

profile

## Marcel Proust, writing and the arts

by Claudine Canetti

The Bibliotheque Nationale de France (French National Library) devoted its last exhibition of the century to Marcel Proust, casting a fascinating light on the origin of the monument to French literature represented by his 3,000 page novel <<A la Recherche du Temps Perdu>> (Remembrance of things past) and on the relationship of the author with all forms of art on which he drew to depict the end of a world, at the junction of two centuries.

THE biggest exhibition ever devoted to Proust, organised in collaboration with the Orsay Museum in an area of 900 m<sup>2</sup>, presents the writer's imaginary museum, dealing with all the arts which inspired him, from painting to fashion and including sculpture, architecture, music, literature and theatre. The exhibition comprises 350 items including about a hundred paintings. The origin and the culmination of <<Remembrance of things past>>, this cathedral-book which was written over 14 years, are revealed in the light of his 4 notebooks and 95 hand-written school exercise-books, with all the alterations, annotations and famous strips of paper stuck on top of one another by Celeste Albaret, Proust's house-keeper, some of which are up to two metres long. All this is presented in a moving wall of manuscripts in a display case in which the heart of Remembrance beats. The itinerary through the exhibition, leading to that final wall is punctuated by four essential aspects of Proust's life: his family culture, his artistic culture, the culture of his time and the figures of creators in his work.

His family culture was dual: Literary on his mother's side and medical on his father's. It was through his greatly loved mother, Jeanne Proust, whose death in 1905 was to be a tragedy for him, that young Marcel discovered literature through, for instance, the Tales of the Arabian Nights, Madame de Sevigne's Letters and George Sand's Francois le Champi, which is lengthily evoked in Remembrance. It was also his mother, who helped him, for five years, to translate John Ruskin, the English art critic who was to play such an important part in his discovery of art and in drawing up his philosophy of art and of aesthetics, a recurrent theme in his work. Through his father Adrien Proust, a doctor and hygienist and a professor at the Faculty of Medicine, Marcel, who, at the age of ten, had his first attack of asthma, a disease from which he would die in 1922 at the age of 51, had access to medical knowledge which is largely evoked in Remembrance, in particular concerning neurasthenia.

Proust's artistic culture, which was essential throughout his life, enables us to visit his imaginary museum which begins with his discovery of the Louvre, that of French religious art and Venice thanks to Ruskin, that of Italian painting (Giotto, Botticelli,



Mantegna, Carpaccio, Titien and Veronese) and, above all, all of Flemish and Dutch painting. Indeed, one of the key passages in Remembrance is the description, which has since gone down in the history of literature, of Vermeer's View of Delft and its famous small area of yellow wall with an awning. It is while contemplating this work in an exhibition, considered by Proust as the most beautiful painting in the world and the ideal symbol of beauty is art, that, in the novel, the

writer Felicien Bergotte dies. One of Proust's last outings before his own death was to go and see this painting again in an exhibition at the Jeu de Paume museum in 1921, and one of his main characters, Swann, a highly cultivated art-lover, works on a book about Vermeer from Delft which he will never complete. This artistic culture is intimately linked to all the figures of creators omnipresent in Proust's novel of whom the three main ones are the painter Elstir, the com-

poser Vinteuil and the writer Bergotte. Elstir would seem to be a contraction of the names of the American painter Whistler, whom Proust greatly admired, and the French Paul Helleu. In fact, Elstir, who painted in several different ways (symbolist like Gustave Moreau, Japanese-style like Whistler and Impressionist like Claude Monet) symbolises modern painting, that is to say, for Proust, Impressionism.

Vinteuil, also inspired in Proust by several models including Camille Saint-Saens, Cesar Franck and Gabriel Faure, personifies musical creation in the novel. References to the famous little phrase of his sonata for violin and piano and also his septuor form part of the pieces of anthology in Remembrance. The main model for Bergotte is Anatole France whom Proust admired greatly but his name seems to have been inspired by the philosopher Bergson. Numerous other writers, of whom Proust often made a pastiche, figured in the imaginary library of the novelist who did not generally keep books. They include Racine, Balzac, Saint-Simon, Baudelaire, Stendhal and Flaubert. One should also note his correspondence with Andre Gide who in 1913, refused to publish Du cote de chez Swann (Swann's Way) for the Gallimard publishers. The book finally came out at Proust's own cost with the Grasset publishers. Gide was later to say that this was one of the most bitter causes of remorse in his life. Proust was also friends with a large number of writers such as Jean Cocteau, Francois Mauriac and Colette.

