Marcel Proust

A la Recherche du temps perdu. Par Marcel Proust. Paris: La Nouvelle revue française. Tomes 1-6.

AFTER Balzac's fifty volumes cohering into a network of lives, and Romain Rolland's ten projecting to the full a single personality, the question what can come next in the novel is being answered by a work now in the sixth volume and the central figure as yet a mere youth. Of all that has been written of Marcel Proust thus far little has been said of what he is contributing to the novel in this growing landmark. Some critics dismiss it as a novel of manners; others appreciate it as a product of style. No one has pointed out that this "Recherche du temps perdu" is a reviving and even recreating of old matter and old method into new effects, is what every novel should be—a discovery of something new both in life and art.

This novel has no hero, no dominant character whose destiny is the reader's concern. Yet unless the reader of these volumes sees that the anonymous, negative, impersonal character of the child, boy, and youth who successively has the place of hero is a triumph of creative skill, all the more powerful because his unobtrusiveness is the very vantage point from which he observes, analyzes, projects, paints whole groups, he misses the first marvel of M. Proust's skill. This canny manipulator has no tangible story of his own, yet he coheres a world already so vast, intricate, yet subtly differentiated that Balzac's multiple world looks loose and fortuitous and "Jean Christophe" a very simple creation. "Du Côté de chez Swann" (Part I) begins as a reminiscence. The prologue, an exquisite bit of reverie, establishes the poetical mood of the hero, how he is to see his world. Memory has perhaps never been so demonstrated to be what Plato called it—the mother of the Muses. The pain, the sensitiveness, the inexplicable suffering of a child have never been distilled into more wistful poetry. Child psychology has something precious in these pages, just as it has in James Joyce's "Portrait of the Artist." M. Proust's method is of the two the more rational. He does not make the recalling mind the same as the perceiving mind. The adult mood colors the picture as it must if life deepens the meaning of childhood, and childhood as life is a mystery even to the child; its pathos is that he is inarticulate. The pastoral quality of the Combray scenes, the tenderness and humor of these recollections have the sincerity of the early idylls of George Eliot, who like M. Proust knew how to use a lyric memory. One misses this lyric instrument form in the second development of the Swann part, but Swann himself is thus given a dramatic value consonant with his importance in the novel as a whole.

"A l'Ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs" is adolescence as we have not had it before. Poetry deepens as memory penetrates unafraid into the sanctuary of emotion, passion, beauty of every kind. A temperamental, intellectual youth and his world live for us again, a world where the pale cast of thought admits little gaiety but touches instead to new issues a whole epoch where mood gives perspective to all the scenes. How everything expands and deepens because the mental reliving quickens consciousness to an almost wizard power! How terribly aware, how psychically alert, what reach of associative thinking in this great second part! Art, books, science, and the art of life itself color a big world for Gilberte, for Albertine, for Saint-Loup and Bloch as well as for their lover and friend who will not disclose his name. The plastic presentation of the groups on the beach; the Watteau handling of those in the woods; the attenuated analysis of such a simple impression as a cluster of trees upon the hero's mind, the frankness of sentiment and of emotional response—the finest since "Werther"—all enrich the first Paris and the Balbec scenes to the full. No matter how many volumes may be added later, the great second part will be singled as a masterpiece. It is Henry James's ideal of saturation, of squeezing the subject, of achieving the "done"

thing. Reaction, reaction, and always reaction! The Goncourts prided themselves on the power to analyze as their contribution to the novel. M. Proust analyzes every analysis, and analyzes again and yet again.

A philosophy slowly emerges from this intricate pattern of lives, and strange to say it is analogous to the big impulse of the novel as Scott, Balzac, and Henry James conceived it—that the new is of less value than the old, that the future must be safe for the past. Oldness is from first to last a permanent note of M. Proust's novel. It is the memory-work of a man old in life; the child, the boy, and the youth are each old in his reaction to an old group—his grandparents and their relatives and their servants. The grandmother in a subtle way dominates the spiritual outlook of the hero, who learned of her that there was "a French past very old, noble, and misunderstood," a part of "a social complexity and worldly refinement which figured in the modern world like delicate sculptures in a factory." This worldly refinement is in full swing in the third part, "Le Côté de Guermantes," another name for Faubourg Saint-Germain. One sees in this stage of this slowly evolved novel that its structural scheme and spiritual outlook are mutually interpretative. The Swann side and the de Guermantes side in the Combray scenes are mere background, topography as it were. They now take on the force of symbol; they are two worlds linked by this nameless narrator, who is properly of neither world. True, his grandmother's affiliation with the Faubourg Saint-Germain is enough to allow him to become the living depositary of its tradition. This is the advantage M. Proust has over Balzac who improvised a Faubourg Saint-Germain, over Henry James who observed its English equivalent. This hero sees all and is part of much of this *vie mondaine*, and is a literary artist acceptable to it because of his talent.

