

## Monsieur Proust

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Marcel Proust died on November 18th 1922, fifty-one years old. Present at his deathbed was his brother - the medical professor Robert Proust, his personal physician Bize, and his maid - Celeste Albaret, the author of the present memoirs. It took place at his home on rue Hamelin in the 16th Arrondissement, to which he had taken abode, after having been forced to vacate somewhat grander rooms on rue Hausmann just after the war. He had always been of delicate health since a child, due to an asthmatic condition which would haunt him to the very end of his life. Much of his time in the past ten years had been spent in bed, furiously working, keeping odd hours. As with many invalids, death although imminent, had been continually postponed; although during the last month of his life, a severe bout of influenza had been followed by a cold that further weakened his already frail constitution and exacerbated his asthma. He refused any intrusive treatment to ease the congestion of his lungs, and most likely a final touch with pneumonia gave him 'un coup de grace'. His gaze, if silent, remained intense until the last. The body was kept for a few days on lit de parade in his bed chamber and given a burial on November 22. By that time his literary fame was quite established, although his death did not result in a public procession, with which his father's had been honored, not yet twenty years before. Among the close circle of family members was included his maid Albaret on the insistence of his brother. No will was written, and apart from a few trinkets of souvenirs, she was left with nothing more palpable, than fittingly enough, her memories. On the subject of her memories she kept quiet for over fifty years, until in her early eighties she was sought out and subjected to interviews, the extensive transcriptions of which, constitute the present memoirs.

Now there are natural questions to ask. First, how reliable are those interviews? Even if not representing willful distortions, and taking due account of the inevitable fading of memory, especially as to factual details, over half a century; how sure are we of her interpretations? In short did she maintain the necessary sophistication and intelligence to even fathom what was really going on, because if not, no matter how sincere and faithful her recollections are, they can at best be misleading, did she lack the clue as how they fitted together. Such misgivings may be now seen as condescending, while they certainly would have been taken as tacit, at the time of his demise (which incidentally could explain her long silence). True, Celine Albaret, was a young innocent and uneducated woman, plucked as a wife from the provinces by a somewhat older man, serving as Proust's driver. She had never been to Paris before, and she did not even know how to perform the simplest household chores when she arrived, having, as she explained it, been spoiled by her mother. Secondly, we have no idea how those interviews were made. Were she free to just report or was she subjected to a cross-examination? In the first case, she obviously was free only to divulge what she chose to do, and thus even if factually true, what she may have decided to tell may be a very partial and unrepresentative story, hiding many crucial ingredients.

But of course this is life. What we actually know is most often something very fragmented and accidental, and this is something we just have to accept, at least provisionally. What seems clear from her book is that she and Proust made a perfect match. What he was looking for was not efficiency but devotion. Her tasks were not technically demanding, but what was demanding was the need to be constantly at his service, in order to pander to his whims at any time of the day, which actually meant at night, as he worked through the night, consequently rising late in the afternoon. Most likely her observation is correct that he approved of her and became dependent on her was due to the fact that he sensed that she waited upon him not out of duty but of natural desire to be with him, which of course made him feel less inhibited to rely on her services as he would understand that they would bring her as much pleasure as they would to him. She did not have to cook, he ate almost nothing, and the few times anything was required, there were always restaurants nearby. (Her husband Odilon used to the very end bring him cold beer from the kitchen of Ritz, to which he had unofficial steady access). Important though were the coffee with milk she had to prepare for him. The coffee had to be bought at the same source and prepared according to some exacting conditions, and generously doused with milk, which seems to have been his only consistent source of nourishment after he gave up his intermittent croissants. Otherwise her duties were of running errands, delivering letters, letting visitors in and out, and waiting for him to arrive in the early morning, because he never bothered by such worldly things as house-keys.

