

## The Proust Effect

for H.W.F.

When I was in my mid-twenties and living in New York with my best friend Howard, his girlfriend, Mary, sometimes used to complain, "Oh no, you're reading Proust again. I hate it when you read Proust." She knew this meant he wouldn't want to go out, or really do anything except keep reading Proust. I knew where he was coming from; I'd been there myself. It was The Proust Effect. My senior year at Berkeley I'd taken a seminar in Proust, in English: all seven volumes (as they existed then, in 1976, in the unadulterated C.K. Scott Moncrieff translation, put out by Vintage Books in those nifty pastel paperbacks with the line drawings on the covers) - seven volumes in ten weeks, two days a week, Tuesdays and Thursdays, two to four. It was, to quote Wordsworth, "very heaven". (The professor was the redoubtable Thomas Flanagan, who would go on to achieve literary distinction himself with a trilogy of novels based in eighteenth-, nineteenth- and twentieth-century Irish history.) I suppose I was taking other courses too - I must have been; but except for a class in Tacitus, I don't remember any of them. As far as I was concerned, for the duration of that Winter Quarter in 1976

it was all Proust. As many before me had discovered, Proust gave me new eyes, a new vocabulary, a new way of recognizing and describing what it seemed I had always felt, but hadn't fully known I felt. He moved into my mind and took possession; he filled my consciousness with his own -- even unto repletion. But it wasn't in any way an uncomfortable feeling; in fact, it was totally satisfying and edifying, in the root sense of that word: new structures of knowledge and awareness were being built up in me. I felt I was receiving a whole new education - a new kind of education - on top of the old one. It seemed I needed nothing more than my daily portion (mon pain quotidien) of Proust. It fed me fully, and I walked around in an altered state. (Surely one of the aptest literary commentaries of all time is Nabokov's anagram for Proust: "stupor".) And this was fine with me - as I'm sure it was, only a couple of years later, with Howard as well. Reading Proust is perfect nourishment for the mind and soul, to such a degree that the needs of the body become nugatory (as Mary came to know). Proust is teacher, guide, friend and lover, all in one. Multiverse be damned; for the "faithful" (to borrow a term from the novel's bourgeoisie socialite, Mme. Verdurin), there is only the Proustiverse.

For the writer, though - and Howard and I were both aspiring writers - I may be painting too rosy (or too mauve?) a picture. For the writer, Proust is not only the bread of life, but also the kiss of death: the master who overmasters you -- what the literary critic and theorist Harold Bloom has called a "strong poet", who reveals, by his towering influence over you, your own comparative weakness and inadequacy. When Proust has said it, all the rest is just commentary (or, in my case, parentheses). It is not for nothing that he is sometimes referred to, in the critical literature, as a directeur de conscience - both a "guide to consciousness" and a "moral conscience" (the French word carries both senses). At the risk of overstating the case, I would suggest that to be both writer and Proustian is to have to recognize that he is the ultimate writer's writer, the ne plus ultra (as Tacitus would say) of the literary sensibility - a quality that may itself be in the process of becoming, in this age of digital communication, a thing of the past, like periodic syntax. (The two are certainly intertwined, as Proust's writing exemplifies.)

The writer who falls under the spell of Proust must recognize something else as well: his example can be crushing. He is what Bloom calls, in another iteration of

his theory, the "covering cherub": the precursor who engulfs and smothers you with his divine, omniscient presence. However, this Bloomian anxiety, intense and inevitable as it is, is hardly the end of the matter; it is, in fact, only the beginning of The Proust Effect. And a necessary beginning, I think, for any creative writer who is self-aware, and seeks to better understand and practice her art. Proust is awesome, in the original sense of the word: he induces awe. (Though it is tempting to imagine him in the more current sense of the word as well -- as instantiated, say, by a skateboarder holding a copy of Swann's Way as he tools along, who, when queried by the quizzical pedestrian, declares the book in his hand to be "awesome", perhaps even "totally excellent".)

But despite the literary intimidation that comes with the experience of the Proustian sublime, the effect of Proust - like the effect of all great art - is on balance a beneficent one. The arc of his influence, mighty and fearful though it is, bends ultimately towards the good. Proust inspires; he encourages; he even "empowers" - to employ a term of cant that I would normally avoid, but use here because it suggests the conferral of useful energy. His genius is a generous one, and lends itself to universal application - as illustrated by his characteristic

generalizing observations, present on nearly every page.

