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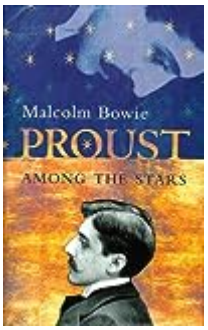

Malcolm Bowie. *Proust among the Stars.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1999. xix + 348 pp. $28.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-11490-5.

Reviewed by David L. Schalk (Vassar College)

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It is curious and perhaps symptomatic of cultural differences between the United States and England that this book was originally brought out by a commercial publisher in Great Britain (Harper Collins), whereas the U.S. edition was published by a university press. The author is Marshal Foch Professor of French Literature in the University of Oxford and has written *Henri Michaux*, *Mallarm and the Art of Being Difficult*, and *Lacan: A Modern Master* among other titles. Malcolm Bowie states explicitly that this is "an introductory volume aimed principally at general readers rather than Proust scholars" (p. 338).

I cannot vouch for his readership on the other side of the Atlantic, but this book would be absolutely incomprehensible to a general reader in the United States, since such an individual, if he or she exists, will not have read all of Proust (fifteen volumes, six thousand pages, in the Gallimard edition which I use). This is an esoteric and difficult work, generally well written, sometimes beautifully crafted, but rambling and loosely structured, with elegant and powerful insights randomly scattered throughout.

Lovers of Proust who happen to be historians will certainly benefit from a close reading of this book, but it would be difficult to recommend it to generalists who are not in the above category. One may compare the historian's ordinary perception and utilization of time in is or her work, not to mention everyday life, with Bowie's view that against the pessimism of linear time and its losses [Proust's] book provides us ... with an optimistic view of time as connection-making and irrepressible potentiality. This time is not a concept, or a connected series of points, or a fixed scale against which geological epochs or human life-spans can be measured. It is a stuff and there for the handling" (p. 64). A professional historian would need to have an intimate knowledge of *la recherche du temps perdu*, and be willing to suspend received notions, to appreciate Bowie's remark that "inside the [Proustian] sentence we are currently reading earlier sentences continue to sound. Present reading time is haunted by reading times past" (p. 52).

Bowie's analysis of morality in Proust is provocative, original, and persuasive. He develops convincingly the argument that even though most scholars have found Proust to be "very impressive indeed on questions of time, memory, and desire [yet] really rather unimpressive on questions of vice and virtue," Proust's book has "a distinctive moral design to it that deserves to be included among the splendours of the Proustian imaginary world... Vice and virtue ... are essential critical concepts that the Proust reader cannot afford to be without" (p. 177).

The chapter on "Sex" is extremely insightful and helps us to read, or reread Proust in a new light. Bowie points

out that "one of the things that makes Proust's account of sex so compelling is precisely that sexual appetite is subject to displacement and endlessly transferable into other areas of human thought and behaviour. Eros is within touching distance of everything else that the book contains" (pp. 211-212).

Bowie's analysis of the Proustian treatment of death is powerful and elegant, and could not be more beautifully stated. He reminds those of his readers who have read all of *la recherche*, of the amazing scene of the final reception, "in this novel of many receptions", when, at the end of World War I, we meet the surviving characters and see how they have aged. I shall cite a fairly lengthy passage, to show how beautifully Bowie can write. The party-goers:

...could be almost plague sufferers, so swollen, disfigured, and contorted are their faces. Death is everywhere on display. Everyone is enjoying a brief stay of execution to enable them to attend a last, lingering *matinee*, but the grave has already claimed them. Proust seizes upon the commonplace phrase 'un pied dans la tombe' and restores much of its literal meaning: Staying alive involves muscular resistance to a continuous downwards and deathwards pressure. The narrator, whose artistic project has by now acquired a sudden new impetus, has himself recently been brushed by a dark wing and does not know whether he will live to complete his task.

Then in his next paragraph Bowie brilliantly swings, or jolts his reader right back to the unforgettable opening pages of *la recherche* where "a deeper and more elusive terror is to be felt. The child the narrator once was hovers between sleep and waking, desiring darkness but recoiling from it too." Bowie goes on to reconstruct powerfully that almost primal scene, wherein "the narrated child and the narrating adult are not the same person at all; growing up has driven them apart; they are at either end of a continuous procession of selves and now feel foreign to each other..." (all from p. 269.)

Yet no historical context is provided; I had to check a biography of Proust to confirm that my memory was correct and he was born in 1871. Indeed, there is no context except the text, Proust's enormous novel itself, and it is cited randomly throughout Bowie's book. There is no connecting in the temporal, no sequential sense that the work was published in seven separate sections totalling 15 volumes between 1913 and 1927, and covers a period from Proust's childhood in the 1870s through the end of World War I. Bowie is so resistant to any context beyond the original text that in the chapter on sex there is not the slightest indication of Proust's own homosexuality. Never do we learn that the model for the narrator's mistress, the splendidly sensual Albertine, was Proust's chauffeur Alfred Agostinelli.

Bowie is captivated by Proust, as is this reviewer. But in this kind of study, which is after all analytic, does it make sense to cite so extensively? There are points in the text where it reads like a tissue of quotes strung together. The chapter on "Art" is fifty-seven pages, more than twenty of which are citations in French followed by English translations.