Now what do you expect from such a tale that his maid could provide? She who stayed with him for nine years until the very end, as the reader has already learned, and acting as the proverbial fly on the wall. First and foremost you do expect an exhaustive account of the mundanity of quotidian life at the time of the war, at the very end of the Grand Époque. Our bodies are tied down to the realities of contemporary technology and fashion, even if our minds may soar and transcend such accidental settings. So, as already indicated, Albaret is able to give us an account of the coffee-making and the rituals connected to it, as well as give us a description of Proust clothing, and habits with towels and handkerchiefs. (He discarded a towel after just one use, just as his delicate nose could only stand one kind of linen, and just as the Princess in the story of H.C.Andersen, he was able to foil her attempts at smuggling in substandard material). We get a feel of the gossipy nature of an apartment house with its concierges (often an old couple), and also the glittering world outside of smart shops, fancy restaurants and magnificent opera houses. Although for the last ten years of his life Proust lived as a recluse, he nevertheless accepted many a social invitation, and saw a steady stream of visitors, even if he, according to his maid, had many turned away at the door. Proust lived just for one thing, namely the completion of his cycle of novels, but to do so, he had to do 'research' keep up with his friends and gather information. Sometimes his forays into the social world, he ostensibly had renounced, were successful, bringing with them the needed material for his book, sometimes, as to be expected, they were not, but insufferable wastes of time, of which he was so perennially short.

Such things are interesting of course, but only as a backdrop, what really intrigues the reader is gossip. Was she privy to any interesting gossip? Did Proust feel inspired to share confidences with her? Was he perhaps even stimulated to do so, feeling that he

could trust to her unwavering discretion and unqualified loyalty? And if so, did the gossip make sense to her, because if not, she would not be able to relay it. As to her intelligence, one may be forgiven to assume that it was limited. Shrewd she may have been, but hardly very sophisticated. Her sincerity in her admiration for her employer is not to be doubted, and clearly her steadfast loyalty, makes her always look out from his perspective, in fact what other perspective would be available to her of a society of which she had no alternate exposure or knowledge? She is constantly stressing the kindness and sincerity of Proust, and his uncanny ability to see through people, to observe them coldly, including himself. From this she concludes that he never really had any real friends, even if there was a fair share of affection with some of the people he had known for a very long time. He always being impeccably polite, she suspects that people usually did not realize how marginal they were in his needs. Once they had served their purposes he could do without them.

The one motivation she brings up for breaking her silence fifty years after his death was to set the record straight. Unsurprisingly Proust became a legend after his death, and as a legend he was fair prey for speculation, most of it, necessarily with no foundation. The most persistent and intriguing of those speculations does of course refer to his sexual orientation. Proust was not indifferent to the charms of women, whether those infatuations, of which he had many, went deeper than mere gallantry and involved real sexual desire, we really do not know. Albaret is honest and intelligent enough, to realize that she cannot rule out the case of his homosexuality, but only deny that it ever took any striking forms during her nine years of his household, and sure enough she would have been in a position to tell. True, he went out, and he did show an almost untoward curiosity towards the going-on in brothels, including homo-sexual ones, and he kept on his pay-roll as an informer, a most shady character running establishments of ill-repute and more often than not, briefly kept in legal custody. But the curiosities of Proust were truly omnivorous, and those facts by themselves, reveal very little one way or another. The case for Proust purported homosexuality lies elsewhere, not through the forensic search of clues, but in his general approach to life and the nature of his sensibilities, on which Albaret has nothing to comment.

Quite a few characters do pass review, some of them vividly depicted, such as the Comte de Montesquiou (vulgarly referred to as the model for Charlus) who always thought so highly of himself and his literary ability. Also Gide makes an appearance, if in a very unflattering way. Gide was a reader who rejected Proust's original submission, most likely out of hand, without even having read the manuscript<sup>1</sup> dismissing the author as a mere dandy. Of course with the success of 'Swanns Way' when it finally appeared, Gide had to eat his hat several times over, and came rushing to Proust in order to make amends, something the latter found very amusing. In short, she was eventually to meet most of the people in his social circle, either by running errands and delivering messages or letters (some of those letters Proust insisted having back, rightfully surmising that after his death they would fetch nice prices) or by attending at his bedside. Still she makes no independent observations of them (the case of Gide as a 'fake monk' being an exception, and one which Proust takes to) but sees them more or less entirely in the way she has been taught to.