For instance, in the Preface to his translation of Ruskin's

The Bible of Amiens, he writes:

When we work in order to please others, we may fail to succeed, but the things we have done to satisfy ourselves always have a chance of interesting someone else. It is impossible that there should be no one who takes any pleasure in what has given me so much. For no one is unique, and fortunately for the sympathy and understanding which are such great pleasures in our life, our individualities are shaped within a universal framework.

In Proust's individuality, particulars and idiosyncrasies we find our own as well, and the effect is deeply gratifying and validating. After one becomes acclimated to the challenges of his style and syntax, one finds one cannot get enough of what he has to say. As Nabokov's brilliant anagram declares, Proust is a drug, and can be addictive; all you tend to want to do when you're reading him is just to keep reading him. Furthermore, he demonstrates that there are few more worthwhile things to do in the world (including, alas, one's own writing). In that sense, he is perhaps more medicine than drug. But this creates another problem. When do you stop reading him? And when you do, how do you justify it? And what do you do instead? This aspect of The Proust Effect presents a paradox for writers who have fallen under The Master's

sway: he both abets and obviates our own efforts. He cheers us on as we stand forever in his shadow: the coach whose own world record his players know can never be beaten, no matter how well they play. The combination of gratitude and despair one feels before his example is unnerving, to say the least.

I first came to the reading of Proust at the beginning of my own writing life, in late adolescence. (And this early exposure no doubt has had its own problematic effects on my style, as you have probably noticed - say, in this parenthesis. I often wonder whether one of the effects of the Proustian drug, ingested at perhaps too young an age, has not been to stunt, or at least slightly pervert, my own natural growth as a writer. Or has he only enhanced it? Is Proust a narcotic, an amphetamine, a human growth hormone, or a steroid? Or rather just a jeroboam of caffeine for the mind? One of the features of The Proust Effect is that each person must decide this question for herself.) It was a time when I was starting to realize, despite my undergraduate Classics major, and a senior honors thesis on Catullus, that my heart lay elsewhere than in scholarship. And it was my immersion in Proust that hastened - if it didn't itself prompt - this change of heart. When I look back on it now, at 64 - and this age

represents a kind of double-whammy for me, and doubtless many others of my generation: when I first heard the Beatles song, at 13, it was unimaginable that they would ever reach the age they sang about, let alone that I would reach it! - I can flatter myself that this was the sort of realization that Proust's six-year apprenticeship as a Ruskin translator also brought him to. As appealing as Ruskin scholarship was to him, he came to feel that it - or really any kind of scholarship -- was not where his true passions lay. This was ironic, since it was his work on Ruskin in the first place that had taught him the existential dangers of what he called "idolatry": the taking of what should only be a means to self-knowledge as an end in itself. And there was an even more fundamental (and paradoxical) truth that came out of his labors on Ruskin: that the way to oneself - to knowing and fully expressing one's own mind and heart - lies in and through one's subjection to the mind and heart of another. Alain De Botton, in that most winning of all self-help books, How Proust Can Change Your Life (and I may as well admit also to my own Bloomian anxiety that De Botton's book, which I greatly admire - though I was a Proustian long before De Botton, since he is 15 years younger than me, goddamn him - has already rendered superfluous my own general-reader

approach to Proust; though I like to think that I am doing something rather different from De Botton in this essay - something less generalizing, more personal, and certainly more confessional; but here, perhaps, I am only once again flattering myself) - in his book, De Botton cites the relevant passage regarding the master-disciple relationship, from the end of the aforementioned Preface:

There is no better way of coming to be aware of what one feels oneself than by trying to recreate in oneself what a master has felt. In this profound effort it is our thought itself that we bring out into the light, together with his.

The passage continues (in a different translation):

Actually the only times when we truly have all our powers of mind are when we do not believe ourselves to be acting with independence... The subject of the novelist, the vision of the poet, the truth of the philosopher are imposed on them in a manner almost inevitable, exterior, so to speak, to their thought. And it is by subjecting his mind to the expression of this vision and to the approach of this truth that the artist becomes truly himself.

