

Reading for Pleasure

A journey with Proust

JAMES ANGELL

I have recently discovered Proust, and I am stunned. Until now I had left his work safely in the category of classics defined as books which everyone would like to have read but no one wants to read. What's more, picking a volume off the library shelf and riffling through its pages is discouraging. Paragraphs of over 3000 words are not rare and one such (I have counted) has only 10 full stops, though commas, semicolons, and dashes abound. Sentences are long and tortuous to put it mildly. If you can imagine three consecutive pages of the *BMJ* without paragraphs with only three or four completed sentences on each page, you will have some idea of how daunting it looks. Add the fact that thousands of words at first sight seem to be, and often are, descriptions of scenery, paintings, or even a single musical note. And bear in mind that the whole work runs to a million and a quarter words (I have not counted them—it says so in the preface). So why even start? Well, I wouldn't have, except that I was on holiday and wanted a substantial, respectable book that I would not be ashamed to be seen reading in the mornings. I will tell you what he has done to me, though I am not very pleased about it, starting with a new paragraph.

Proust a fiend

Proust was a fiend who, writing before I was born, managed to know more about me than I ever wanted to know about myself in the first place and certainly do not want to be reminded of now. Reading him is often so painful, so moving, or so embarrassing that I have to stop. *Remembrance of Things Past*—the title sounds harmless, even beguiling, but who wants the emotions of the past recalled along with the memories? Not me, thank you very much. I found that I had inadvertently chosen to spend my holiday in the company of a penetrating and relentless analyst who was so insensitive to my feelings that he had no idea when to bring a session to a halt, though Proust himself is so stylistically exhausting at times that very long sessions are impossible. But style apart, it is going to take me the rest of my life, if I live long enough, to read it all, because I look for excuses for not resuming for fear of what I might read next, or I think of something more important to do after reading a few pages.

The whys and hows of falling in or out of love, or lust, with one particular person rather than another; the differences

between people's private and public behaviour; the variety and social inappropriateness of some sexual attractions; the way in which trifling incidents, hardly noticed at the time, rather than the things one was certain one would never forget, are what jog the memory later. These are a few of the things I have been reminded of in the little I have read so far, with deep poignancy when I have recognised myself and tolerant amusement when I have not.

The "longueurs"

Even the *longueurs*, the at first sight boring descriptions of flower beds and interior decoration, become important. It is a bit like the effect of "The Ring" on a non-musical listener like me. One cannot live entirely on a diet of highlights, however moving, and Siegfried's funeral march is not the same without the preceding music of his death scene. We (I) have to put up with Wotan's (to me) repetitious monologues about what we know has already happened in order to respond fully (with tears and retrosternal pain) to the surges of emotion and grandeur. It is the same with Proust—unbroken stretches of such deep insight into human nature would be intolerable. But there is another reason for reading the descriptive passages. Some of them are deceptive, and if one skips too far ahead there is a risk of missing intriguing information, such as when the sight of a nobleman's carriage reminds Proust that a group of highly respected elderly gentlemen frequent a brothel where they are soundly thrashed with metal-studded leather thongs by a variety of young men, though in this instance it would be difficult to miss the lengthy account of what goes on there. (And to think that the French have the nerve to call flagellation *le vice Anglais*.) All the same, dipping and skipping can be very rewarding, though it can be confusing—it took me some time to realise that two people, as I thought, were really only one, sometimes called by his title and sometimes by his name.

I am not suggesting that anyone else should read Proust, not just because I do not want to wish anguish on anybody, but because recommending books to others is as difficult and dicey as recommending friends. All too often the reaction is to wonder what on earth anybody could see in him, her, or it. In the case of *Remembrance of Things Past* the difficulty is compounded by its immense length and its limited availability, to say nothing of its cost. Instead of being published in paperback in the original 12 volumes, sold separately, which would be sensible though presumably not profitable, it is currently available only complete in three volumes of over a thousand pages each (which are surprisingly easy to handle) at the price of £55. This is a pity. So is the possibility, a very faint one, that one may need to be of a certain age and have enough past things to remember to get the most pleasure (if that is the word) out of reading it.

Proust instead of port

Perhaps the best solution would be for a young person to find the sort of godfather who used to lay down port for his godson to start drinking on his 21st birthday. It would make a superb graduation present, with the instruction to lay it aside for 20 or 30 years before reading it, although any adventurous young men or women would surely recognise themselves and each other in *Swann in Love*. And anyone interested in the quirks, as well as the more ordinary oddities, of human beings will find something striking within a few pages of wherever they let a volume chance to fall open. Trying this out on a not yet read section I have just found:

"We are not free to refrain from forging the chains of our own misery, and however well we may know our own will, other people do not obey it."

Anyone who feels a pang, however faint, on reading that should embark on a journey with Proust, though there is no guarantee that the trip will be enjoyable, though trip it will be, and no saying how long it will last.

I do not know whether I am pleased or sorry that I started. For Proust is an addictive drug, damn his eyes. I hate his guts for it, but I cannot keep away from him.

