
Proust and the Private Life

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How Proust Can Change Your Life: Not a Novel, by Allain de Botton. *New York: Pantheon Books, 1997. 160 pp. \$19.95.*

The Year of Reading Proust, by Phyllis Rose. *New York: Scribner's, 1997. 280 pp. \$23.*

"Generations of critics have told us we are not supposed to read novels for what they have to tell us about life," observes Phyllis Rose. If this is true, if fiction is not supposed to tell us about life, then the contemporary literary world is a fabulous success. Too often nowadays, the American novel reveals little about enduring human experience and much about the dry social and political issues that are supposed to animate us. It is as if only those subjects that "raise awareness" are deemed worthy by contemporary writers.

Still, some readers prefer to intensify their appreciation for the perennial drama that is life. In his essays and especially in his multi-volume novel *Remembrance of Things Past*, Marcel Proust shows that a deeper life can be gained by seeing the ordinary as the significant. He engendered in his readers a finer sensitivity to the details of their own

experience. If two new books bearing his name are any indication, Proust may be coming back into fashion.

If you do not have time to read all the volumes of *Remembrance of Things Past* (or if you cannot fit it on your bookshelves), Alain de Botton's book, which highlights the best in Proust, is a good alternative. *How Proust Can Change Your Life: Not A Novel* provides exactly what its title promises: an insightful, concise explanation of how to live more perceptively, intensely and genuinely. Botton has collected (the more) perceptive parts of Proust's *oeuvre*, both fiction and essay. Proust speaks for himself, but Botton's ability to add something to those insights indicates that he is a man who has already had his life changed by a careful reading of Proust. Botton means to make that change contagious.

Botton points out that Proust's descriptions are so good that you see

your own subtle feelings in them and know that you are not alone. The trials that you believe you cannot handle, you can indeed get through, for Proust draws a map of similar difficulties endured. Botton observes that Proust's work "stretches to an ability to describe [our experiences] far better than we would have been able, to put a finger on perceptions that we recognize as our own, but could not have formulated on our own." Proust shows that philosophy emanates from our own experience, illustrating that philosophy, as J. M. Miclot puts it, is "nothing other than the articulation of desire."

Indeed, Proust linked feelings to the acquisition of knowledge. He wrote, "We imagine that we know exactly what things are and people think, for the simple reason that we do not care about them. But as soon as we have a desire to know, as the jealous man has, then it becomes a kaleidoscope in which we can no longer distinguish anything." Botton comments on a man who is tortured by the desire to know a woman: "He understands what is hidden from him in the light of what is revealed, and therefore understands nothing."

Proust called the reading of newspapers "an abominable and sensual act." He wrote that the events in newspaper articles "are transformed for us, who don't even care, into a morning treat, blending in wonderfully, in a particularly exciting and tonic way, with the recommended ingestion of a few sips of café au lait." This distancing of life was intolerable to a person who experienced life as

directly at any one moment as did Proust. Botton reflects, "The more an account is compressed, the more it seems that it deserves no more space than it has been allocated." Hence, the trivialization of contemporary life history by its reduction to celebrities and social power.

The Year of Reading Proust is the journal of a woman who seems to have spent most of her year avoiding reading Proust while running in famous and privileged circles. In fact, she spends so much time talking about not reading Proust that her book might more aptly be titled, "A Year In My Fabulous Life When I Nearly Got A Little Reading Done."

Certainly, Phyllis Rose is inspired by Proust's approach to writing. She explains her own problems in such detail that her problems become the reader's. Her problems, however, seem rather trivial. What, for instance, does the reader gain from sharing Rose's experiences with her landlord and neighbors in Key West or with menu-decisions for a dinner she gave for Salman Rushdie at the request of Sonny Mehta and Bob Stone (who, we learn, did not thank her for her hospitality)? The illness of Rose's friend, Annie Dillard, comes across as just another opportunity for name-dropping, at which the author is proficient.

Her enthusiasm for detailing her reactions is indiscriminate. She writes about the rise and fall of the Beatles, her feelings about the Kennedy assassination, and the merits of a Mercedes-Benz. The problem with such a memoir is that not everything

celebrated in the public consciousness is all that interesting. Rose does not seem able to put critical distance between her fabulous life and her writing. Hers are reactions, not reflections.

The last fifteen pages of the book are Rose's best. She takes up Proust for a look. "I realized what he left out was the chaos. Proust has no random bombs, no anarchists. He is interested in the evolution of society, not in aberrations and ineffective protests against it," Rose writes. The last pages also contain a few telling notes about other writers. For example, Wordsworth said that poetry consisted of emotion recollected in tranquility. "It annoyed me that he didn't say exactly how long you have to wait to be tranquil," Rose responds.

Questioning the very notion of 'remembering things past,' Rose asks whether it is necessary to go back from where you started to find out who you are, as C. S. Lewis wrote, or if, as Wallace Stevens wrote, you can invent yourself like a work of fiction.

Both Botton and Rose opt to refer to Proust's novel as *In Search of Lost Time*, the title used in a new translation. That is surprising, since the new title lacks the wistful poetic quality of *Remembrance of Things Past*, something the two authors certainly can appreciate. The new title is a more 'literal' translation of the title Proust gave his novel, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, but the French title does not translate literally in all that it inti-

mates and evokes. Proust took his title from Voltaire's translation of Shakespeare's Sonnet 30, so when C. K. Moncrieff wrote the first English translation of *A la recherche du temps perdu* in the year before Proust's death, he used Shakespeare's words. The sonnet captures Proust's experience far better than the more word-for-word translation does. *In Search of Lost Time* sounds vaguely scientific, like a cross between a dig at the Aztec ruins and Einstein's Theory of Relativity.

Proust's masterpiece does not suffer much for the error, and *How Proust Can Change Your Life: Not A Novel* is a must-read for anyone who appreciates fiction that probes beneath the illusions of popular culture to reveal the way we actually experience life. However, too many of Botton's closing paragraphs start with "The lesson?"—sending a prickly feeling down the spine. If the reader has not come to his own conclusions by this point, such blunt didacticism will not help. Proust himself was never didactic, he never permitted the afterthought to camouflage the actual. Nevertheless, Botton ably shows how Proust satisfies the need to affirm that the substance of life is in the private. Such wisdom is timely, for, as Peter Viereck has said, "the fight is for the private life. On the other hand, in certain moral crises the fight is not only for the private life but also for the publicly-embattled right to have a private life."