

V A N I T Y

F A I R

JUNE, 1923

A Note on Marcel Proust

*An English View of the Great French
Symphonist of the Emotions*

By CLIVE BELL

THOUGH in England, and in America, too, I gather, almost everyone who has read and understood, admires the works of Marcel Proust, it is not so in France. There, not to go beyond my own experience, I have met plenty of writers, and good ones too, who cannot away with them. Even that essay on the style of Flaubert, which I had supposed would be universally reckoned a masterpiece, I have heard described by a friend of mine, a charming poet and admired dramatist, as childish. Now when I hear such a one, and others whom I respect, disparaging Proust, I do not fly into a passion; I seek the cause, instead. And I find it, though the discovery—should they ever come to hear of it—would a good deal shock some of my French friends and surprise perhaps a few of my English, in politics.

The French themselves seem hardly to realize how sharp and deep their political divisions are become. Yet when we remember that during the last forty years politics have been able to make of that gentle latin scepticism, which gave us Montaigne, Beyle and Voltaire and still gives us M. Anatole France, something as narrow and bitter almost as Calvinism; when we hear of such pretty place-names as (say) St. Symphorien being changed into (say) Émile Combesville, we ought not to be surprised if even literature gets splashed in the dirty dog-fight.



Marcel Proust, who died last November, wrote novels without plot, in which formal technique was discarded. They are autopsychographical records, in the mazes of which the artist probes the enigmas of his actual and remoter self. His is the art of jaded nerves and exacerbated curiosity, yet it is not a perverse art, but one calm, wise, mature and sincere

A Note on Marcel Proust

The Faubourg St. Germain

BECAUSE Marcel Proust is supposed to have chosen as the subject of his epic the *faubourg St. Germain*, it is assumed that he admired and believed in it. Was not *L'Action française* amongst the first to hail his rising genius? Is he not half a Jew and therefore wholly a renegade? He is a black reactionary and an enemy of light. He is not a good man, so how can he be a good writer? We are back again in a very familiar world of criticism; only the English critics can prove that he was good after all.

As a matter of fact, which I know counts for little in politics or criticism, Proust seems to me often unduly hard on the *faubourg*. I shall not easily forget, nor perhaps will it, the devastating effect of that small phrase, when, after treating us to a ravishing description of a theater full to the brim of *beau monde*, after explaining how these are the people fitted by training, tradition and circumstance to taste the things of the mind, he adds, by way of afterthought as it were, "si seulement ils avaient eu de l'esprit".

For my part, sitting next her at that gorgeous dinner-party, I was completely bowled over by the matchless Oriane, Duchesse de Guermantes (late Princesse des Laumes), bowled over not only by her beauty and seduction and a little perhaps by her great name, but by her *bel esprit* and intelligence. To me her observations on Victor Hugo in particular and the art of writing in general seemed to possess that airy profundity which above all things one relishes in a literary conversation, until M. Proust, after poo-pooing her circle, undid the duchess herself with this painfully just appreciation: "Pour toutes ces raisons les causeries avec la duchesse ressemblaient à ces connaissances qu'on puise dans une bibliothèque de château, surannée, incomplète, incapable de former une intelligence, dépourvue de presque tout ce que nous aimons, mais nous offrant parfois quelque renseignement curieux, voire la citation d'une belle page que nous ne connaissions pas, et dont nous sommes heureux dans la suite de nous rappeler que nous en devons la connaissance à une magnifique demeure seigneuriale. Nous sommes alors, pour avoir trouvé la préface de Balzac à *la Chartreuse* ou des lettres inédites de Joubert, tentés de nous exagérer le prix de la vie que nous y avons menée et dont nous oublions, pour cette aubaine d'un soir, la frivolité stérile."

