

**The New York Times**

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, please [click here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit [www.nytreprints.com](http://www.nytreprints.com) for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#) »



---

September 17, 2000

## **Life Was Art, Art Was Life**

By Roger Pearson

**MARCEL PROUST**

By Jean-Yves Tadie.

Translated by Euan Cameron.

Illustrated. 986 pp. New York:

Viking. \$40.

**MARCEL PROUST**

A Life.

By William C. Carter.

Illustrated. 946 pp. New Haven:

Yale University Press. \$35.

About a third of the way through Proust's seven-volume novel, "la Recherche du Temps Perdu," the hero finally gets to

kiss the girl. Having tried before and been angrily rebuffed, he gazes at Albertine's rose-pink cheeks and longs for a more intimate knowledge of their scent and savor. But the maneuver proves problematic. The target begins to break up: "As my lips made their short journey toward her cheek, I saw 10 different Albertines." It is too late to abort the mission, but the instruments are failing: "Alas -- for, when it comes to kissing, our nostrils and our eyes are as poorly situated as our lips are poorly fashioned -- suddenly my eyes ceased to see, then my nose was crushed in the collision and lost its capacity to smell, and, while yet not one jot advanced in my desire to know the taste of this rosiness, I understood from these hateful signs that I was at last engaged in the act of kissing Albertine's cheek." The human being, he wistfully reflects, "may be a less rudimentary creature than the sea urchin or even the whale, but we do lack a number of essential organs and notably possess none that will serve for kissing." All we can do is substitute our lips and "thereby arrive perhaps at a slightly more satisfying result than if we were reduced to caressing the beloved with a horny tusk."

A simple kiss becomes as complex as a lunar landing, thanks to Proustian writing at its most characteristic: simultaneously perceptive (and here bringing to mind the Cubism of Picasso's "Demoiselles d'Avignon"), funny (and performing the novel's time-honored role of ironizing romance) and symbolic. The desire to know -- sensually, emotionally, intellectually -- propels us on a journey fraught with vertiginous perspectives, and truth is an elusive destination.

Earlier in the novel the narrator undergoes a similar experience during a carriage ride. From a distance the two church steeples of Martinville-le-Sec and the single steeple of Vieuxvicq look like birds perching motionless on the horizon. But as he draws near and subsequently departs, they realign themselves in a startling choreography and finally merge into "a single dark shape" before vanishing into the dusk. As we move through time, the future offers prospects upon which habit, prejudice or the illusions of desire confer a deceptive fixity. As we embrace reality in the present, those fond prospects fragment into a bewildering and promiscuous array, which in turn is transformed by retrospect into a stable but now quite different pattern. This is Proust's "kaleidoscopic" vision, so cleverly reproduced in Raul Ruiz's recent film of "Time Regained," the final volume of "la Recherche du Temps Perdu." As the performance of a sonata for piano and violin nears its end, the camera tracks and pans from right to left and left to right across the rows of the Princesse de Guermantes's seated guests; and as it does so, some of these rows themselves move independently from left to right and right to left, only ceasing their movement after the camera itself has come to rest but simultaneously with the recital.

And so how shall a biographer embrace the reality of Marcel Proust? The first task -- and both these fine biographers succeed admirably in this -- is to explode the terrible myths that cling like barnacles to the person of this highly intelligent and original writer: the clichés of the neurotic hypochondriac insomniac snob, of the drama queen and mommy's boy who lived by night and slept by day, rarely venturing from the bed in his cork-lined room. The second task is to be minded of Proust's own convictions: one, that the only way to escape from the prison of one's subjective vantage point is to see the world through the eyes of an artist who has the technical means successfully to express the artist's own way of perceiving the world (in words, music, paint or whatever); and two, that the best way to understand an artist's work is not to look at the life of the artist (as the great 19th-century critic Sainte-Beuve had done) but to analyze the themes, structures and images with which the artist's work articulates a unique vision of the world.

Here we have a problem, which Jean-Yves Tadie addresses squarely in his preface: Is biography therefore redundant? And what happens if, as in the case of Proust, the artist's masterpiece happens itself to be the story of a life, the quasi-autobiographical account of a would-be writer who believes his time to have been wasted on parties and ephemeral amours only to discover that he does after all have a vocation and the talent to write a novel about time?

For more than 30 years the standard biography of Proust has been that of George D. Painter (two volumes, 1959 and 1965), which itself supplanted Andre Maurois's "Quest for Proust" (1949). But Proust scholarship has moved on since Painter's day, notably with the publication of Philip Kolb's magisterial 21-volume edition of the correspondence (1970-93), comprising more than 5,000 letters, and of the four-volume Pleiade edition of "la Recherche du Temps Perdu," under the general editorship of Tadie (1987-89). This exhaustive edition draws on the manuscript drafts for the published novel (itself more than 3,000 pages long), which are contained in 75 school notebooks and run to more than 7,000 pages (not to mention the typescripts and the multiple proofs). There have also been memoirs and eyewitness accounts, most famously that of Celeste Albaret ("Monsieur Proust," 1973), the housekeeper-cum-secretary who looked after the writer during the last eight years of his life. The closer the scholar gets to Proust, the more Prousts there are!

Tadie, a professor of French literature at the Sorbonne and the leading Proust scholar in France, has been publishing on Proust since 1959. His biography, now translated into English by Euan Cameron, was first published in French in 1996 and has been widely acclaimed. It must now compete with that of William C. Carter, a professor of French at the University of Alabama, Birmingham, himself also an internationally recognized Proust scholar.

