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Benjamin Taylor, *Proust: The Search*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015. xiv + 199 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$25.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-3001-6416-9; \$16.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-3002-2428-3.

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For the frontispiece of his biography, Benjamin Taylor chose Man Ray's photograph of Proust on his deathbed, taken on November 19, 1922, the day after the writer's death. This choice of illustration suggests that the biography is concerned equally with Proust's legacy and his life. Indeed, the subtitle is *The Search*, as though to advise readers that it will largely focus on Proust's work, *In Search of Lost Time*. One may therefore see this biography as a search to understand the process through which the novel took shape during Proust's life, a shape that led to his survival in the text, or a life more vibrant after the writer's death. At the close of his book, Taylor writes, "In the *Search* an entirely new understanding of life is indeed born, and with it the possibility, for each reader, of a new way of living. This culmination of European literature is also a gospel whose tidings are that nothing is lost that seems to be lost. And that nothing is wasted. Mind and heart secrete the whole of what has happened. Like disregarded books in some illimitable library, memories wait patiently in the dark to be summoned again to consciousness" (pp. 168-69).

Apart from its significance, this passage highlights one of the biography's outstanding features: its engaging style. After quoting from an erotic passage in Proust's early, unfinished novel *Jean Santeuil*, for instance, Taylor comments incisively, "This has the authority of bliss remembered" (p. 42). Or later, when discussing Proust's short texts "On Reading" (1906) and "Impressions While Traveling in an Automobile" (1907), Taylor judges that the writer has now reached a "mature idiom: relaxed, loose-limbed, light in the halter, intimating profundities with new élan" (p. 91). It is no surprise that such intellectual pleasures abound in this biography, because Taylor himself is an award-winning author of both fiction and nonfiction, who most likely recognizes in Proust his own identity as a writer.

Taylor's biography is dedicated to the celebrated poet James Merrill (1926-1995), who wrote his senior thesis on Proust while at Amherst. As was the case with Proust, Merrill was wealthy and his early publications were dismissed, facts that may explain the book's dedication. Taylor uses as epigraph an excerpt from Merrill's *Book of Ephraim*, where the poet declares that "foreshortening in Proust" toward the conclusion of the *Search* is a surprising "truth." This epigraph might function to justify Taylor's short biography of Proust—just over 200 pages long—as his own creative "foreshortening" of Proust's life. The two most recent biographies of Proust, to whose authority Taylor frequently refers—Jean-Yves Tadié's *Marcel Proust* (1996) and William C. Carter's *Marcel Proust, a Life* (2000)—count approximately 950 pages each, as though the extraordinary length of Proust's novel required similarly exhaustive biographies. Not to mention Carter's biographical account, *Proust in Love* (2010), which adds to these lengthy works, and Alain de Botton's short literary biography, *How Proust Can Change Your Life* (1997), to which Taylor nods graciously at the end of the prologue (p. xiv). When compared to such towering giants as Tadié and Carter, Taylor provides a pleasantly distilled version of Proust's life,

somewhat like Man Ray's photograph alluding to the writer's essence that remains after his death. It is therefore fitting that the prologue to Taylor's biography should open with a meditation on Man Ray's photograph.

Because it is fairly short, pleasurable to read, and well-researched, offering a blend of reflections and aesthetic insights with descriptive accounts, this biography can serve as an introduction to Proust in college courses. Some of its more pedagogical pages may result from a seminar on Proust that Taylor recently taught at Columbia University. For instance, chapters seven and eight usefully summarize the composition of *Swann's Way*—the first volume in the *Search*—while the book as a whole tracks the various stages of the novel's evolution and critical reception. The book is nicely illustrated as well, including photographs by the author and by the contemporary photographer Nicolas Drogoul. With such an array of qualities, Taylor's biography should appeal to general readers who might be curious to learn about Proust without having enough time to invest in a more comprehensive biography.

