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Adam Watt, *Marcel Proust*. London: Reaktion Books, 2013. 208 p. Illustrations, notes, and select bibliography. \$ 16.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-78023-094-8.

Review by François Proulx, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

The year 2013, the centenary of the publication of *Swann's Way* (1913), was celebrated with a wealth of Proustian activities on both sides of the Atlantic: conferences, exhibitions, and publications, among them two very fine reference works by Adam Watt, the edited collection *Marcel Proust in Context* [1] and this new short biography for Reaktion Books' "Critical Lives" series. Why a new biography of Proust? English-language enthusiasts are not exactly wanting for choices: two magisterial works, Jean-Yves Tadié's 1996 *Marcel Proust* [2] and William C. Carter's 2000 *Marcel Proust: A Life* [3] rightfully stand as authoritative. Shorter biographies by Edmund White [4] and Mary Ann Caws [5] are still in print, and publishers regularly offer up biographical collections of "pictures and documents," including a recent volume by Mireille Naturel.[6] Yet this new book is a welcome addition to that crowded field, for among its many virtues—including its admirable erudition and vivacious style—is a determination to do away with some of the tenacious myths that shape the ways we think about Marcel Proust. Readers of Adam Watt's lively biography, even those familiar with Proust's work and life, will find it akin—to use a deliberately un-Proustian image—to cracking open a window in a stuffy room.

"Comfortable clichés" abound when it comes to Proust (p. 11): the mother's boy, the cork-lined room, the madeleine. All biographies following George Painter's highly important but flawed first effort worked to dispel some enduring oversimplifications: that *À la recherche du temps perdu* is an autobiography or a roman à clef, or that Proust lived the laborless life of a social butterfly before fully cloistering himself to write his novel.[7] Other myths are more pervasive, and color even recent work: Proust was "a martyr to art" and "miserably closeted," we read in White's account.[8] About the former, Watt stakes his claim early on: "appearances and mythologies to the contrary, there *was* pleasure in this existence" (p. 9). While he chronicles the decline of Proust's health in vivid detail (even in his early twenties Proust relied on "valerian, trional and amyl to help him sleep" as well as medicated cigarettes and anti-asthmatic powders to help him breathe, p. 74), he maintains that Proust was no martyr or ascetic. Proust traveled to see artistic and architectural treasures; even late in life, he enjoyed gossip dinners at the Ritz and frequented a male brothel on at least one documented occasion (pp. 152-53). More importantly, he deeply loved the work of writing. The spirit of "*recherche*" so central to Proust's life and work, argues Watt, is "an active search" that embraces life and its pleasures (p. 9)—accounting in no small part for the lasting appeal of his novel.

On questions of sexuality, Watt's biography is somewhat more reserved. He is careful, in citing salacious rumors such as the notorious allegation of Proust's enjoyment of cruelty to rats, to highlight the questionable source of the account and the ways it has been disputed, and concludes—with uncharacteristic reticence—that "[w]e will never know for sure how or with whom Proust found his pleasure but such details are little more than titillation for the prurient" (p. 154). On occasion, he chooses the safer explanation to questions of attachment and desire: commenting on the famous

photograph of Proust playfully holding a racquet like a guitar at a tennis court in 1892, Watt simply notes that the central figure in the image is Jeanne Pouquet, “whom Proust adored” (p. 59). Virginie Greene, in her biographical notice on Jeanne Pouquet (later Mme Gaston de Caillavet) in a 2004 collection of Proust’s letters, proposes a more complex but more likely explanation: Proust knowingly played the role of Jeanne’s spurned suitor to deflect her father’s misgivings about Gaston, while all the while “his love for Jeanne provided an alibi that hid his own undisclosed love for Gaston.”[9]

