

Les Plaisirs et les Jours / Pleasures and Days

Early Short Stories by Marcel Proust

A Dual-Language Book

Translated and Annotated by Edward Ousselin

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Introduction

Marcel Proust is of course best known for his seven-volume novel, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, which was published from 1913 to 1927 (the last three volumes were published after his death). The lasting critical success of this intricately-constructed novelistic reflection on time, memory, and literature has confirmed Proust's status as one of the most influential novelists of the twentieth century.

His first book, *Les Plaisirs et les Jours*, was published in 1896. This collection of short stories, prose poems, and verse provides an introduction to Proust's work.

About Proust

Marcel Proust's life (1871–1922) spans two traumatic periods in French history. In institutional terms, the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871)—and the ensuing undeclared civil war, known as *La Commune* (1871), which pitted an insurgent Paris against most of the rest of the country—marked the end of the Second Empire and the beginning of the Third Republic (which would last until 1940). Proust outlived by a few years the long and very bloody First World War (1914–1918).

Between these two outbreaks of warfare, Western Europe enjoyed a relatively rare and prolonged period (encompassing most of Proust's life) of peace, the latter part of which is usually referred to as the *Belle Époque*. An era of rapid technological progress, of colonial conquests in Africa and Asia, of rising prosperity (especially for some), and of artistic innovation, the *Belle Époque* is also the historical period during which originated many of the cultural monuments, events, and movements (the Eiffel Tower, Impressionism, “les intellectuels,” etc.) that are commonly associated with the image of France around the world.

Much of Proust's fictional work is set in what was then called "le monde"¹ (sometimes also referred to as "la bonne société"), the upper socioeconomic strata of French society at the end of the nineteenth century, which, especially in Paris, included *la haute bourgeoisie* and what was left of the aristocracy, and around which gravitated much of the world of art and literature. Due to his family background and to his own tastes and achievements, Proust became part of that social milieu, although he was also marginalized to a certain extent.

While not extremely rich, Proust's family was certainly well-off (his father, Adrien, was a very successful medical doctor and professor). Marcel received an excellent education and quickly acquired a reputation as a promising young writer. However, as a gay man who was also partly of Jewish origin (his mother, Jeanne, who was Jewish, accepted when she married Adrien that their children would be baptized and raised as Catholics), Proust was not always fully accepted in "le monde," the exclusive social milieu to which he initially aspired but which he later described so minutely and so critically. Proust's homosexuality and Jewish family background would of course become important thematic threads within his fictional works.²

Among the more notable social and political events that occurred in France during the *Belle Époque*, readers of Proust's work should be aware of *l'Affaire Dreyfus* (1894–1906),³ which sharply divided public opinion between the *dreyfusards* (those who, like Proust, believed Dreyfus was innocent) and the *antidreyfusards* (who believed Dreyfus was guilty of treason). Soon referred to as simply *l'Affaire*, this notorious miscarriage of justice also divided "le monde"

¹ "Le monde," as a mainly Parisian upper-class milieu at the end of the nineteenth century, is usually translated in this edition as "high society." Readers should note that the adjective "mondain(e)" translates not as "mundane" (a *faux ami*) but as "urbane," "worldly," or "sophisticated." Similarly, "la mondanité" refers to the norms and customs of social interaction in high society. As for "aller dans le monde," it means: to attend a formal social gathering.

² In *Les Plaisirs et les Jours*, see chapter 4 of "Violante ou la mondanité" (la princesse de Misène) and the end of part I of "Mondanité et mélomanie de Bouvard et Pécuchet."

³ Alfred Dreyfus (1859–1935), a French military officer of Jewish origin, was wrongly convicted of passing military secrets to Germany. He was sentenced to life imprisonment at *L'île du Diable*, a penal colony off the coast of French Guiana. It took several years for Dreyfus's innocence to be officially recognized.

and the Parisian world of arts and letters,⁴ within which Proust was already known (though he was nowhere near as famous as he would become after the publication of the *Recherche*).

