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Adam Watt, *The Cambridge Introduction to Marcel Proust*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. ix + 141 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$62.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-521-51643-3; \$19.99 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-521-73432-5.

Review by Hervé G. Picherit, University of Wyoming.

I am struck by the challenges that the “Introduction to” genre poses to a critic. One must make an author’s work accessible to new readers, providing its context and significance, all the while resisting the *doxa* that, often unjustly, dominates the common perception of famous works. These challenges are all the greater for Adam Watt, who takes on the labyrinthine complexity of Marcel Proust’s œuvre, most notably the modernist epic, *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Setting a course away from the reductive image of Proust as the reclusive hypochondriac hidden in his cork-lined room, Watt creates a successful guidebook for new and hesitant readers of the *Recherche*. In particular, Watt provides a preview of, and a map leading to, the many “pay-offs” one is likely to receive from their investment of time and effort in the three thousand pages of a novel whose first sentence—“Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure” [For a long time I would go to bed early]—is perhaps not the most promising in the history of literature. Watt particularly succeeds in what he proposes in his introduction, namely to show the *Recherche*’s capacity to help us relearn our experience of time (p. 1), but also of art, society and the self. Watt achieves this by helping the first-time reader “relearn” his or her expectations of Proust. This is what makes *The Cambridge Introduction to Marcel Proust* a useful book for new readers and, perhaps even more so, for readers who would like some help in their second or third try to read this literary Everest.

*The Cambridge Introduction to Marcel Proust* is organized intuitively and with the intention of easing a first-time reader into the complexities of a decidedly difficult text. “Life” (pp. 5-16) provides a brief but representative biography of the author. “Contexts” (pp. 17-31) lays out the political, scientific and literary events that accompany Proust’s development as a writer. “Early works and late essays” (pp. 32-43) examines Proust’s other writings and their influence on the *Recherche*. “In Search of Lost Time” (pp. 44-103) provides a summary and running analysis of Proust’s *magnum opus*. “Proust criticism” (pp. 104-115) sketches the reception history of the *Recherche* starting from Proust’s attempts to publish his novel until today. Finally, perhaps the most innovative section is the epilogue, “Proustian afterlives” (pp. 116-122), in which Watt examines Proust’s cultural influence beyond literary and academic circles, from Monty Python and *Little Miss Sunshine*, to the cookbooks and self-help guides the *Recherche* has inspired.

Watt’s book is punctuated with successes. I am first struck by his time and care in introducing the “Life” chapter. In what is a good lesson for a new reader of Proust and, more generally, for any undergraduate student of literature, Watt points out that, while we must recognize the influence Proust’s life had on his art, we must also be careful to acknowledge the distance that separates this author from his Narrator. Indeed, though Proust’s life is the vein from which this homosexual author of Jewish descent mined the *Recherche*, we cannot forget that the Narrator he creates is heterosexual and wholly Catholic.

No less successful is Watt's careful and sensitive analysis of Proust's writings besides the *Recherche*. Indeed, Watt's reading of these texts counters the prevalent temptation to present them as mere footnotes to Proust's *magnum opus*. This is, to my mind, the most thoughtful section in Watt's book. I appreciate that he situates these less often read texts, not only in Proust's development as an author, but also in the literary climate of the time. What Watt elegantly shows by doing this is that, before becoming a great writer whose renown continues to grow with time, Proust was a writer deeply rooted in his time and place. This is a valuable observation for a first-time reader of the *Recherche* and one that brings added pertinence to the chapters describing the historical context of Proust's life.

The summary and analysis section is another strong element of the book. This format seems uniquely adapted to the challenges a first-time reader faces reading a novel infamous for its digressions and "bending" of time. As such, Watt's summary acts as Arianna's thread, helping the first-time reader to find his or her way through a labyrinthine novel whose plot often disappears among the Narrator's thoughts and analyses. One must also appreciate Watt's sensitivity in his creation of the accompanying analysis. He never imposes a single interpretation on the reader, but rather gives guiding clues, suggestive of the treasures an attentive reader might discover in a given section. In this, he remains true to the principle he identifies as one of Proust's own, namely the acceptance of different and even contradictory perspectives.

The literary context in which Watt situates Proust's life and work is well balanced and equally helpful. In this short section, Watt presents a narrative of literary influence that leads us from La Bruyère and La Rochefoucauld to James Joyce and Gertrude Stein. It is a compelling account of the fundamental upheavals that make Proust's French and *belle époque* world expand—if not explode—into the international and modernist world he occupies today.

Perhaps it is the compelling nature of this narrative of literary influence that makes the "Science, technology and medicine" section seem less solid than the others. Indeed, though Watt argues with verve that Proust's novel is one of telephones, motorcars and bicycles rather than one of "liquescent crumbs of cake and wistful reminiscence" (p. 22), the connection between these technologies and the *Recherche* feels less immediate and its significance is not entirely clear. For example, Watt piques his reader's curiosity when he suggests a comparison between Einstein's general theory of relativity and Proust's description of young women on a Norman beach. The tantalizing audacity of this claim begs an explanation, but the details of this link do not appear here. Perhaps Watt offers here, as he does elsewhere, a suggested path rather than an imposed reading for the first-time reader. But the intriguing nature of these claims requires, I think, a more explicit explanation of the relationship between Proust's novel and the scientific innovations and advances of his time.

The success of Watt's book depends on redefining the reader's expectations of Proust. However, it seems that this goal—otherwise well achieved—leads Watt, at times, to overstate what the *Recherche* is not. This is an inclination to which any seasoned reader of Proust will feel sympathy, especially since we have all received as gifts our share of madeleines—the now famous cake that initiated the Narrator to the mechanisms of involuntary memory. As an emblem of Proust's work for the uninitiated, the madeleine has become a prop—along with Proust's cork-lined room—of the limiting *doxa* that surrounds the *Recherche*. Yet, in insisting on the inaccuracy of this vision—of what Watt calls "the much-peddled 'madeleine-induced bliss'" (p. 4)—he sometimes strays from his otherwise careful and generous affirmation of what the *Recherche* can be for an attentive reader. Indeed, Watt's own treatment of Proust's madeleine is sensitive and suggestive of its grand importance throughout the text.

As with many authors of his stature, Proust's novel suffers from its fame as much as it benefits from it. And it is this phenomenon that makes Watt's book a pertinent and useful text. Indeed, Watt elegantly avoids the traps of the "Introduction to" genre. Far from being reductive or limiting, his book rebuilds the first-time reader's expectations, providing him or her with the tools and clues for a fruitful reading of a decidedly complex text. More importantly, however, is the fact that Watt shares with his reader what, in the end, is the true secret of Proust's novel: for its great length and difficulty, the *Recherche* holds the promise of being an inexhaustible source of pleasure.

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