Such interpretations are never fully certain—indeed “we will never know for sure”—but neither are they gratuitously “prurient.” Watt makes a familiar argument for Proust’s universality, stating that all readers, “whatever our preferences or tastes,” have much to learn about love and desire from his novel (p. 154). That is undeniable, but the specificity of the biographical Proust’s amorous and sexual proclivities, as a male who pursued males in the particular cultural context of turn-of-the-century France, nevertheless deserves careful scholarly attention. This is a difficult task, given that many letters between Proust and his various actual or potential lovers, as Watt acknowledges, were “destroyed and what remains is almost exclusively undisclosed, in private hands” (p. 91). The best effort to date is William C. Carter’s unflinching *Proust in Love* [10], a complement to his 2000 biography. Much remains to be done as some of Proust’s most intimate letters, long held by wary families and guarded collectors, slowly trickle into the auction market.

Watt graciously acknowledges his debt to earlier biographies of Proust, and does not hesitate to cite some of Tadié’s and Carter’s (even Painter’s) best observations or bons mots. He also draws on recent biographies of Proust’s mother [11] and father [12], allowing his readers to enjoy such delightful anecdotes as the image of Proust wearing a suit “padded ... with thermogene wadding, a sort of medicated cotton wool” topped with “three coats and a swathe of assorted woolens” inside a church to attend his brother Robert’s wedding in January 1903 (p. 93). His main source, however, is Proust’s vast correspondence, which he evidently knows very well, citing and commenting letters that are not always highlighted in other biographies. Philip Kolb, the editor of the monumental twenty-one volume *Correspondance*, famously compared Proust’s letters to “the reverse side of a tapestry” where the “colors” and “threads” of his novel are visible in diffuse shapes.[13] Watt’s well-chosen citations and perceptive readings of Proust’s correspondence highlight how “practically every scrap of his experience nourished the book that began to take shape in 1908” (p. 113). All the while, he resists the lure of seeking keys to the novel, reminding us instead that Proust’s transpositions are usually complex transmutations—“the characters (and indeed the places) of *À la recherche* are almost never drawn from a single biographical source: they are composite, alloying memory, observation and invention” (p. 94).

Watt also adroitly draws on the substantial corpus of Proust’s works beyond the *Recherche*—essays, reviews, pastiches, some published only posthumously—effectively refuting the myth of the thirty-something Proust as a “dandy and partygoer” who had written “little more than ... a slim volume of short stories and two translations of Ruskin” when he undertook what would become his immense novel in 1908.[14] He highlights, for instance, Proust’s four “significant publications” in 1907 (p. 102): a striking essay on parricide, an article on a nineteenth-century memoir that sparks a long reflection on the telephone, a review of a poetry collection in which Proust contemplates writing’s privileged relation to its creator’s “deep self” (p. 103), and an essay on the exhilarating new sensations experienced in motorcar travel. Elements from every one of these texts, Watt points out, would “work their way (sometimes verbatim) into *À la recherche du temps perdu*” (p. 102). He likewise compellingly argues that Proust’s reactions to postwar artistic and political developments in France (for instance a treatise on modern music, or a reactionary literary-political manifesto, both in 1919) “are the responses of a critically engaged thinker alert to the issues of his times, not those of a blinkered, self-absorbed aesthete” (p. 172).

Throughout, Watt calls attention to amusing but significant details that connect Proust to the literary and cultural context of his era. For instance, Proust wrote one of his first short stories, “Violante ou la

Mondanité,” in August-September 1892, just as French readers (including his well-read mother) were gripped by Zola’s *La Débâcle*, a huge bestseller: the budding writer followed the established novelist in writing a “cautionary moral fable” (p. 64). Elsewhere we learn that one of Robert de La Sizeranne’s articles on Ruskin, which Proust read avidly, appeared in the March 1897 issue of *La Revue des deux mondes* where a concurrent article mentions Marcel’s father Adrien Proust and his significant contributions to the field of public hygiene (p. 82). Much later we find “a young poet by the name of André Breton” hired by Gallimard to correct typos on a set of printing proofs of *Le côté de Guermantes I* in 1920—quite unsuccessfully, it turns out, since the ailing Proust had to go over more than 200 errors left unmarked by Breton (p. 175).