For Proust, becoming truly himself meant writing the novel he felt (but was not sure, until after his self-defining encounter with Ruskin) he had within him. More specifically, it meant seeing, and believing, that the heretofore scattered and desultory writings he had done, and was doing - essays, reviews, prefaces, pastiches, autobiographical sketches and fragments - formed part of a

much larger project of autobiographical fiction, and/or fictionalized autobiography, that could be given a narrative with a beginning and end, and then, later -- gradually, accretively, expansively -- a middle. This was a process that has been painstakingly traced and explicated by the dean of Proust scholarship, Jean-Yves Tadié, in his definitive edition of the novel, and subsequent biography. The process was not a haphazard one. Proust retained his original plan for the overall structure of the book -- beginning and end -- throughout his continual expansions to its middle part, which grew from one to eventually four volumes: Within a Budding Grove, The Guermantes Way, Cities of the Plain, and -- taken together, as they are nowadays -- The Captive and The Sweet Cheat Gone. (Proust scholars will cavil at my use of the Moncrieff titles here, which are considered nowadays to be inaccurate - as indeed, technically, they are -- as well as at my preference for his overall title, Remembrance of Things Past. But although it is true that Moncrieff took considerable liberties with Proust's original titles, I find that his poetic license - with its echoes of Shakespeare and the KJV - makes for a more beautiful rendition into English than the more literal recent revision of Moncrieff by Terence Kilmartin and D.J. Enright, which is now the standard

translation. Furthermore, I think Moncrieff's favoring of the spirit over the letter in matters of translation is more in line with Proust's own sensibilities as Ruskin's translator, and onetime disciple.) These constant additions did not end until his death - and not even then, editorially speaking. Tadié's four-volume French edition of Remembrance (1987-1989) adds an entire volume's worth of ancillary manuscript material (totaling about 1,250 pages) to the previous three-volume Pléiade edition (1954). If the novel didn't exactly cause Proust's death - he had suffered from a severe form of asthma since childhood, and his condition worsened over time, leading to the heart and lung problems that finally killed him, in 1922, at the age of 51 - it could perhaps be said that his death helped to cause the novel, at least in the sense that his belief that he was near the end of his life - a feeling that became much more acute after the death of his beloved mother in 1905 - brought an increased urgency to his writing. The time he was trying to recapture in and through his novel was running out in his life.

This accelerating race against the clock lends a heightened sense of drama to the reading of the biographies - the longer ones by George Painter (1959), Tadié (1996) and William Carter (2000), as well as the shorter portraits

by Edmund White (1999) and Benjamin Taylor (2015). Once the novel was underway, Proust developed a clear and unswerving sense of the importance of his enterprise - at least to the degree that he remained undeterred by criticism or perceived failure. The stories of the rejection of Swann's Way by various publishers are famous in the literature. The novelist André Gide, a senior editor at the most prestigious house, the Nouvelle Revue Française, rejected the manuscript either unread or after only a cursory look (the biographical accounts vary), dismissing it as the effort of a snobbish twit. The reader at Fasquelle, the first publisher it was sent to, declared:

At the end of this 712-page manuscript...one has no notion - none - of what it is about. What is it all for? What does it all mean? Where is it all leading to? - It's impossible to know! It's impossible to say!

The managing director of the publisher Ollendorf - a friend, moreover, of Proust's friend Louis de Robert - opined:

I may be as thick as two short planks, but I fail to understand why a chap should require 30 pages to describe how he tosses and turns in bed before falling asleep.

And then, a year after the 1913 publication of Swann's Way - at the author's expense - came the letter from Gide to

Proust, surely one of the greatest examples of crow-eating in literary history:

For several days I have been unable to put your book down. Alas! why should it be so painful for me to like it so much?...The rejection of this book will remain the most serious mistake ever made by the NRF and (since I bear the shame of being very much responsible for it) one of the most stinging and remorseful regrets of my life.

How sweet the vindication must have been, after all the dismissals and expressions of contempt. The second volume, Within a Budding Grove - published, in a rather abject turnaround, by none other than the NRF in 1919 (book publishers had suspended operations during World War I) - went on to win the Prix Goncourt, France's most prestigious literary prize.