Just as importantly, because this book is published in the Yale University Press series entitled "Jewish Lives," it provides yet another cogent justification for a new biography of Proust. Its emphasis on relevant circumstances in Proust's life—notably his maternal Jewish background and the broader historical setting of the Dreyfus Affair, of which Taylor gives a comprehensive account—helps to explain challenges that Proust must have confronted in navigating his society. Besides welcoming in his circle the virulent anti-Semitic writer Léon Daudet, his "lifelong friend" (p. 26), Proust would brush with "some of the most distinguished Jew-haters in all of Europe" (p. 46), such as Maurice Barrès, François Coppée, and Edmond de Goncourt. Readers who may be preoccupied with fears of the cultural "other," such as Muslims in present-day North America and Europe, will appreciate the contemporary pertinence of this book, which details some of the ardent Judeophobia in France at the turn of the twentieth century. One of its most infamous exemplars was Édouard Drumont, who founded in 1869 the Anti-Semitic League of France, established in 1875 *La Libre parole*, "the leading French anti-Semitic newspaper," and published in 1886 *La France Juive*, "which sold 100,000 copies in two months and became the sacred text of French Jew-hatred" (p. 12). Taylor reveals how anti-Semitic views permeate the opinions of several characters in the *Search*, especially M. de Guermantes, who maintains that Jews are, "all secretly united and are somehow forced to give their support to anyone of their own race, even if they don't know him personally. It's a public menace. We've obviously been too easy-going" (Proust, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, quoted by Taylor, p. 60).

Writing for a series entitled "Jewish Lives," when the object of the biography barely acknowledged his Jewish background and only presented himself as Catholic, introduces another type of challenge. If Taylor rightly interprets Proust's rarely expressed ambivalence about Jews as a lack of "liberty to dislike them" (p. 47) when in the company of outspoken anti-Semitic acquaintances, he stays shy of interpreting obnoxious Jewish characters in the *Search*, such as Albert Bloch, as products of Proust's ambivalence. This raises the interesting question of the "abject" in the *Search*, which a critic such as Elisabeth Ladenson has addressed, showing how three secondary characters—"Bloch, Charlus, and Legrandin, who incarnate, respectively, Jewishness, homosexuality (or 'inversion'), and snobbery"—can be seen as abject, in the sense that these characters are blind to such traits in themselves while recognizing them lucidly in others.[1] Ladenson pertinently observes "the central problem for Proust (as well as his reader) in terms of Jewishness: he is not half-Jewish; rather, he is entirely Jewish because his mother was Jewish, and he is also entirely non-Jewish because he was baptized." [2] Distinct from the constraints in his life, through textual substitutions Proust gained complete freedom of expression and the ability to remain disconnected from the abject characters he created. Taylor does show how Proust courted the writer Robert de Montesquiou, "raving sycophantically in letter after letter. These make unpleasant reading; Charlus's characterization of the young Narrator as 'an hysterical little flatterer' comes to mind as an apt description of Marcel himself in this season" (p. 30). Perhaps Taylor misses the opportunity here to establish how Proust was able to create not only the "greatest homosexual in all of literature" with Charlus (p. 30) but also a rather unsympathetic protagonist with

his narrator, who may serve as a mode of self-criticism and self-derision. Taylor does provide a rare insight into Proust's failure to cast a public self removed from his Jewish heritage when he quotes from François Mauriac, who professed to admire Proust and yet who, in 1921, privately depicted the aging writer's "Jewish features, with his ten-day growth of beard, sinking back into ancestral filth" (Mauriac, *Oeuvres autobiographiques*, quoted by Taylor, pp. 155-56).

As have Proust's most recent biographers, Tadié and Carter, Taylor does not hesitate to address well-documented aspects of the writer's intimate behavior, such as homosexual love (p. 158), voyeurism, and particularly masturbation while watching famished rats tear each other apart. About such episodes he concludes, "what is so wretched about voyeurism and masturbation I do not see. It's the *rats* we recoil from" (p. 135). As this passage demonstrates, he will occasionally give his personal opinion. On Freud, for instance, "[Proust] never read Freud and would have found the discoveries of psychoanalysis superfluous if he had" (p. 138), or the French Academy, for which he seems to hold little regard, "when has the opinion of Quai de Conti's alleged immortals ever mattered, finally?" (p. 152). Whenever necessary, Taylor honestly acknowledges his own "speculations" (p. 86); for instance, he interprets Proust's fear "that he himself would not survive the writing of such scenes" as the death of the narrator's grandmother.