The exhibition also shows the importance, for Proust, of the culture of his time whether it be history (the Dreyfus affair whose first supporter he wanted to be and the 1914-1918 war) or the progress of modernity (the automobile, the birth of aviation, the telephone, Sarah Bernhardt at the theatre or Diaghilev's Ballets Russes (Russian ballet). Jean-Yves Tadie, the author of the book Proust, la cathedrale du temps (Proust, the cathedral of time), published in Gallimard's Decouvertes series, points out the Proust was not a high-society writer, but a philosopher of society. He was a great admirer of Balzac of whose work he wrote a pastiche in 1908 with a 100 man Comedy consisting of 500 real or imaginary characters coming from all walks of life.

A remarkable CD-Rom (brought out by Gallimard Multimedia) and constructed like a real interactive programme, acts as an extension to the exhibition. It presents Proust's life and work, combining eye-witness accounts, chosen extracts, pictorial documents, music and files on various themes.

poem

## Meeting at Jail Gate

Al Mahmud

Translated by Andalib Rashdie

When the cell was unlocked,  
a small patch of the sun entered into my room.  
You will meet me today.  
A thrill of joy roams around my place.  
Although the northern wind was blowing  
giving a chilly tremor in my bones  
I chose cold water to wash my hands and feet.  
I called out the sentry to inform that you would be coming today.  
Putting on a smile on his face the sentry lit my cigarette  
and said, 'Take a walk along the porch and get a good appetite,  
You can take it for sure, fabulous dish is on way with her.'  
Food is always first, you see, this what everyone thinks.  
I know there is a famine condition outside.  
The hungry crowd maddened for food is rushing towards cities.  
Even the newspapers cannot but term the condition  
to be something horrendous beyond any wild dream.  
I have seen the photographs of corpses of long starving children  
lying on the streets and  
I clutched the iron grills of the prison hard.

Oh my independence! Did we sacrifice everything that we had  
in order to establish a reign of hunger?

They have kept me in between a gun and court of law.  
It is place which dry up human souls  
It does not allow me a search for my roots.  
But you know what the fountain of a poet is.  
I can bring my stream back within the four walls of the stony prison.  
You have always seen me how do I keep the sources of our souls alive  
in woes and misfortunes.

The sparrows' twittering awoke the prisoners.  
I left the porch to get into the garden.  
Only a small slice of garden it was.  
My sleepers and pajama drew water from the wet leaves.  
I plucked from the bushes of *chandramallika*  
a bunch of white and yellow flowers  
Waving their heads in the air  
the red *dalia* tree asked me to reach the flowers.  
Then I went to the roses.  
Although the rose bloomed inside the prison  
it was still a rose with fragrant as ever.  
My jail inmates do not pluck flowers  
nor do they allow anyone to pluck one.  
But I did it to offer you a bouquet.

Today time hangs heavy on me.  
I took a clean shave  
and browsed over books.  
The city on the other side of the walls  
has started to get up from sleep.  
I could hear the ringing bells of rickshaws and whistles of vehicles.

By now, I know in those hotels of Chawks the large pans with meat  
have started boiling, and the tasteful soup is being poured down  
on the plates of poor customers.

But famine reigns the land outside the walls.  
Do the masses have anything at all to eat?  
Do the day labourers get enough to have a plate full of *nehari*?  
Look what a great difference can a wall make.

Oh, how free the birds are to fly over the walls so easily.  
It is for the first time in my life, I become  
jealous of this great fortune of sparrows.  
I can take it for certain that our city, by now, is crowded with beggars.  
Days are spent in coping with them.  
Didn't tell you time and again that  
a handful of alms cannot alleviate poverty.  
It demands a different intervention to address poverty.  
It requires social justice to be ensured.  
I am afraid, if you could understand me.

My dear love,  
the sun today has risen with your sacred name  
warm and eager rays of the sun are sliding on the bars of the prison  
On the other side of the walls you may hear the noise of people  
who are just awoken.  
They are the people who go to bed after everybody is settled there  
and get up earlier than anybody else.  
They are the people  
who push  
who drive  
who turn  
who cast  
who fly and burn  
and march forward with their fists clenched.  
Beneath the civilisation the eternal rivers of their sweat never dry.

Listen to the clamor of the masses.  
The prisoners are waking up.  
I hear someone coughing in a cell next to mine.  
I pronounced your name in every cells of the prison  
and announced that I have an interview with you today at twelve noon.

Happy to be informed of your arrival, all the prisoners sat on their beds.  
Everyone expects you to bring some good news.  
You are, as if, a newspaper of the day  
and you are the headline on it.

Swinging me in its invisible rays when the sun brought me  
in the middle of the sky  
You have just arrived.  
I approached the jail gate to see that you are sitting mute  
with a tiffin-carrier right in front of you.  
You smiled a pale but a total smile  
We did not exchange words of well-being.