In a letter to his close friend Geneviève Straus, Proust had written, "...only that which carries the stamp of our choice, our taste, our uncertainty, our desire and our weakness can be beautiful." What I find particularly gratifying in this statement is the affirmation of uncertainty and weakness, not as things to be overcome, but as essential elements in the creation of art. Proust's artistic faith was robust, and he also knew instinctually that what he had to say was uniquely important, and could only be said in his own peculiar, sublime - peculiarly sublime - literary idiom. In this, as well as in his

philosophical and emotional orientation, and his characteristic interest in the complex interrelationship between sensational experience and memory, he resembled no other writer so much as Wordsworth. I have always felt a strong affinity between the two, yet have found little critical notice of this. Which is odd, since their literary intermediary was Ruskin, who was a devout Wordsworthian. It is unlikely that Proust - a devout Ruskinian - would not have been aware of Wordsworth's influence on his master. Tadié remarks:

He did not believe that happiness was to be found in a sensation experienced in the present moment, but rather in the recollection of a sensation, in the link between the present and the past:  
[quoting a letter from 1912] "If I don't stop desiring, I can never hope."

Compare this with the conclusion to Wordsworth's "daffodil poem" ("I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud"):

For oft, when on my couch I lie  
In vacant or in pensive mood,  
They flash upon that inward eye  
Which is the bliss of solitude;  
And then my heart with pleasure fills,  
And dances with the daffodils.

One notes the similarity between both writers' perception that happiness - Wordsworth's "emotion recollected in tranquility" - lies more in the remembrance of experiences than in the experiences themselves. There is also a common recognition of the relationship between desire and hope.

At one of the climactic points of Wordsworth's autobiographical epic The Prelude, halfway through the poem - which he referred to, during his lifetime, as "the poem on the growth of my mind", and which one might see, if not as a precursor to Remembrance, then at least as kin to it - there occurs this declaration:

Our destiny, our nature, and our home,  
Is with infinitude - and only there;  
With hope it is, hope that can never die,  
Effort, and expectation, and desire,  
And something evermore about to be.

But in Proust's statement ("If I don't stop desiring, I can never hope"), the relationship between hope and desire is paradoxically inverted: hope begins only with the cessation of desire. When you think about it, though, the paradox makes sense. To stop desiring something is to admit to oneself that the object of desire has become, for whatever reasons, unobtainable. It is lost to us. Yet we want to recoup the loss; we hope to find some kind of substitute for it. So the feeling we have at the recognition of its loss is not quite the same as a state of despair (or hopelessness), because the imagination, in the face of any one particular loss, does not stop functioning as an organ of desire; it just changes its object and methods. There is sense, then, in which to stop desiring a specific thing or person is to be liberated - freed not only from that

particular desire, but also free to entertain a very different kind of hope: the hope that comes from freedom itself, from the act of being released from something that one was previously held in bondage to - in this case, desire. We can now see the object of our former desire for what it is in itself, not as it appeared according to our own hopes and expectations. In other words, when we stop wanting something, we can see it more clearly. Conversely, when we want something we do not have, and which is absent, our imagination is fully engaged in conjuring it. In his Introduction to the Yale University Press edition (1987) of Proust's Prefaces to his translations of Ruskin, Richard Macksey quotes The Past Recaptured, the last volume of Remembrance: "One can only imagine that which is absent."

He goes on to cite an analogous section from Ruskin's

Modern Painters:

If the imagination is called to take delight in any object, it will not always be well, if we can help it, to put the real object there, before it. The imagination would on the whole rather have it not there; -- the reality and the substance are rather in the imagination's way: it would think a good deal more of the thing if it could not see it. Hence that strange and sometimes fatal charm, which there is in all things as long as we wait for them, and the moment we have lost them; but which fades while we possess them.

Ruskin's insight into the "strange and sometimes fatal charm" of things we are looking forward to, or have just

lost, is reinterpreted by Proust in the last paragraph of the Preface to his translation of The Bible of Amiens:

It is only when certain periods of our lives have come to a close forever, when, even during the hours in which power and freedom seem to have been given to us, we are forbidden to reopen their doors furtively, it is when we are incapable of placing ourselves again, even for an instant, in our former state, it is only then that we refuse to believe that such things might have been entirely abolished.

Here again, developed at greater length, we see the paradoxical relation between hope and the cessation of desire -- whose loss, which seems to be final, and to signal a state of disillusionment, despair and disempowerment, is only the beginning of another form of hope - a purer form, if you will, cleansed of specific desires, and purged of the wish to return to a "former state". It is only in this purer state of mind, which has been stripped of illusive desires and vain hopes, that we can experience the transformations peculiar to involuntary memory. The "madeleine moment" comes to us not only when we least expect it, but when we have been chastened, as it were, through disappointments and losses that only seem to be permanent.