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MATERIA NON MEDICA

Hospital bees in Africa

Not many hospitals keep their own bees. We have just started at Chogoria. We hope eventually to fill 16 hives with wild bees. We have built them in a "bee castle" next to the leprosy hostel. The "bee castle" is a stone building the size and shape of a garden shed. Each side wall is pierced by eight holes, each of which is painted a distinctive colour and pattern. The hives are arranged with their entrances next to these holes. There is plenty of room inside the hut for someone to collect the honey, and the door can be locked against thieves and inquisitive children. When the castle is full we hope there will be 16 separate colonies each with their own queen. The markings at each entrance are meant to help the worker bees return to their own colonies. I believe bees do have a sense of colour. We hope also that the close proximity of the hives will enable us to catch new swarms as they occur.

The hospital carpenter made an extra hive for me which I have placed in the traditional African fashion in a tree in my garden. With the help of my gardener I have just finished preparing it for the bees. We burnt a piece of honeycomb wrapped in banana leaves inside the hive and then he spoke some Kimeru phrases. I think he was casting spells but he will not admit it. Now we are all waiting for our first swarm. I hope the spells work!—JIM THORNTON, Chogoria Hospital, Kenya.

Win some, lose some

Living in the country, we have achieved a sort of self-sufficiency. Our hens provide us with eggs all the year round and, assisted by Harold, cockerels for Christmas time. We have a number of fruit trees and plenty of soft fruit. The vegetables are grown at the far corner of the paddock behind a horse-proof fence. Over the years I have increasingly concentrated on cultivating this plot and my wife looks after the rest of the estate. Indeed, when things go well the vegetable patch becomes "my vegetable garden." Last year, things went well. My senior house officer, who in his spare time runs a farm with his medically qualified brother, had the audacity to challenge me to a vegetable competition. His defeat was humiliating even though I consequently discovered that he had blatantly cheated by collecting the best vegetables he could find from his Border farming friends. My prize was a load of best farmyard manure. He told me that he had always wanted to give shit to a consultant.

This year has been different. It started with a visit from a flock of passing sheep who browsed my over-winter cauliflowers and broccoli. Far from dying, these responded by producing a remarkable crop. The spring and early summer brought a variety of problems. My parsnips were incredibly slow to germinate, the runner beans started very badly, and the courgettes looked positively sick. In the last few weeks, however, all has gone well and we have been producing bumper crops. We have been forced to become vegetarians and every evening has been spent hectically freezing the surplus. I even fantasised about trying to make money by putting out a sign encouraging people to pick their own, but maybe this idea was my undoing.

One of our daughters came home and following my wife's instruc-

tions picked the main crop peas instead of the mange tout. Last week the patch was raped. Our visitor helped himself to potatoes, turnips, beetroot, sea-kale, and cabbages. He removed about 100 onions, including my solitary row of Kelsies, the Jane Russells of the onion world. I have already made good the havoc but now live expecting a further visit. The patch is a long way from the house and I do not see how we can protect it. Fortunately, he is no great authority on vegetables—for example, he left the globe artichokes unmolested. Still, every year has its compensations, and this year we have grown an enormous puffball measuring 109.5 cm in circumference. I am leaving it in splendid isolation in the middle of the lawn. He might mistake it for a mushroom.—JOHN MUNRO, Musselburgh, Midlothian.

Taste of freedom

"Would you like to take your Freedom on your birthday?" asked my husband. "Yes," I said, hastily, in case he changed his mind; the idea was instantly appealing—freedom, from what? Then I remembered. Several months ago I had agreed to allow my name to go forward for consideration for admission to the Freedom of the City of London. I had gone to Guildhall to present myself, my long birth certificate, and my marriage certificate to the Chamberlain's Clerk, who explained that I would in due course be summoned to attend again. Having been proposed by two Loriner Liverymen, that was all that was required.

When the day came it was happily bright with autumn sunshine, and Guildhall, that marvellous mixture of ancient and modern architecture, looked quietly dignified and very impressive. A few friends had come to witness my freedom and we presented ourselves at the Chamberlain's office, where I was shown a card on which was printed the Declaration which I would have to make later, and to my horror I saw it was written in Middle English. "I do solemnly declare," etc, etc . . . "and will keep this City harmless, in that which in me is. . . ." "Nothing to it," said Mr Deputy Morgan, "just watch for that line."

The Beadle then appeared, in frock coat and top hat, and announced that it was time for the ceremony to begin. Feeling that I was going to my execution I processed with my party along the corridor to the Chamberlain's Court. I stood before the Chamberlain's Clerk who said, in velvet tones, something about the Court of Common Council having given its approval would I please read aloud the Declaration, which he handed to me. For a moment I was transfixed unable to utter a word. But, I thought, if I really want to have the privilege of driving a flock of sheep over London Bridge, then I must get on with it—so I did.

And suddenly, on my umpteenth birthday, I was the "Youngest Freeman" in the whole of London, and our small procession moved back to the Chamberlain's office where I was so toasted with a glass of very fine marsala, most kindly provided for the occasion by the City and Corporation. Then followed the customary photographs taken in Guildhall yard, and with much hand shaking and congratulations the ceremony was over. But as a birthday surprise a luncheon had been arranged in the Guildhall Club, during which I was informed that I was now the Second Youngest Freeman, Field Marshal Sir Edwin Bramall, Chief of the Defence Staff, having just made his Declaration.—MEG FOGG, Freeman, London.