By naming Madame de Guermantes I have given myself occasion to remark one of M. Proust's most extraordinary gifts—his power of realizing a character. Without being presented one would know the incomparable duchess should one ever have the happiness of meeting her at a party: and I should recognize one of her good things ("Oriane's latest") were it repeated in the train. When someone quotes a saying by Dr. Johnson or the Duke of Wellington we need not verify by the book; their characters are so vivid to us, and they speak so much in character, that their phrases have the ring of familiar voices. It is the same with Madame de Guermantes. How many authors have achieved this miracle? Shakespeare, of course, who achieved all miracles, can distinguish even his minor characters. In a tipsy dialogue between Mrs. Quickly and Doll Tearsheet you can tell by the mere phrasing, by the particular way in

A Note on Marcel Proust

which a bawdy joke is turned, which of the ladies is speaking. And who else can do it? Not Balzac, I am sure. Dickens, someone will say. Yes, but only by giving us for characters blatant caricatures.

So far I have not contested the common opinion that Proust is the poet of the *beau monde*; I have sought only to show that, if he were, it would not follow that he was either a snob or a reactionary: it would not follow that he was taken in. In fact, the subject of Proust's epic is the whole of French life as it was from forty to twenty years ago,—a subject of which the *faubourg* is but a part. He gives us a full length picture of family life in the provinces and of a quasi-intellectual circle in Paris, of the "sea-side girls" who run about with Albertine, and a *croquis* of "county society"; best of all perhaps, he gives us exquisite landscapes and still-lives. And surely at this time of day it ought not to be necessary to remind people, especially French people, that any subject, provided the artist is thoroughly possessed by it, is as good as another; that the forms and colors, and their relations, of a pot of flowers or fruit on a table, passionately and imaginatively apprehended, are capable of inspiring as sublime a work of art as the Madonna or the Crucifixion.

Proust's Comédie Humaine

IF the *faubourg* above all things fascinated Proust, that I suspect was because in it Proust saw a subject proper only to the touch of a master psychologist. "Society", he saw, is a hierarchy without official grades or badges: unlike the army, with its colonels, majors and captains; unlike the navy, with its admirals, captains, and commanders; it resembles rather a public school or small college. It is a microcosm in which people are moved up and down, in and out, by mysterious and insensible powers; in which they are promoted and degraded by a breath of fashion blowing they know not whence; in which they obey slavishly unwritten laws, as absolute as those of the Medes and Persians: powers these, none of which they themselves can apprehend, but of which some can be surprised by sensibilities in their way as delicate and subtle as those which know when a lady changes her *sachets* and can distinguish the *bouquet* of Léoville from La rose. Herein perhaps, rather than in its mere social prestige, lay the chief charm of the *faubourg* for Marcel Proust.

One word more: a translation may do very well—Mr. Moncrieff's does better—but we can have no English or American Proust. No Englishman or American I mean, writing in English, would be allowed to publish in England or America so complete a picture of life. Wherefore as a novel and playwriting people we have lost pride of place, and cannot hope to regain it till we have set our laws in order. An artist must be possessed by his subject; but the English or American novelist who is inspired by his sense of contemporary life is not allowed to express that by which he is possessed. Fielding, Jane Austen, Hawthorne, Thackeray, Dickens, Meredith, James, and Hardy, novelists who took contemporary life for their province, all had something to say which may have shocked or hurt but which the age did not prohibit. They were, therefore, as free to express the best that was in them as Balzac, Zola or Proust.

A Note on Marcel Proust

The Artist in the Modern World

BUT today our subtlest and most active minds, affected maybe, consciously or unconsciously, by modern psychological discoveries, are concerned, so far as they are concerned with life at all, with certain aspects of it, with certain relations, of which they may not treat freely. Their situation is as painful and absurd as would have been that of men of science who, towards the close of the last century, should have been allowed to make no use of Darwin's contribution to biology. The gap between first and third rate minds has been growing alarmingly wide of late. Proust moves in a world unknown almost to the intellectual slums, or to those intellectual lower middle classes from which are drawn too many of our magistrates, judges and legislators. These lag behind, and impose their veto on the sincere treatment of Anglo-Saxon manners by a first-rate Anglo-Saxon artist. And perhaps the best tribute which English-speaking admirers of Proust could pay his memory would be to agitate for the repeal of those absurd and barbarous laws which make an English *Recherche du temps perdu* impossible.

V A N I T Y F A I R

OldMagazineArticles.com