The moment you took the chair for interviewees  
you started serving food  
You rolled a fish-ball and whispered into my ears-  
another round of crackdown is going on.

I simply nodded my head.  
You poured down the gray of *magur*  
and whispered again to tell me that a revolutionary know to me  
is no more alive.  
I bent my head down.  
I asked you not worry.  
We can bear the grief. May Allah give us that strength.  
Then we kept looking at each other.  
We kept looking until the noise of the sentry's boots reached  
and stopped between us.

fiction

## A Strange Betrayal

by A S M Nurunnabi

RECEIVING wrong telephone calls is a normal phenomenon in our city life. When one gets such calls, though regarded as a kind of petty nuisance particularly when received at inconvenient hours, say after midnight, one can only fume in suppressed anger.

For Sajna, a young woman reading in a private university in the city, such wrong calls, not quite few in number, are taken as an inevitable part of our technical shortcoming. She had never thought that one of such calls could bring about a change in her attitude in her unfolding young life. She was a good-natured likeable person, pretty handsome in appearance, more devoted to her studies than to any other interest except painting and music.

The telephone call in question was received by Sajna one evening. Taking it as an usual wrong number call, as she expected no call from any relative or friend at that time, she was about to dismiss it curtly with the words "sorry, wrong number" when the caller at the other end said piteously, "Please don't drop the phone as a wrong number. Please bear with me for a few seconds."

It was a male voice with a soft timbre. Curiosity seized her and she continued to hold the phone. The voice apparently seemed to be of a young man. He then said, "I got your number from a source which I won't disclose. I may continue calling you from time to time, but please rest assured I have no

ill motive". Saying this, he abruptly cut off the line.

Sajna was thrown into a welter of confusing thoughts. For the next few days, she remained in terrible suspense.

Then again the telephone call came from the anonymous person. His voice this time also appeared to be well modulated and his manner of speaking seemed quite impressive. This time he took a longer time speaking to her and then again abruptly cut off his monologue.

The calls from the young man increased at regular intervals. Sajna also became a little free in her talks with him. But the strange thing was that the caller never told her his name, address or telephone number. Even when she wanted to see him face to face, he would avoid the proposition.

In this manner, the dialogue between the two over telephone continued for some months. During this period, without unfolding his identity he talked to the girl on a verity of topics at random with his impressive voice with touches of wit and humour. Such talks were essentially flippant in nature as might be expected when two young minds exchange ideas on many common favourite subjects.

But the continued anonymity so assiduously presented by the young man put a heavy strain on the mind of the young girl. All her attempts to un-

mask his identity bore no results. However, the magic of the man's voice and his attractive ways of speaking cast a spell on the girl. A time soon came when the girl could no longer bear the intriguing situations. She felt she must find somebody whom she could trust and tell her about the whole affair.

At first, she thought of considering in her elder sister. But she gave up the idea as it might involve the risk of conveying it to their mother, which would be very embarrassing for her.

The girl then thought of a suitable alternative. She had an aunt, not directly related, yet she was much friendly with all members of Sajna's family that she was called an aunt by all. She was senior to Sajna by about four years, married with a child. Her husband was a successful businessman, but the calls of his business required him to stay out of Dhaka frequently.

Sajna, in her desperate bid to rid herself of the torment of keeping the secret about the affair with the young man, approached the so-called aunt and told her the whole story. The aunt listened to Sajna's story patiently and then advised her to inform the anonymous caller of her own telephone number when he would next call Sajna. She acted accordingly with the hope that the aunt might now be able to unfold the mystery about the young man.

When Sajna informed the young man of the aunt's residential telephone number, dramatic developments began to take place. The youngman's calls to Sajna became less frequent. This put Sajna in greater suspense as she wondered about what might have been said by the aunts to the young man about her.

One day the aunt came to see Sajna and told her that she had contacted the young man and learnt that he was married. As such the aunt advised Sajna to have nothing further to do with the young man. The information shattered all the dreams that Sajna had nurtured in her mind about the young man.

That was not the end of the matter. Though the aunt counselled Sajna to cease all communication with the young man, it transpired that the aunt herself, though married with a child, continued to maintain steady connection with the young man.

Sajna was stunned by the revealed information. She even doubted the authenticity of the aunt's story about the young man being married. She had told her story to the aunt in the hope that she might help in unravelling the mystery about the anonymous young man. On the contrary, the aunt belied her trust and she, being a married woman with a child, felt absolutely no scruples in starting an affair with the youngman, thereby causing a betrayal of Sajna's fond hopes and dreams.