

---

H-France Review Vol. 16 (December 2016), No. 293

Bette H. Lustig, *The Concept of the Soul in Marcel Proust: Homophilia, Misogyny, and the Time-Memory Correlative*. New York and Bern: Peter Lang Publishing, 2016. ix + 169 pp. Bibliography and index. \$78.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4331-3189-9.

Review by Casey Walker, The Cooper Union.

In the nearly 100 years since his death, fascination with Marcel Proust, both inside and outside of academia, has grown so various that it sometimes seems Proust's work can be marshaled to speak to almost any concern at all. There are popular books that deputize Proust to explain neuroscience or that claim his work can "change your life." Today, if we refer to the "image of Proust," we are no longer necessarily making reference to the famous Walter Benjamin essay of that name. We might be speaking of the image of the soulful, dark-eyed Proust that is published in the back of *Vanity Fair* magazine every month, accompanying a "Proust questionnaire," wherein celebrities answer such questions as "What is your greatest extravagance?" or "What do you consider the most overrated virtue?" Proust's widely dispersed cultural image often puts the critic in the position of peeling away the cultural rind that has accumulated around *À la recherche du temps perdu*. It is true, however, that Proust's popularity indicates something meaningful about his work. *À la recherche* is a novel so capacious, so multivalent in its interests, that almost no single angle of vision feels sufficient to the whole—it can, indeed, speak, and be spoken about, in an almost limitless number of ways.

Bette H. Lustig's book *The Concept of the Soul in Marcel Proust* offers a careful close reading of Proust's work that mines it for the spiritual ideas it contains. Lustig has a series of arguments to make about Proust and the "soul," though admittedly these arguments are not always bound together into a close enough relationship to one another. It is a slim book of three chapters, the first of which feels most novel to Proustian scholarship, examining the concept of the soul in *À la recherche* with reference to Jewish, Celtic, and Platonic sources. The following chapter delves less successfully into Proust's conception of the souls of women, and the final one seeks to explicate Proust's idea of the "soul" as it relates to *À la recherche's* explorations of time and memory.

For a book that promises a conceptual framework in the title, the opening chapter is surprisingly—though sometimes excitingly—loose and omnivorous in its sources and references. Lustig's key texts are excerpts from Cicero, Plato, Rabbinical sources, and Maurice Maeterlinck—an "author closer to Proust's time, whom Proust read and who influenced him," Lustig contends (p. 7). The overall impression her book leaves is that none of these lineages of the "soul"—not even Maeterlinck's—predominates in *À la recherche*. Rather, in Lustig's telling, Proust is engaged in a kind of bricolage. In other words, Lustig's book might more accurately have been titled the "concepts" of the soul in Marcel Proust.

For Lustig, one of the primary uses of the concept of the soul in Proust is in "the reiteration of the theme of imprisonment and temporary deliverance" (p. 27). "Like the souls of the deceased in the Celtic tradition yearning to be delivered," Lustig writes, "the Narrator's soul is also seeking to communicate

with the world outside of himself or herself, to be liberated” (p. 25). This argument squares nicely with the romantic passions that drive much of the novel for central figures such as Swann or the narrator, passions which are almost always figured in terms of imprisonment, deliverance, and the transformations of remembrance.

Deeper in the book, Lustig’s variegated approach to the Proustian soul can cause a certain feeling of disjointedness to enter into the overall argument. It may indeed be true that the Proustian concept of the soul has roots in a wide body of traditions, but when the Celtic and Jewish sources are quoted right alongside the ideas of Plato or Maeterlinck, the final effect can be something of a muddle. The concept of the soul starts to seem like no concept at all—either so broad and wide as to be difficult to make use of, or so narrow in particular examples as to not really rise to the level of a “concept.”

Lustig’s argumentative method is largely one of close-reading, and while the book is filled with detailed attention to Proust’s language, in much of the book long block quotation follows upon long block quotation and the promise of the larger argument becomes lost in a minutiae of examples that are not expertly bound to an overarching architecture. This is especially the case in the long chapter on Proust’s perceptions of the souls of women. Here, Lustig brings together numerous examples of “the ways in which a woman’s activities...are depicted in a negative, indeed a pejorative, light, especially with respect to her interaction with a male character” (p. 81). Lustig’s close textual analysis, she claims, “examine[s] some of Proust’s negative perceptions of the souls of women in...his portrayal of characters such as Odette, Albertine, Gilberte, Rachel, and finally the daughter of Vinteuil” (p. 90). It is somewhat dispiriting to find all of these rich, distinct characters lumped together under the umbrella of a singular “negative perception,” even when Lustig adds the caveat that “these perceptions and portrayals are the male view of these women” (p. 91). Moreover, it is hard to discern where this argument about Proust’s concept of the “soul” has taken us. Are we simply to conclude that in Proust, as in Plato, “women are...portrayed as unintelligent” (p. 103)? Lustig notes that in the *Symposium*, “women are...referenced disparagingly” (pp. 102), so wouldn’t this indicate that a certain misogyny exists within the classical understanding of the “soul”? Is the issue at stake, then, Proust’s (or the narrator’s) own dislike and distrust of women, or should we in fact be searching further back into the history of this concept of the “soul” to explicate the ways that concept itself might have given rise to certain forms of misogyny? This is a promising line of inquiry that is largely allowed to drop.

In the final chapter of her study, Lustig brings her examination of the “soul” into the widest and most studied terrain of Proustian scholarship: *À la recherche’s* exploration of time and memory. While her method of patient and sensitive close-reading often unearths rich insights, it is in this chapter that the comparatively thin bibliography begins to show through. In such well-trod territory, the insights of Lustig’s close-reading might have been enriched by more robust attention to the long history of Proustian scholarship on these topics. A heterogeneous and dazzling compendium of writers and scholars have taken up Proust as a subject of study—everyone from Samuel Beckett to Walter Benjamin to Georges Poulet to Julia Kristeva to Gilles Deleuze (not to mention contemporary work by scholars too numerous to name). But none of these boldfaced names appear in the bibliography, and very little of the most recent work on Proust seems to have been consulted.

Towards the end of her book, Lustig writes, in what might serve as the closest definition of the Proustian soul: “Thus the soul, l’essence, in this blissful state, extricated, disentangled from the shackles of time and space, from present and past, from the constraints of sensorial associations, such as odor, is inspired and the imagination free to create. One may say that the soul is happiest at the moment of creation” (p. 143). The Proustian “soul” as the act of creation, liberated from the shackles of time, seems an apt way to consider a novel that is, in many ways, an extended record of the history of its own creation. In the end, Lustig has made a contribution to Proustian scholarship that is uneven, but suggestive.

Casey M. Walker  
The Cooper Union  
[c-walker@cooper.edu](mailto:c-walker@cooper.edu)

Copyright © 2016 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172