It is said of depressed people that one of the things that makes our experience so painful is that we cannot bring ourselves to imagine a future time in which we will

no longer be depressed. Our sadness seems to stretch out interminably before us. Such a state seems to lack all hope, in the sense that the depressed cannot imagine wanting or hoping for anything ever again - except perhaps our own extinction. But Proust's extraordinary insight in the passage from the Preface may help mitigate this state of affairs. (I don't mean to seem to be offering any kind of panacea for the often-intractable suffering of depressives. I myself am one of them.) However, hope in another form - the form assumed by what Proust called involuntary memory - may come to us when we seem to have capitulated to a complete failure of the will, or the imagination (and I'm not so sure they're not the same thing), when we seem unable to desire anything ever again; when we have lost all power as an "agent", as we would say today. Another way of putting this might be to say that we can only come to a more abiding hope through a sense of failure - through our experience of our own "weakness" and uncertainty, as stated in the letter to Mme. Straus, and elaborated more fully in the Preface.

In another kind of writer, such a realization might have set the stage for a religious revelation - a moment, say, of "Christ-consciousness", or of surrendering oneself to a "higher power". And indeed, in Proust a religious

sensibility is never quite absent; it's just that it always gets transmuted, directed not toward God, but toward art - that is, toward aesthetic experience. The directeur de conscience aims his consciousness - and his conscience - at the appreciation of beauty. But this impulse - numinous though it is -- arises from inside oneself, and is directed at the world of nature or artifacts, rather than being felt as something divine.

The sense of a transmuted religious sensibility in Proust becomes even more pronounced when we consider the role of redemption in the novel - redemption from failure, and waste, and the squandering of so much time and energy on distractions unworthy of one's better self. It is the redemption of the dark horse, the throw-away, the outsider and outlier. The supposed lightweight is now seen to be a heavyweight - and to have been one all along. The sometime society gossip, freelancer, translator, pastiche artist, metamorphoses into what we now see he was always meant to be: a novelist in the great tradition. And even more than that: one who has established his own tradition, as the great always do. In the "Essay Supplementary to the Preface" of the 1815 edition of his poems, Wordsworth wrote:

...every Author, as far as he is great and at the same time *original*, has had the task of *creating* the taste by which he is to be enjoyed: so has it been, so will it continue to be.

Ten years earlier, at the very end of The Prelude, addressing himself to Coleridge (the poem was also known, through the second half of Wordsworth's life, as "the poem to Coleridge"), he wrote: "...what we have loved/Others will love, and we will teach them how."

Nearly 100 years later, Proust was to make similar observations in his own Preface, then go on to exemplify those ideas in his novel, which brought into the world a new way of imagining the relationship between one's life and one's writing - a new form, related to what we now call "life-writing", but also distinct from it, in that it incorporated not only the methods but also the materials of fiction. I think of this new way of literary imagining as "biographization". Proust himself foretold his invention in a note to his translation of Ruskin's Sesame and Lilies, where he explained the formal effect of Ruskin's manner:

He goes from one idea to another without apparent order. But in reality the fancy that leads him follows his profound affinities which in spite of himself impose on him a superior logic. So that in the end he appears to have obeyed a kind of secret plan which, unveiled at the end, imposes retrospectively on the whole a sort of order and makes it appear magnificently arranged up to this final apotheosis.

He might have been describing his own method in Remembrance. Discussing this process in his biography,

Tadié writes:

As Proust approached the end of his book, and, still more swiftly, the end of his life, he introduced into his pages an allegory, not just of the way in which he wrote and of his manuscripts which were doomed to remain posthumous, but also of the work that awaited their editor. This person was invited to decipher the unpublished writings and to present their successive layers which, once unfolded, allow us to understand the composition of the work and the depths of its substance. What penetrated it very gradually, in every word, in every sentence, was the life of the artist himself, which he slowly "infused" into it.