Watt’s style is nimble, often witty, and never ponderous. A few typographical errors lightly mar the otherwise appealing material presentation of his book: “palate” for palette (p. 59), “tale” for tail (p. 128)—but then again, even Proust had his troubles with copyediting. Watt frequently uses French terms, sometimes without translation, especially in the early sections of the book dealing with Proust’s childhood and education: it’s unlikely that all readers of English will easily understand the meaning of a French “*baccalauréat*” (p. 33) in the late nineteenth century (it is, of course, not a bachelor’s degree). Strangely, a term like “bon viveur” appears without quotation marks or italics, while “*demi-mondainé*” is italicized two lines below (p. 18); on a later page, “*ancien régime*” is in italics while “Noblesse d’Empire” is not (p. 51). None of these small details detract from the very high quality of the work.

This new biography provides a brisk and highly engaging overview of Proust’s life in less than 200 pages. Its greatest merit may be how it corrects received ideas big and small: the “much touted cork-lined room,” for instance, turns out to be “relatively un-extravagant by Proust’s standards, particularly in the days before modern soundproofing and double-glazing” (p. 120). Proust himself rejected “unthinking recourse to cliché” (p. 108); with select friends he exchanged lists of “*louchonneries*” (p. 72), hackneyed sayings that made one cross-eyed (*loucher*) with amused exasperation, similar to Flaubert’s *idées reçues*. In a 1908 letter to Madame Straus, Proust writes: “Why, when we write ‘1871,’ should we inevitably add ‘that most abominable year’? Why is Paris immediately qualified as ‘the great city,’ Delaunay ‘the master painter’? ... Every writer must make his own language for himself ... only that which can bear the mark of our choice, our taste, our uncertainty, our desire, and our weakness, can be beautiful” (p. 109). [15] Proust would likely be cross-eyed at the thought of his work being inevitably linked to a pastry, or his name reduced to an adjective for an experience of involuntary memory. Adam Watt, with lively style and vast erudition, makes us see his remarkable life with new eyes, and that—much more than cork-lined rooms or madeleines—is what Proust is all about. This is finest short biography of Proust in print today.

NOTES

[1] Adam Watt, ed., *Marcel Proust in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[2] Jean-Yves Tadié, *Marcel Proust* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996); trans. Euan Cameron (Viking, 2000).

[3] William C. Carter, *Marcel Proust: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

[4] Edmund White, *Marcel Proust* (London and New York: Viking Penguin, 1999).

[5] Mary Ann Caws, *Marcel Proust* (New York: Overlook, 2005).

[6] Mireille Naturel, *Marcel Proust in Pictures and Documents*, Patricia Mante-Proust, ed., Josephine Bacon trans. (Zurich: Olms, 2013).

[7] George Painter, *Marcel Proust: A Biography*, 2 vols. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1959-1965).

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- [8] Edmund White, p. 7; jacket notes.
- [9] Virginie Greene, “Caillavet, Mme Gaston Armand de Caillavet née Jeanne Pouquet,” in Marcel Proust, *Lettres*, Françoise Leriche ed. (Paris: Plon, 2004), p. 1195.
- [10] William C. Carter, *Proust in Love* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).
- [11] Evelyne Bloch-Dano, *Madame Proust* (Paris: Livre de poche, 2004); trans. Alice Kaplan (Chicago, Ill. : University of Chicago Press, 2007).
- [12] Daniel Panzac, *Le docteur Adrien Proust : Père méconnu, précurseur oublié* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2003).
- [13] Philip Kolb, preface to Marcel Proust, *Correspondance* (Paris: Plon, 1970), vol. I, p. 9.
- [14] Edmund White, pp. 90-91.
- [15] I have slightly modified and added to Adam Watt’s translation based on Marcel Proust, Letter to Mme Straus [6 October 1908], in *Lettres*, pp. 461-462.

François Proulx
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
fproulx@illinois.edu

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