What is true of many biographers may be even more true of Proust biographers, who face absorbing dilemmas: how could such a masterpiece as *In Search of Lost Time* emerge from such an ordinary life as Proust's ostensibly was? How much of the life can be seen to inform the work? To what extent should one refrain from using the life to interpret the work or vice versa? Taylor reaches a decision early, in the prologue: "A biographer of Proust must begin with the following reversible axiom: The work is not 'explained' by the life; the life is not 'explained' by the work. All Proust's transactions between real life and its dramatization are in the care of the shape-shifting imagination, a creative not a recording capacity. Actual persons do not 'explain' any of the characters on whom they are said to be based" (p. x). A few pages later, he returns to this crucial axiom: "Proust's life is, like his book, a series of self-transformations; but not a series you can know from the *Search*, any more than the *Search* can be understood merely as the consequence of Proust's life" (p. xiii). Generally, Taylor stays faithful to this view of literary transmutation. For instance, in certain respects, Montesquiou "may be said to resemble Baron de Charlus in the *Search*. But Montesquiou is a curiosity of passing interest. Proust's imagination transmutes him into a figure on the scale of Don Quixote or Falstaff, a comic giant hedged about with sublime pathos" (p. 29). Sometimes, however, especially when biographical data is missing, Taylor comes close to regarding the life in terms of the work. When he discusses the famous Proustian episode of the "good night kiss," for instance, he seems tempted to place it in Proust's own experience (pp. 6-7). Conversely, Taylor will occasionally use the biographical to explain the literary, as when he appears to identify the historical Madame Lemaire with the Proustian character Madame Verdurin (p. 28). These examples simply indicate the biographer's taxing obligation to juggle between the work and the life.

It is regrettable that the book's extensive bibliography lists only a handful of women scholars. This may be significant when considering that Taylor appears to disregard the problematic makeup of a female character such as Odette, tending to fall into clichés from traditional Proustian criticism, which relies on Swann's own characterization of Odette. Taylor depicts her as "cunning but stupid" (p. 15), while also quoting Proust who recognized that Laure Hayman, a main model for Odette, had "genuine talent" (p. 16). Perhaps unconvincingly he resolves this ambiguity by noting that "Proust's characters always diverge from their putative models" (p. 16). A revisionary critique of Odette might detect in this character forms of intelligence that Swann morally disapproves of—in addition to her sensuous understanding, an extraordinary ability, born of necessity, to decipher social codes and adapt to them in order to escape subordination.

A few intriguing features need to be noted here. Taylor affirms that, in the late 1890s, "Proust was shaking off the mystique of Symbolism and turning to the realist art that was his calling" (p. 49). Maybe

assuming that the readers will understand, he does not offer an explanation of what “realist art” meant for Proust until later in the biography, when we learn that, “A fresh reality, neither subjective nor objective but artistic, is declared” (p. 69). Meanwhile, we are left with statements that seem to contradict what is commonly known as literary realism. To take one example only, “already one finds the slowly accreting conviction that *unbidden* memory is the artist’s passport to ‘true impressions,’ as he’ll call them, that these alone ‘resuscitate the timeless man within me’ and are the source of all beauty and all joy” (p. 62). For someone who would want to know more about realist art, a short clarification early in the book would be helpful. Somewhat confusing as well is the alternating use of the names “Marcel” and “Proust,” which do not seem to conform to a clear purpose. At first, one could think that “Marcel” designates the individual going about his life while “Proust” would designate the author, but “Proust” is often used interchangeably with “Marcel.” For instance, “Proust also sounded out [the publisher] Eugène Fasquelle...Marcel would claim Dostoyevsky...as his great teacher” (p. 108-09). And especially this: “A single letter from Proust to Alfred [Agostinelli] survives” (p. 118). The result in this case is that the reader perceives Agostinelli as inferior to Proust, which may be the intention.

While even in the most carefully edited books a typographical error is virtually unavoidable, it is surprising that Yale University Press would allow at least as many as twenty-four in this book, most occurring in the transcription of French words and names. Ironically, one particularly glaring error—“*Nouvelle Review Française*”—appears only three lines above the following sentence: “Grasset’s first edition [of *Swann’s Way*] contained at least a thousand misprints” (p. 115). Knowing how well Proust’s work fared in subsequent editions, there is no doubt that a second edition of Taylor’s biography will have repaired these oversights. Finally, some references one would expect are missing (see pp. 109, 125, and 134, for instance). Apart from such minor flaws, Taylor’s biography of Proust is eminently readable, informative, and enjoyable.

NOTES

[1] Elisabeth Ladenson, “Proust and the Marx Brothers,” in Christie McDonald and François Proulx eds., *Proust and the Arts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 213.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 220.

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