame way, of course, that last realization, the one which struck the Narrator at the end of the novel – as he tells us himself – has now prepared him to sit down and begin writing that book which we now recommence. As we are so much older, now, reading it again, so had he become.

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We raise up the Mundane, every day – was it not he who taught us how? His is a book about nothing, no? A lily in a décolleté, a daub of paint in a Dutch genre landscape, a snatch of melody, a bit of uneven cobblestone. Nothing more than, say, a cracker doused in a cup of tea. Which has taught us to accept, and raise up similarly, in fact, our

versions of the same ‘nothing.’ Nothing much different, converted into the terms and conditions of our time, than a TV show about nothing, paying homage to chocolate babkas, birth control sponges, black and white cookies... (leading, obliging us to accept what kind of parallels? Kramer = the Baron de Charlus? George Costanza = Aunt Leonie?).

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Is this Swann In Love the same ur-story of jealousy – the blueprint of painful, tortured love which when we first read it – awoke in us – made us alive to those torments hitherto we’d never dreamt of? When we read it we promptly – according to some terrible serendipity - without any volition on our part whatsoever, we began to feel, be consumed by *something* which ate away at us, keeping us awake, sobbing, when we should have been sleeping the sleep of youth, in another’s arms – the arms of that other, the one who had left us, and so reduced us so. Is it then when all the terrors ensued?

Has it changed – is it the new translation, or is it us? Perhaps that is the answer. If this depiction of Swann’s slow descent, decades after first reading it, perhaps leaves us somehow cold, it must fail to set us on fire either because something is missing from this translation, which does not seem to be the case, or because there is something now missing in us. Are we now too old? Has that flame consumed something in us which cannot be rekindled? Can we only once, in a single lifetime, be burned by those torments? Or, is it that the unavoidable accretion of the years, and all that they weigh us down with, both good and bad, with all of that which mayhap flow from that first love, then marriage, say, and family too perhaps – can all of that somehow immunize, cauterize us to those terrible flames which consumed poor Swann?

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And yet, this act of rereading – somehow deposited back in New York, back in that same neighborhood, thirty years later – how much of it is like the very process by which he wrote this book (as we see, especially in Volume 1, and certainly via Davis’s translation) – when he went back and examined the proofs, and inserted phrases and clauses and revised and extended, over and over again, those phrases and clauses? As we reread those sentences – doubling their meanings, extending, folding them in upon themselves and building up – and out – a new superstructure of assonance and realization – which came from where? From what? Is it because we know how it is all going to turn out? Because we know what will happen to his grandmother, to Swann, to the Narrator himself? Or, is it because we know what has happened to us – how our lives have risen and fallen, how we have gained and lost and now can, indeed – must – must at least try – to look back at our own self-spun narration with the same admixture of regret and, we would like to aver, resignation or acceptance or perspective? Or equanimity perhaps? Or is it that only by rereading him that we can lend a shape to our lives in any way similar to the way he was able to give form to his?