One might have expected chapter IV, "Politics", to be of more interest to the historian, even if according to Bowie, Proust always presents political life at a distance, refracting it through the particular optic of aristocratic, or pretentiously upper-bourgeois salons. One can certainly agree with Bowie that Proust "aestheticises politics" (p. 173), but could not this be said of all novelists, even perhaps the tractor realist variety in the Stalinist USSR, yet this in no way diminishes their interest and utility for historians.

Bowie mentions (p. 129) that Proust's narrator does meditate on the Dreyfus Affair, and notes briefly the Dreyfusism of Robert de Saint-Loup, but does not add that this leads the young Marquis into violent arguments with his fellow officers, slowed down his military career, and prevented him from getting into the Jockey Club.[1] Bowie leaves the Dreyfus crisis, which so marked the last fin-de-sicle and so deeply influenced Proust, fairly quickly and moves into the arena of sexual politics. He does not refer to passages, which to this reviewer are quite insightful from a historical perspective, and indicate that politics are more tightly woven into Proust's narrative than Bowie would concede.

To illustrate briefly: the Dreyfus Affair becomes a recurring theme in *la Recherche du temps perdu*, beginning with vol. VI, the irst part of *Le Ct des Guermantes*, with references to the major characters, Picquart, Esterhazy, and Dreyfus himself, cropping up on almost every page. These characters all take strong positions, often but not invariably dictated by their social status and religious and racial background.[2] The narrator, Marcel, is quite careful to disguise his own sentiments as he objectively describes those of his characters. A close scrutiny of the text does uncover indications of his Dreyfusist position. Marcel's father, a personal friend of Prime Minister Jules Maline, was convinced of Dreyfus's guilt, and did not speak to his son for eight days, when he learned that the latter had followed "a different line of conduct."[3] Later

the narrator offhandedly notes that he was involved in several duels during the high period of the Dreyfus Affair, but no details are given.[4]

On account of her Dreyfusism, Mme Sazerat, who used to be an anti-Semite, now receives M. Bloch *pre* with pleasure in her salon.[5] The character who is perhaps most affected by the Dreyfus Affair is Charles Swann. Swann assures Marcel that all the Guermantes are at heart anti-Semitic, and Marcel observes, with a touch of sadness and irony, that Swann's Dreyfusism has made him, once the wisest and wittiest man of the world, rather naive and illogical. Swann now classifies people according to whether they are Dreyfusist (thus intelligent) or not (thus stupid) and puts "all his admirations and all his disdains to the test of a new criterion, Dreyfusism."[6] And so he has forgotten his past criticisms of Georges Clemenceau and now sees Maurice Barrs as a man with no talent. The Prince de Guermantes makes a real turnabout and becomes a Dreyfusist, owing to his contact, while taking *les eaux*, with two charming princesses who are pro-Dreyfus.[7] None of the above is mentioned in Bowie's chapter on politics.

There is another reference to the Dreyfus Affair in *la recherche* which Bowie does not cite. I wish he had taken note of it and even interpreted it from the perspective of a scholar of literature. It has special resonance for intellectual historians because it advocates disengagement, *dgagement*, a decade before the noun *engagement* came to be used in France in its modern sense of political involvement, particularly of the intellectual class. This is in the final volume, *Le Temps retrouve*, when the narrator presents his view of what the novelist's task should be. There is an "interior book" which it is the writer's duty to unlock, and no one can help him in this solitary effort:

Yet how many have turned away from writing this book, how many tasks have been assumed, in order to escape this one. Every event, whether it be the Dreyfus Affair, whether it be [Great] War, has furnished writers with other excuses to avoid deciphering this book; they wanted to assure the triumph of justice, to remake the moral unity of the nation and did not have the time to think of literature. But all this was nothing but excuses, because they had no genius, or had lost their genius (that is to say their instinct). For instinct dictates our duty, and intelligence furnishes us with pretext to evade it.[8]

Has the case for the artist's remaining in the ivory tower ever been more beautifully put? Proust is surely among the stars, as Bowie demonstrates wonderfully in his epilogue, "Starlight on Balbec Beach", but Proust is also among people, and within a society, and he was profoundly grounded within that society. There are sections in Bowie's book which are stunningly elegant, which help us understand Proust's aesthetics, his brilliant reconfiguration of time, his amazing presentations of relations between (and within) the sexes. If Bowie had devoted some of his enormous erudition and talent to assuring that this work truly was what he has claimed it to be, it would provide a marvelous incentive for those American readers, and I am convinced that the group would still be relatively small, who have read the first volume, *Du Ct de Chez Swann* (*Swann's Way*). They would be incited to embark on the fabulous voyage of discovery which is to read Proust's masterpiece in its entirety.

Notes

[1]. Vol. VI, *Le Ct des Guermantes*, part I, pp. 127-128, 131 (original edition is cited throughout my translations).

[2]. M. de Guermantes remarks emphatically, "When one's name is the Marquis de Saint-Loup, one is not a Dreyfusard, what more can I say!" (vol. VII, *Le Ct des Guermantes*, part II, p. 71).

[3]. Vol. VI, p. 185.

[4]. Vol. IX, *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, part I, p. 16.

[5]. Vol. VII, p. 137.

[6]. Vol. IX, p. 243.

[7]. Vol. IX, pp. 180-181.

[8]. Vol. XV, *Le Temps retrouve*, Part II, p. 23.

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