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## In “memory” of Marcel Proust (1871-1922)

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## In “memory” of Marcel Proust (1871-1922)

The death of the famous French writer Marcel Proust at the age of 51 on the 18 November 1922 marked the end of a short but highly productive life. As a student of French a number of decades ago, I was given my first introduction to *A la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*). After getting over my initial feelings of inadequacy (we had all been forewarned about how difficult Proust was), I came to appreciate the writer’s beautiful evocation of Normandy, best encapsulated in places like Illiers and Cabourg – which are assigned the fictional names Combray and Balbec in *A la recherche*. Mind you, his interminable sentences, many of which go on for entire paragraphs, have never appealed to me – give me Balzac or Mauriac as stylists any day. However, the biting commentary on the cultural milieu of Paris during the fin-de-siècle and early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that only an insider like Proust could have penned, did have an appeal for the aspiring iconoclast that I was.

The 6 volumes of *A la recherche* could not be described as being particularly accessible: there is very little plot and the narrative tends to revolve around certain key moments and reflections that recur over and over again – the aristocrat Swann’s obsession with Odette being a case in point. All of this has contributed to Proust’s reputation as being a writer that only highly sophisticated readers can truly appreciate. Like Joyce, reading Proust is occasionally a signifier of intelligence and hence there can often be a preciousness surrounding his work. The famous French cartoonist Claire Bretécher captured this aspect very well in her renowned work, *Les Frustrés*, which the former Professor of French in UCC, Grace Neville, brought to my attention over 20 years ago. The characters of this satirical work aim at presenting themselves as refined and erudite: one of the tactics they employ to impress their dilettante friends is to claim they are in the process of *rereading* Proust: the prefix here being key, as the idea of going through the work more than once is daunting in the extreme!

The representation of Proust as a writer most suited to intellectuals and academics is not entirely justified, however, as his prose is not nearly as impenetrable as is sometimes claimed. On one occasion he explained his fixation with style: “Style is not at all a prettification as certain people think. It is not even a matter of technique, it is – like colour with painters – a quality of vision, the revelation of the private universe that each one of us can see and which others cannot see.” This commitment to avoiding “prettification” in favour of revealing a “private universe” that is at once personal and shared by everyone, led literary critic Denis Sampson to draw a filiation between Proust and the Irish novelist John McGahern.

But it is the use of involuntary memory, a technique that allows episodes from the past to be relived in the present thanks to the activation of certain triggers, that is the most salient intersection between the two writers. Many will have heard of the madeleine episode in Proust, which involved the dunking of this small cake in tea, the smell and taste of which transport the writer backwards in time to key moments of his youth. Like the mystical experience, Proust's moment of memory regained is transient, passive, subject to forces beyond his control. Naturally, not every attempt to evoke the past in this manner is successful. However, when it happens, a whole string of memories come flooding unsolicited into the writer's consciousness from the shadows of the past. Proust does not just remember these things, he communes with them, views them with eyes that perceive what had evaded him when he lived them in real time.

John McGahern experienced something similar when strolling through the lanes of Leitrim in his later years, where he sporadically felt as though he was once more walking along these same lanes hand-in-hand with his beloved mother on their way to school. The effect was "an extraordinary sense of security, a deep peace", the conviction that he could live for ever. McGahern knew such moments could not be willed into being, but when they did occur, they were accompanied by an inner calm and spiritual contentment.

A modernist who wished to reshape language in order to express ideas that had not heretofore been broached in literary texts, a writer who was equally adept at evoking day-to-day life in Normandy as at outlining the social prejudices that characterised the literary salons of Paris, a man who suffered the pain of betrayal and jealousy in his personal relationships, who was afflicted with ill-health from an early age, resulting in confinement to bed for long periods, Proust is an indispensable reference point within world literature. On this, the centenary year of his death, I think it would be appropriate to read, or maybe even *reread* his work, not in the pretentious manner of the characters in *Les Frustrés*, but in order to appreciate its universal significance and literary merit. Afterwards, I assure you that tea and cake will never be quite the same again!

**Eamon Maher** will be talking on the theme of Proustian echoes in the work of John McGahern at **The Irish Proust** conference in the Museum of Modern Literature on the 29-29 October.