

## The Madeleines of Marcel Proust

The following is a letter (unpublished) to the New York Review, responding very late to Graham Robb's review of Richard Davenport-Hines's book *Proust at The Majestic*. (My subjects: a fact about the last photos of Marcel Proust, and a speculation about the role of drugs in Proust's creative process.)

Dear NYRB:

Recently I wanted to pass on to my francophile sister the delightful Proust parody by E.M. Forster, cited for us (by Graham Robb in his review in the October 19, 2006 NYRB) from Richard Davenport-Hines's book *Proust at The Majestic*. I had a little trouble finding it in the NYRB archives with "Proust+parody", but got a hint and found it among my clippings.

That's when I noticed again the photo of Proust taking the air in a public garden, with the caption "The last known photograph of Marcel Proust". I knew this to be not strictly true, at least without the qualifier "alive", because for years I've been used to seeing, at the home of a Proust admirer of my acquaintance, a photo of Proust on his deathbed, taken by Man Ray. A little research told me that Man Ray took it two days after Proust's death on the initiative of Jean Cocteau, who knew them both. It's a fairly well-known photograph, at least to Proustians and Man Ray admirers, so Robb and Davenport-Hines are surely aware of it. (There is also a very similar photo, taken from a slightly different point of view, the lighting a bit different as well.) Though a very minor inaccuracy, it seemed worth a moment to set the record straight, even at this very late date. Incidentally, the photo of Proust in the garden is not credited, at least not on the page as usually done in the Review; I for one am curious to know who was the photographer. Lartigue?

But this is more substantial: upon rereading Robb's article, I was struck much more than before by the part addressing Proust's affinity for mind-altering substances. I am no expert (on Proust), and have only read the Moncrieff *Swann's Way*, but I had no idea the great man was such a stoner. I don't know whether Davenport-Hines makes the connection between the drugs and the madeleines, but Robb hits it square. He doesn't emphasize it as much as it may deserve, however, as a key to the understanding of Proust's method (if not his work – but maybe that too).

Like artists generally, who are driven by the high of creation, writers get a big kick out of their best inventions, and some of these are the devices they use to recreate their own lived experiences as literature (sometimes not changing the facts much at all). This is largely a matter of art, but at times there is also the more banal imperative simply to avoid trouble – scandalizing the public, or embarrassing or even incriminating their acquaintances (or themselves). It seems that Proust transformed certain real-life homosexual relationships into hetero for his novels, changing not only the names of the parties but the gender of one of them as well – though not always convincing everyone – presumably to avoid scandal or libel.

I suppose drug use in Proust's time was of a somewhat lower order of the forbidden than homosexuality. Still he probably did not want to make his narrator *un chronique*. So, given the importance to him of memory (however nurtured and stimulated in his own life), I imagine it was a delicious moment for him when he hit upon the idea of the madeleines and the herbal tea as a genteel stand-in for self-medication. (Perhaps he had another one, or whatever, to celebrate his invention.)

At once a private joke and a narrative device, this business of the teacakes that bring on a "rush" of memories is the definitive Proustian moment, known even to many who have never

read the books. As a vivid image of an experience of vivid images, it clearly deserves that status. Though by now inevitably a cliché, it is not merely an oft-repeated story. It is perhaps the biggest key on the chain of his whole *roman à clé*, an invention that masks a habit, in this case, instead of a real person's identity or sexual inclinations. Proust was right to urge us, as Robb quotes him, "not to trace facile patterns of cause and effect when analyzing the process of literary creation", and his writing was not about drugs as such, but he would be less than candid to deny the role played by drugs in his "work flow".

The history of artists who are somehow inspired by or driven along by substances would fill many shelves. A few make the drug experience itself the subject or theme of the work, with others the drug functions more as a tool; many are just attached to the stimulation. For Proust it seems to have been instrumental, as it has been with Burroughs and Bowles, each in his own way. With our puritanical heritage, many of us habitually (!) tend to pity and condemn those with often-harmful dependencies, but we shouldn't deny what value they may offer. The sensible Proust likely knew well that his work would be judged badly if his personal habits were generally known, and it may be that he was thinking also of this when he warned us against facile criticisms. Clearly he wanted to be judged for his work alone; all the rest was *segreti di bottega*.

Allen Schill  
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"Proust: The Race Against Death", by Graham Robb:  
<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/19451> (a sample only of the original review)



(Marcel Proust on his deathbed, by Man Ray, Nov. 1922)

Appendix:

E.M. Forster's parody of Marcel Proust, cited by Davenport-Hines, but too good to omit:

"Three fields off, like a wounded partridge, crouches the principle verb, making one wonder, as one picks it up, poor little thing, whether after all it was worth such a tramp, so many guns, and such expensive dogs."