

Spring 2001

## Review of Malcolm Bowie, Proust Among the Stars Benjamin.

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### Recommended Citation

Caws, Mary Ann (2001). Review of "Review of Malcolm Bowie, Proust Among the Stars Benjamin.," *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*: Vol. 2 : No. 2  
Available at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc/vol2/iss2/5>

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**Malcolm Bowie, *Proust Among the Stars Benjamin*. London: Harper Collins. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. 348 pp. ISBN 0231114907.**

**Reviewed by Mary Ann Caws, Graduate Center, CUNY**

"A spectacular introduction to Proust," says Richard Howard. "The best general study of Proust's 3,000 page work," glows the *TLS*. Who could possibly not glow? Proust does indeed. With both interior and exterior gleam, equally profound. Malcolm Bowie does not just know Proust; others know Proust, feel Proust, write about Proust, explain Proust, do Proust imitations, make Proust films. This book and this writer are truly in another category, on another level from "knowing" Proust. I think Richard Howard has hit it squarely on the noggin when he uses the word, maxi-appropriate, of course, for the starry title: "spectacular." For it is about watching, seeing, and also about the extraordinary.

Malcolm Bowie hears and makes resound the breathing of Proust's indelible pages: their rhythm, their language, their "alternating copiousness and restraint" in their use of the glorious French language. "The narrative breathes out, and the world is many. It breathes in again, and the world is one."

This kind of perception of the rhythmic alternations of writing and living and reading and seeing motivate much of this remarkable book. I am thinking here of a passage on science, as it has worlds cohere and humans take a stab at understanding both worlds and ways of operational coherence:

For a moment the natural and human sciences have become intelligible to each other, and a single dynamism—that of alternating dispersal and concentration—is seen to govern the stars in their courses, the growth of crystals, the structure of the human mind, and Mme Verdurin in her successive salons.

Plurality and plenitude, says the critic, are the centres about which the contemporaries of Marcel Proust turned also. But Proust does it different, bigger, maybe we could say. More diversely. More comically, more tragically, more, well, humanly.

Bowie brings out the larger metaphysical and moral issues—about which he deeply cares, as did Proust—and, no less, what one might think of as lighter. Only it isn't lighter, it is just something else, another issue, but breathed in and out with the moral sense. Listen, and, of course, notice the words, for Malcolm Bowie is a craftsman with language as with thought: "Proust's writing—the fantastification of it, the fine-spun texture of it, the power, pace, and percipience of it—is a song of intellectual gladness and an unwearying tribute to the muse of comedy."

And the narrator? His pace is droll, improbable, moving. "He havers. He maunders. He drugs himself with retrospection." And what he learns? Well, "his path toward knowledge of human sexuality is to be, in its later stages, slow, cruel, and disconsolate." As the narrator becomes a Keatsian "thoroughfare for all thoughts," we all learn something. "The mind, sexually energised, is worth studying, because it tells us important things about how the real world is."

As a whole, Bowie's vision of Proust's architectonics is itself a gladsome thing to perceive, with its "cantilevers, suspensions, and buttresses." We won't be seeing the work again in the same way, or maybe anything else.

What about time? Yes, there is a chapter on this, as on all the major topics. But you wouldn't expect it to be simple, would you? As usual, Bowie is able to come up with a more subtle twist, one laden with the irony of which Proust and he are masters. Get this: "The problem, however (we have learned to be waiting for just that, ed. note) is that time as presented by the narrator in his abstractly philosophising vein is too big for the ordinary time-bound business of reading Proust." Real time isn't to be confused with virtual time, or the actual present of reading with the supposed pasts created in order to be read. But the reader relives those pasts, in the present? Right you are. Time-effects stack up, or cluster. And Proust's endless sentences work as bridges between them, and among the various types of writing styles. . . . Retroaction, what a grand word. It is used here to characterize the kind of thinking the narrator and reader have to experiment with together. They are looping, doing an aerial "reconnaissance" flight.

"Proust's novel," Bowie observes, "is testing our powers of recall, telling us how to handle its fierce local intensities, and drawing our attention to its counterpoint." Of recall and revision. Of pilgrimage tales here, and tales of quest, which have apparently neither solution nor outcome. Where indeed might we be, and what time is it really, in this ah so marvelously lengthy text? We know, of course, that Proust is "placing death, boldly figured, both at the end and at the beginning of his lengthy tale." Art itself is the possibility of the ground and the sky. Bowie comments on the simultaneous presence of Proust's "generalising death-haunted textual music and what could be called the social comedy of dying. I know of nothing stranger in this strange book." Nor I.

Proust, yes, among the stars: "the savagery of Proust's writing on old age is part of a wider vehemence and disconsolateness in the book as a whole." Now Bowie's use of the word disconsolate, so ultimately powerful, is part of his own intensely moral designs on our reading of this deeply and disconsolately moral work.

Speaking the unspeakable, Bowie points out the uncrossable barriers between ourselves and those characters we feel so attracted to and repelled by (one barrier is precisely that Charlus cannot write: it had not occurred to me to ask). "Charlus is small-minded, lean-spirited, yet beyond his false grandeur he is genuinely grand." This too seems somehow to make part of the moral design. The human will is both functioning and under attack (even in the "volitional world of the voluptuary"): we see it, we feel it, but have no control over it or apparently over our own understanding of the ways the barriers function, or those crossing them. Such considerations are at play, and at work.

Christopher Prendergast's major undertaking—that retranslation of Proust's whole novel (WHAT? AGAIN? Yes, again)—to be published by Penguin, when it is done, will lead still more readers in the Paths of Proust. For my modest part, I am preparing an ultrabrief illustrated biography to accompany it (in Penguin's new and about to have an August 2001 launch Illustrated Lives series). Proust doesn't die, he just gets retranslated, relaunched, reviewed. We

taste, with Bowie and his Proust, the salt of the beach at Cabourg, with which his splendid book commenced, and see, with Proust, the light of the real stars on which it closes.