Tadié's account of this "allegory" - his term for Proust's way of communicating, posthumously, with those who, as he foresaw it, were to read and study his book, in its genesis, gestation and compositional vicissitudes -- is another way of expressing my idea of "biographization", and what it means to "biographize". (I have written on this subject before, in an essay entitled "On the Desire for Future Biographers", and some of what I have to say here is a summary of parts of that earlier piece.) Briefly put, to "biographize" is to imagine your life and writing, and the relation between the two, as if from the point of view of a future biographer or editor. No doubt it is my own predilection for literary biography that has shaped - or

even created, in the Wordsworthian sense -- my own taste for looking at one's life and writing in this way. But (to universalize myself for a moment) I don't think I am alone. Many of us do the same thing - if not in the form of an imagined future biography, then in the form of an imagined future film or TV series, in which we are the stars, and the story is our life - or certain choice scenes from our life. We all like to give shape, structure and meaning to our lives; we all like to make a fictional order - and biographical order is always, to some degree, fictional - out of the chaos of our lives. Proust's great formal and generic achievement - or one of them, anyway, and maybe the principal one - was to find a way to combine the imaginative freedom of fiction with the particular kind of self-discovery and self-expression available to autobiography. Proust's critics and editors and biographers, in turn, found - and are still finding - ways to further order and shape that achievement through their own work. If the cessation of desire gave Proust another kind of hope - a more literary and transcendent hope you might say - then the reading of literary biographies, combined with my own life-writing, gives me a different but related sort of hope - the kind you and I might experience when we read Proust; the kind we feel when we imagine

ourselves rising to our idea of our "best self" - which reading Proust encourages us to do. Moreover, if we are all prone, to lesser or greater degrees, to see ourselves as the center of our own drama - the star of our own film - the hero of our own story - then those of us with a taste for literary biography may also be inclined to see our own lives in biographical terms: driven by certain prevailing and recurrent themes and desires, and divided into certain periods or phases.

Is "biographization" narcissistic? No doubt; though it is my hope that to be conscious of it, and to write about it in a self-aware way, may help to mitigate the narcissism - and perhaps also to entertain and provide insight to others. (Horace's "delight and instruct"; and also, Proust's "for no one is unique, and...our individualities are shaped within a universal framework.") In this regard, "biographization" is not unlike the study of Proust itself, in that both pursuits speak to our desire to better understand certain aspects of the relationship between writing and life.

But "biographization" does more than just satisfy our aesthetic or historical or existential vanity; it gives us something more valuable than just another term of art, or a new way of looking at the ways that reading affects our

mental and passional life. "Biographization" - that is, the tendency to "biographize" - shows that we all, in our different ways, seek forgiveness for our "weakness" and "uncertainty" (to use Proust's own words) through the exercise of our imagination. Moreover, we seek vindication - either in this life, or in the thought of the life that will continue, for others, after we are gone (and if this conjures up the idea of an "afterlife", then I intend it not in any supernatural or mystical sense, but only in the sense that our memory and actions and productions, such as they are, will live on in the minds of others) - we seek vindication, in the eyes and judgments of others, for what might have appeared, at the time, as our errors, vanities, and failures. We seek the kind of disinterested understanding that it is the business of biographers and critics to confer upon us. (For "biographers" here, you can also read "therapists", "clerics", or "mentors".)

I want to emphasize that it is not the forgiveness of God I am talking about here, but rather an understanding of a much more mundane sort - but no less precious for all that. We want our work in this life - and I mean "work" in its widest sense, not restricted to works of art or craft, or undertakings of note, but including also the work we do to earn a living, and care for our home and loved ones - to

be acknowledged and understood by someone who not only cares, but has the qualifications and has earned the right to be able to assess our accomplishments in the light of accepted standards of judgment. We want our work in this life to be weighed in the balance, and valued according to its merits, and found worthy. For me - and I speak here only for myself; though it is my hope, and even my belief, that there are others who share my conceit - I would very much like a biographer, in the mold of a Painter, or a Tadié, or a Carter; though I would be willing to settle for something less; my illusions in that regard are not as great as they may seem. I would like a biographer to redeem me in the eyes of posterity - redeem not in the sense that I am a sinner, but in the sense that I just want to be understood by someone who specializes, let us say, in knowing about lives, and writing about lives, and who is in a position to know about mine with understanding, and compassion, and fairness. And honesty. And good judgment. I do not expect a whitewash. My father, himself a writer, used to say, "Judge a writer by the best thing he's done, and a man by the worst." A literary biographer is in a position to do both, and I ask no more. (And honestly, I want nothing less.) As far as expectations go - well, I'll

let Wordsworth, Proust's literary kinsman, have the last word:

Our destiny, our nature, and our home,  
Is with infinitude - and only there;  
With hope it is, hope that can never die,  
Effort, and expectation, and desire,  
And something evermore about to be.

I would only add that I am in no hurry to be biographized. Since my home, like yours, is with infinitude, I am willing to wait a long time. Because another thing The Proust Effect teaches you is patience.