Who's the better biographer? Unsurprisingly, there is much common ground. In books of roughly similar length (and wrist-challenging weight), we are taken at a roughly similar pace through Proust's life: his parentage (mother from a wealthy Jewish family in Paris, cultivated and well-read, with a keen sense of humor; father of petit-bourgeois Roman Catholic stock from Illiers, near Chartres, a highly successful doctor and a major figure in international disease prevention); Marcel's birth on July 10, 1871, just as the Third Republic was being born out of the rubble created by the Prussian siege of Paris and the French government's brutal suppression of the Commune; his early childhood and the asthma attack at the age of 9 that marked the beginning of a lifelong illness; education at school and university, the emergence of an interest in writing and the realization of his homosexuality; military service (which he enjoyed, and not just for the men); his resistance of parental pressure to get a proper job and the eventual publication in 1896 of a collection of stories, poems and essays called "Les Plaisirs et les Jours" (on the model of Hesiod's "Works and Days"), with a preface by the established writer Anatole France; "Jean Santeuil," an unfinished, highly autobiographical novel and prototype for "la Recherche du Temps Perdu"; the translation of Ruskin's "Bible of Amiens" (1904) and "Sesame and Lilies" (1906), a form of literary apprenticeship during which he developed his own highly individual and accomplished prose style; the deaths of his father (1903) and mother (1905); the growing awareness (1908-9) of the novel he might write and the mutation of his polemic "Against Sainte-Beuve" into the circular structure of a three-volume novel to be called "Les Intermittences du Coeur" in 1912 and retitled "la Recherche du Temps Perdu" in 1913; the struggle to complete publication of a work that doubled in size over the last eight years of his life; the award of the Prix Goncourt for "l'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleur," the second volume of "la Recherche du Temps Perdu," and appointment to the Legion of Honor (in the footsteps of his father and younger brother, also a distinguished doctor); and finally death on Nov. 18, 1922. At the end, like his mother before him, this close relative of two eminent doctors refused to be treated (for pneumonia).

Meanwhile we are introduced to Proust's lovers and friends, to the society -- high and low -- he moved in, to his tastes in literature, music and painting. We follow his financial affairs and watch a large inheritance being eroded by extravagance, gambling and speculation in the stock market. We join him at the Ritz, where the food is good and the waiters obliging; we vacation with him at Cabourg on the Normandy coast, where the air is fresh and the casino is just next door. We ride with him in the newfangled automobile, driven by a young chauffeur from Monaco called Alfred Agostinelli, who wanted to be an aviator. When on May 30, 1914, the wingtip of Agostinelli's airplane caught a wave in

the Baie des Anges, off Antibes on the Cte d'Azur, so died the man who Proust said, "with my mother, my father, is the person I loved most."

But Tadie and Carter differ in style, emphasis and intended readership. Tadie assumes a knowledge of French history -- Carter gives much more information about the Dreyfus Affair, for example -- and at least a passing acquaintance with the essentials of "la Recherche du Temps Perdu." He is dryly dismissive of a "neurasthenic" Proust, observing that "it has always been fashionable" to attribute his asthma to "psychological causes" and that "only someone who has never had asthma could think that the advantages outweigh the inconveniences." Psychological effects, perhaps, Tadie writes ("anxiety, need for affection, fear of being alone, nervous tension"), but not causes. Well served by this slightly acerbic, no-nonsense approach, Tadie interprets Proust for us in the belief that "the biography of a great writer is not that of a man of the world, or a pervert, or an invalid" but rather "that of a man who draws his stature from what he writes, because he has sacrificed everything to it, including his lesser qualities." With erudition lightly worn, he pulls no punches and hides no skeletons, but he is also alive to the pitfall of amassing fascinating but inconsequential detail (for which the correspondence is a tempting treasure trove). Tadie's biography is an outstandingly intelligent, authoritative and well-balanced account of a complex phenomenon, and Euan Cameron's occasional mistranslations and unintentional ambiguities barely detract from the pleasure it offers.

Carter's own English is not without blemish, and occasionally his prose assumes -- conversely -- a Gallic air: surely Agostinelli's car hitting a little girl would be "fatally injuring" not "mortally wounding" her. While omitting all reference to Tadie in his preface (though not in his endnotes), Carter justifiably claims authorship of the first detailed biography of Proust in English since publication of the Kolb correspondence; and his purpose is "to understand . . . how Marcel Proust, generally considered by his peers a talented but frivolous dilettante, came to produce what is arguably the most brilliant sustained prose narration in the history of literature." No less well-informed than Tadie but intellectually less austere, Carter tends to a more narrative style, as in this about Proust's parents: "As Adrien and Jeanne put away their wedding finery, they could hear the noises of civil strife erupting in the streets as the Second Empire began its death throes"; and he gives a graphic account of Capt. Alfred Dreyfus being ceremonially stripped of his rank in the snow-covered courtyard of the *ecole Militaire*. He is more sympathetic to the "neurasthenic" view and more willing to endanger the dignity of his subject by telling us about Proust's need for his underpants to be held tight round his waist

with a pin. He is more eager than Tadie to envisage a Proust who also liked girls, but (as he concedes) there is little reliable evidence of such bisexuality. Carter's biography offers an impeccably researched and well-paced narrative that brings vividly and credibly to life not only the writer himself but also the changing world he knew.

Both Tadie and Carter demonstrate the enduring relevance of biography to the deeper understanding of a literary masterpiece. But the work's the thing. When the young Jean Cocteau came to pay his last respects at Proust's bedside, he was struck by the sight of all the notebooks: "That pile of paper . . . was still alive, like watches ticking on the wrists of dead soldiers." Proust's great timepiece is ticking still.

Drawing (Stephen Savage)

---

[Copyright 2015 The New York Times Company](#) | [Home](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [XML](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Back to Top](#)