L’Affaire is reflected in Proust’s fictional work, as are many of the important cultural events and movements of his lifetime. However, *Les Plaisirs et les Jours* contains short texts that were written before the Dreyfus Affair permeated French intellectual life. In that sense, this early collection of Proust’s fictional shorter works provides a glimpse into the first efforts, or the apprenticeship (and, often, successes) of a future master of his art.

About This Edition

This bilingual edition includes the entire text of *Les Plaisirs et les Jours*,⁵ except for the brief rhymed section entitled “Portraits de peintres et de musiciens.” It also includes the first (and uncharacteristically short) work of fiction published by Proust in 1891, “Souvenir,” which prefigures some of the thematic elements of *Les Plaisirs et les Jours* (and, indeed, of *À la recherche du temps perdu*).

Reading Proust can be challenging even for a native speaker. He favored long sentences with multiple subordinate clauses. His style tends to be allusive, leading readers to infer and draw conclusions. His texts are full of references, not only to other writers, but also to music, theater, philosophy, and historical events. And of course, the social milieu in which most of his fiction is set has largely disappeared. However, as readers around the world have discovered, reading Proust is well worth the effort.

The purpose of this bilingual edition is to help learners of French transition to reading and appreciating Proust’s original prose. Wherever possible, the English translation therefore remains “literal”: it generally follows the structures of Proust’s complex sentences and makes use of cognates (while steering clear of *faux amis*). As an example of the recurring French constructions to be mindful of, while enjoying Proust’s elegant style, readers should explore the multiple meanings, contexts, and uses of the pronoun “on,” which can be translated, for instance, as “one,” “we,” the generic “you,” or the passive voice. The use of the pronoun “soi” adds

⁴ The term “les intellectuels” (which was originally used as an insult) took on its modern meaning during *l’Affaire*.

⁵ The title is adapted, no doubt with some irony, from *Les Travaux et les Jours* (*Works and Days*) written by the Greek poet Hesiod, around 700 BCE.

another level to the challenge of translation. Consider the following example: “En entrant, *on voyait en face de soi la mer*” (from “La Mort de Baldassare Silvande”). Possible translations include:

There was a view of the sea ahead
Ahead, the sea was visible
The sea could be seen straight ahead
You could look directly out at the sea
We had a view of the sea right in front of us

And of course, a strictly literal, if infelicitous, rendering would be: “One could see the sea in front of oneself.” In this edition, the goal is not to attempt to reproduce the brilliance of Proust’s style, but to provide language learners (and, hopefully, lovers of literature) with an English equivalent that is as close to a linguistic mirror image as possible, thereby facilitating the reading of the original French text.

Suggestions for Further Reading, Listening, and Viewing

The best follow-up reading to *Les Plaisirs et les Jours* is the second part of the first volume of Proust’s *Recherche*, a self-contained narrative entitled *Un Amour de Swann* (*Swann in Love*). Readers will then probably be interested in reading the entire first volume, *Du côté de chez Swann* (1913). After that, it will be difficult to resist the temptation of reading the rest of the *Recherche*.

Along with the text, readers should think about the possibility of listening: high-quality recordings of many of Proust’s works can be downloaded (at no cost) from various websites.⁶ Readers should also consider, as a means of facilitating the reading of Proust’s texts, a more visual medium that is particularly popular in France: *bandes dessinées*. Part of *À la recherche du temps perdu* has been adapted into graphic novels by Stéphane Heuet (Éditions Delcourt). Some film adaptations are also available: *Un amour de Swann* (Volker Schlöndorff, 1984), *Le Temps retrouvé* (Raoul Ruiz, 1999).

⁶ For instance: <<https://www.litteratureaudio.com>>.

Reading through Proust's *Recherche* is an experience similar in some respects to reading Shakespeare's thirty-seven plays. *On pénètre peu à peu dans un monde différent, / You progressively go deeper into a different world, / et quand on en ressort, / and when you come back out of it, / on découvre qu'on a quelque peu changé. / you discover that you have slightly changed.*

Bonne lecture!