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<sup>1</sup> The ms was submitted in a parcel to the publisher, a parcel tied up with a very artful knot performed by a servant of Proust. It was returned with the very same knot, which to Proust was proof enough

The serious reader is of course most interested in the working habits of Proust. Of those she has very little to report. For one thing, writing is mental, and most of the work is not on display. The actual writing on paper, or by dictation, or whatever form it will eventually take, just being the result. When he wrote he used bibs, eschewing the fountain-pen<sup>2</sup>. Of bibs and penholders he was not particular, only wanting a generous supply within easy reach, so when he dropped a pen, he would not need to look for it, but could have another one immediately at hand, so as not to interrupt the flow. Proust also preferred to write than to dictate (maybe saving his asthmatic breath), and his manuscripts became unwieldy aggregates of pages and slips of paper pasted on to each other<sup>3</sup>. Given the proofs, there was bound to be a lot of corrections turning every page into a palimpsest. Proust occasionally asked her to check some facts in an Encyclopedia (what would he have made of the internet?) otherwise he relied on older notebooks, one particular suite of 32 numbered black ones, he ordered her to burn, an order which she unlike Kafka's friend, decided to loyally execute, much to the detriment and consternation of future Proust scholars<sup>4</sup>. The cycle of Proust's novels make up a cathedral. Once the general structure is in place, there is endless room for improvisation and digression, which of course is the way the novels present themselves to the reader. It must have been a delight to write them, anything was food for his thought, any clever remark could in some way or another find its way into the novels, which became a big receptacle for anything he could come across. His curiosity was legion, well-known are his insistent questions to Harold Nicolson in connection with the peace talks at Paris. He just did not want to know the bare facts, he also wanted all the telling details in addition; and the same kind of relentless hunger for the significant particular, also characterized his cross-examinations of his maid, was he on the scent of something interesting. And it is of course this density of detail that gives to his descriptions such a vividness. But of course it is never enough to pile detail upon detail, as many readers of tedious descriptions can testify to. Details should not make mere inert catalogues but provide cascades, just as the eye cascades over a scene, its search revealing more and more.

So was the Marcel Proust, the semi-invalid writing from his bed, identical to the narrator of the novels? Reading her account it is very difficult not to make an identification. He certainly comes across with the same temperament and sensibility. Of course many of the incidents in the novel have direct counterparts to his life, but that does not mean that one should expect a one-to-one correspondence between the events of the novel and its people with his factual life. Even his maid would find such an expectation naive and a severe underestimation of his powers of imagination. Obviously almost everything in the novel has a real source, but the way it is put together is due to the imagination. Even our

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<sup>2</sup> It is remarkable that as late as the late 50's I was taught to write with a bib at elementary school, using an ink-pot and blotting paper. A connection to the times of Proust, of which I could not have been consciously aware.

<sup>3</sup> Incidentally, Albaret proved herself useful here, by suggesting a method of pasting paper, as to forestall any possible confusion by the printer

<sup>4</sup> yet given the fact that the finished bulk of Proust remains and was never meant for the flames, it would have been far more calamitous had it been the other way around, on the other hand, then we probably would never have heard about Kafka and not had any inkling of what we had lost

factual memories, faithful as we may believe them to be, are reconstructions.

I referred to the memoirs as a transcription, and I am afraid that this is what it is. France is an elitist society, and writing and speaking are still considered very different things. While in more egalitarian societies, everyone is expected to be able to write, and are even encouraged to do so, this is not the case in France. A woman like Albaret would never have trusted herself to write. Short letters maybe, but not anything ambitious. It is true that Proust, at least according to her account, very much encouraged her to keep a diary. (Maybe he was envisioning her as his Boswell, well aware of the posthumous fame which may come his due). He even suggested that he continually read it and even edit it. Although she in later years very much regretted not to have kept a diary, at the time the idea must have struck her as preposterous, especially the idea of Proust himself taking time off from his own writing to attend to hers. (But of course he must have seen it as a minor component of his own encompassing endeavor.).

Not enough time. But in the end, almost at the very end, he could one night triumphantly report to her. The novel is finished, he had been able to write the words - the end. Of course this did not mean that it was practically finished, there was still plenty of room for corrections and endless digressions, but the overall structure was finally in sight, what remained was but the polish.

Proust died in 1922. It was after the end of the war, after the Belle Époque had definitely gone, as he well knew (otherwise what purpose had there otherwise been to the writing?). Celeste Albaret lived on for more than sixty years dying in 1984. It is sobering to think that there were still that late in our age direct ties to the world of Proust. And in fact when I first encountered him in the spring of 1965, there were still contemporaries of his alive. That distant age, irretrievably lost, was still within living memory.

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