

Books, Drama, Films

Remembrance of Proust

Remembrance of Things Past. By Marcel Proust. With an Introduction by Joseph Wood Krutch. Random House. Four Volumes. \$12.50.

THIS reprint in four durable volumes of the great novel which it took three American publishers ten years to issue in eleven volumes is only the first of many monuments which will be erected to the memory of Marcel Proust. The angel Time with whom Proust wrestled can be counted on, I think, to recognize a worthy foe and to deal handsomely with him. Yet enough years have elapsed since his death, and since the publication in this country of "Swann's Way," to make some sort of perspective possible and to put some meaning into a question which could scarcely have been asked twelve years ago: namely, *how* great is Proust, or if one prefers, *how* long will he last?

Not quite forever, I should say. It suddenly occurs to me, now that the work has receded some years into my own past, that it is indeed past; and I find it strangely possible to imagine a future age when it will have little of the fascination and the reality which it has had for me and which it will continue to have, of course, for a great many readers still to come.

In the long run it may appear to have been unfortunate that Proust was so entirely occupied with Time, since Time in all probability takes a particular pleasure in defeating those writers who give him the Lie Direct, who wrestle with him and for the moment seem to win. Proust already seems to me to have lost something by the match. Time, even while he wrestles, wears a veil, and not a few shreds of that impalpable but obscuring fabric cling here and there to "Remembrance of Things Past." Proust set out, he says, to recover a world which Time had begun to obliterate. But in process of doing so he came to understand his enemy too well—exactly how well Mr. Krutch's compact and beautiful introduction to this edition makes very clear. He advanced so far into Time's territory, and maneuvered there so long, that he came back with patches of mist and mildew on him; he had accommodated himself to clouds. Another masterpiece of our day, Mann's "Magic Mountain," suffers a little from the same malady. Neither Proust nor Mann will seem in another century, I think, to have gained anything by being so subtle concerning the theme of Time. Rather they will seem to have lost, to have been in a measure submerged; and this has not happened, so far as I know, to certain masters of narrative—Homer, Fielding, and Tolstoy—who wrote ever so less subtly and self-consciously, who had no theories about our common enemy, who hardly glanced at him, indeed, as they moved down the main highway of experience, but who were indubitably much greater men.

Proust was a very wonderful man in his way, but he was also very small, and I fear that this will be another count against him. He, like his hero, was preposterously, insufferably, spoiled; and while a thoroughly spoiled person may be wise sometimes almost beyond license, may see a million things which others do not see, he can seldom be credited with that kind of knowledge—not a knowledge of the nerves merely—which in the greatest books seems to carry the whole world on its shoulders. Mr. Krutch is right in saying that Proust gives us *a* world. But Proust does not give us *the* world. It is perhaps significant that Combray, Balbec, and Paris are presented to us through a hero who spends most of his time in bed, with three women—his mother, his grandmother, and Françoise—always there to caress him and indulge him, to kiss him goodnight, to draw his curtains in the morning, to roast him a delicious fowl when he

is hungry, and to tiptoe out of hearing when he wants to think. Even as the lover of Albertine he keeps to his bed—not theirs but his—and receives her according to whatever mood dominates him by chance. It is undeniably *a* world which we perceive past his pillows; it is a world which he knows and can discuss with marvelous minuteness, and it is one from which we can learn a great deal, for not the least of Proust's glories is that his book abounds with observations that are absolutely true as far as they go. It is obviously, however, not *the* world. To the objection that there is no such place I would simply answer that there is a kind of novelist who makes us think there is. To the objection that no other modern novelist has done this I would make no answer, for it is true; as it is true that Proust is clearly the best of all modern novelists. Why our vision has ceased to be complete—well, that is another question, not to be confused with the question whether completeness is not better than incompleteness.

Even Proust's people are incomplete. They are consistent, they are differentiated from one another with an unexampled delicacy, and they have their fascination. But the illusion is not of bones and blood. They are the most perfectly fashioned dolls in fiction, but they are dolls. I find this true not only of Albertine and Saint-Loup, both of whom, despite the attention lavished upon them, are failures in characterization, but of the famous successes—M. de Charlus, Swann, Odette, the Duchesse de Guermantes, M. de Norpois, the Marquise de Villeparisis, Françoise, and Marcel's grandmother. It is not that these people are thinly characterized; it is that they in themselves are thin—are not quite big enough somehow for one of the most skilful novelists ever born to have been forced to exercise his fine brain and his almost perfect art upon. They are not to be loved or feared; they are merely to be admired as creations—which is not what we say of Odysseus, Squire Western, and Pierre Bezúkhov.

This minority report is probably premature and very likely wrong. But it is all that one devoted reader of Proust, remembering him after several years, could find to say. To that reader "Remembrance of Things Past" appears now, in a word, both wonderful and trivial, both mammoth and minor.

MARK VAN DOREN

The Twilight of the New Deal

America's Hour of Decision. By Glenn Frank. Whittlesey House. \$2.50.

New Frontiers. By Henry Wallace. Reynal and Hitchcock. \$2.

The New Democracy. By Harold L. Ickes. W. W. Norton and Company. \$1.50.

The New Deal in Action. By Schuyler C. Wallace. Harper and Brothers. \$2.

Beyond the New Deal. By David Lawrence. Whittlesey House. \$2.50.

IT is a fact well known to students of medieval history that the papal pretensions to power and glory reached their climax on the eve of the collapse of the supremacy of the medieval church. Perhaps a simpler illustration of this mental mechanism is that of a boy whistling in the dark to keep up his courage. Similarly, the apostles of the New Deal appear most vocal and confident at the moment in which it is going on the rocks.

It may seem strange to make such a statement as this on the heels of an election which gave Mr. Roosevelt an apparent vote of confidence unprecedented in American history. Unfortu-

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