He turns its worldly refinement into fine use in once more making woman a real *décor* in fiction. Flaubert has misled two generations of novelists into the vain idea that by subjecting their women to tooth and claw they are making fiction moral. M. Proust's demi-mondaine walks abroad an enchantress—her dress no external part of her but incorporate "like the plumage of a bird." Dress as plumage is an art in this book, part of a system of portraiture which adds to this novel the fascination of a gallery of masters—the grandmother affects one like a Whistler. Odette and Oriane have all the sumptuous array of the Venetian school with whatever graces the moderns have added. The men are equally objective; their hats, their gloves, their whole demeanor are caught with rare skill. If only worldly refinement were all of the Swann side or the de Guermantes side this pictural value of M. Proust would tempt one into an ensemble arrangement, each group an exhibition of some school of portraiture. This would be to emphasize too much what is after all but an accessory to the character portrayal which, as much as the poetry, as the intensive reaction, is another domain won for the novel.

In making the future safe for a "fine French past" M. Proust's genius for truth makes his writer, who is participating in the social complexity of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, play an equivocal part. On one page he writes of Mme. de Guermantes, who is his idol, his dream, as "his goddess turned woman who rained on him the brilliant and celestial shower of her smile." On another he reports her critical remarks on Dumas *fils:* "As her taste was the opposite of mine she supplied literature to my mind when she talked of Faubourg Saint-Germain and never appeared so stupidly Faubourg Saint-Germain as when she talked literature." Balzac would have made this lady a rival of Sainte-Beuve; Henry James would have had her talk suspirated gossip. M. Proust's hero is after all the predatory literary artist out for copy. And never did one subject his material to more thorough treatment. In subtle touches—the mere notation of gesture, detail of dress, trick of manner—these men and women are made to live, as well as by wealth of anecdote, incident, apt illustration, dialogue, situation, the whole literary machinery known to the art of the novel. Here are men

and women whose refinement cannot atone for their shallow souls. Never was artist more impartial; the women cannot hide under their plumage, the men cannot escape their hidden sins. A novel of manners indeed! This is a caste, a social complex untouched before, a civilization of the kind the Swiss rustic Rousseau called back to nature; it is the kind of civilization Rousseau's disciple Chateaubriand exhibited to an American Indian as a sinister evidence of the safety of the wigwam. One understands now why Romain Rolland made Jean Christophe an Alsatian. The French are a courageous people. They are unafraid of their emotions and are artists; they are unafraid of their vices and are moralists; they are unafraid of ideas and are real intellectuals. M. Proust in all three is French of the French.

As for M. Proust's prose it is wholly of the substance of his material and his method. He may not be what his hero set out to be in his childhood, the greatest writer in the world, but he is one of them. Solidity and rhythm, a daring use of figure, pictorial power in homely detail as well as in the large free suggestiveness of temperament and mood neutralize a cumulative syntax piled to tantalizing obscurity. What lifts this novel out of the order of novels, even the very best, is the play of intellect about ideas, and this "travail de la pensée sur elle-même" preserves a moral tone in a novel difficult to classify morally. Its subtlety frees the work from its personal trammels and makes it the study of a soul, voyaging in a world petty but for his own thought. The author and the hero may be identified, but no biographic implication is needed to interpret these six volumes as the product of a mind with a phenomenal literary intelligence. This is a novel of novels—that is, all that is best in the novel, not in France only, has been assessed for the making of this one. Such play of intellect in the deep as well as the casual things of life has not been put into a novel since Goethe's serene wisdom was embodied in "Wilhelm Meister." Should M. Proust carry his drama to our own time—his hero is now in touch with the Dreyfus affair—our own time will be both impaled and glorified. All life is old; it will bear renewing many times.

ELLEN FITZGERALD

Victory Before Battle

The Brimming Cup. By Dorothy Canfield. Harcourt, Brace and Company. $2.

THE times have lent to this book an interest and an importance it only partly earns. A craving for sensation and variety has seized upon a world which has lost most of its aspects of permanence. Simple lines of conduct have been washed out in a deluge of blood; and those persons who clung most closely to the sanctions and taboos of a more comfortable age now feel lost without them. Some such persons are helplessly floundering and have given up the effort to find their way; some are listening with pitiable trust to the ghoulish philosophies of the Reverend John Roach Stratons of our day; and some are eager to face life honestly and yet to find a rational way of return to simplicity and solidity and enduring values.

To satisfy such worried but conscientious souls, and perhaps to satisfy herself, Dorothy Canfield has written an earnest and serious vindication of marriage—and a fine novel is lost in the process. She has evidently tried to be honest. She has faced the flattening effect of long-accustomed intimacy and endless household cares upon the most glowing of youthful ecstacies. She has allowed the sensitive, impressionable Marise to feel intimations of a new passion under the hot eyes of Vincent Marsh, the disturbing intruder. She has laid the spare, gaunt outlines of life in the Vermont hills against a sumptuous background of wealth and art—all personified in the rasping presence of Marsh. She has pictured with appalling veracity the incoherent existence of a mother of three small children. And yet with all this brave effort at frankness, the cards are