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**Review of Marcel Proust's *Un amour de Swann*  
(trans. Brian Nelson)**

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Proust, Marcel. *Un amour de Swann*. Paris: Gallimard, 1987<sup>1</sup>.  
———. *Swann in Love*. Translated by Brian Nelson, with an Introduction by Adam Watt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Brian Nelson, Emeritus Professor of French and Translation Studies at Monash University, has been translating for years, mainly novels in Émile Zola's Rougon-Macquart series. Here he turns his hand to *Un amour de Swann*, a detachable component of the first major section of Marcel Proust's great novel *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927). Usually printed as the middle part of *Du côté de chez Swann* (1913), it has, at different times, been published separately, filmed (by Volker Schlöndorff), dramatised, adapted for voices and recorded on a cassette for Radio France. For it is all but self-contained, focuses mostly on two characters, and requires of the reader little acquaintance with the rest of the work. Adam Watt's Introduction is excellent, authoritative, informative and wide-ranging. A bibliography of works in English is also excellent (though it repeats the half-truth that Tadié's Pléiade edition (1987) is 'the' authoritative one, despite its at times unsatisfactory solutions to editorial problems and the fact that there are other equally reliable French versions). Nelson thus joins a handful of translators who have Englished this and other parts of Proust.

In a Note, Nelson endorses a statement by one of the team engaged by Penguin just over twenty years ago to translate the whole of the *Recherche*: "I have worked very much in the shadow of these previous translators and with much gratitude towards them". That is evident to anyone who compares Nelson's text with his predecessors'. He appears to have often worked with an eye on their versions.

On the matter of syntax, Nelson discusses a principle espoused by one predecessor, Lydia Davis, doubting the wisdom of her "retention of the precise order of elements in a sentence" (xxx). Often, however, he reproduces Proust's structures and the "order of elements in a sentence". One wonders where is the advantage in designing the order of the clauses on a more French, less English, model? To some readers, such ordering will feel aptly French, nay, 'Proustian'; to others, too French, awkward or stilted. It gives a slightly foreign feel to much of the prose, placing some of the longer, more complex sentences within what we might call 'the Venuti spectrum', after the American traductologist most associated with a notion of 'foreignisation' (1995). That any degree of foreignisation gives a more Proustian experience to reading Proust in English is, like many things in translation, debatable. Understandably, this fidelity to the "order of elements" quite often determines the choice of punctuation, which can feel clumsy.

Similarly, Nelson quite often chooses to translate the « *si* » *d'opposition* by the contrastive or concessive 'if', rather than, say, 'whereas', 'while' or 'though'. This 'if' is of course used in English, albeit at a much lesser frequency than the « *si* » *d'opposition* in French. But, partly because of that infrequency and because English 'if' tends to suggest hypothesis, it can make a reader hesitate. Especially in sentences like these:

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<sup>1</sup>First published by Grasset in 1913, then all subsequent editions by Gallimard. Edition translated, Gallimard 1987.

If he was obliged to make his excuses to people in society for not visiting them,  
those he made to Odette were for not staying away from her;  
If she was now frequently away from Paris, even when she was there she saw very  
little of him.

(116)

There, many readers, having assumed until halfway through that each 'If' introduces a hypothesis, will have to re-read to disambiguate structures which turn out to be contrastive.

Imitation of French may perhaps be seen too in a tendency towards the literal in choice of word or phrasing. Speaking of frequencies, Nelson uses forms which, though morphological equivalents of French terms, seem improper in context, for instance the Latinism 'a priori' ("her a priori excellence", 117) favoured by some of his predecessors, despite the fact that in English (2,892 = 1.3 per million, according to the corpora of the University of Bologna) it is ten times less frequent than in French (21,034 = 13.00 p.m.). This does not necessarily disqualify it, but the English contexts where it is used, largely philosophical or theological, do. Would a character who is neither philosopher nor theologian use it in indirect speech, describing a woman? Also favoured by a predecessor is "peripeteias" (179), a word known, I suspect, to few readers: Bologna's frequencies are 0 in English and 4,298 for *péripéties*, a word well known in French. Similarly, defensible though it may be to render *une petite ouvrière* as "a little working-class girl" (30) and *une petite bonne* as "a little servant-girl" (56), it might be preferable to call them 'young', as that is why Swann the sexual predator fancies them.

Imagery can enable a translator to be creative without being unfaithful. Here too Nelson, like most predecessors, often prefers literalism, though it makes for weak or obscure images. Two examples: Proust implicitly compares Swann's *âme*, in the throes of his jealousy, poisoned by Odette's confessions, to a stream contaminated by corpses. Implicitly, because the idea of flow is conveyed only by the verbs *charriait*, *rejetait* and *berçait*, commonly used in watery contexts. But "His soul bore them along, cast them aside, cradled them" (170) – all terms used by Moncrieff and Davis, by the way – weakens the evocation of a river and loses the force of the metaphor. To describe melody emerging from a violin as "like a devil in a baptismal font" (149) is to calque an old but still vivid expression (*comme un diable dans un bénitier*) into its literal equivalents, although in English these have little association with seething frenzy.

It is good that some of the dialogue which Proust embedded inside paragraphs is indented for each character, making those parts of the text more reader-friendly. There could have been more of it. Proust's paragraphing of dialogue was an afterthought, intermittent and inconsistent, arising not from aesthetic considerations but from a concern to reduce the length of the volume and hence the price to the buyer, none of which argues for retaining his arrangements with dialogue.

Speaking of dialogue, I do think the translator's ear lets him down at times. I give three examples, one a cumbersome Frenchlike mouthful: "I was about to make one of those judgments of you of a severity that love cannot long endure" (97). The second, spoken by a prostitute in a brothel, "If you'd been boring me, I'd have said so" (173), ignores the semi-educated speech-form of the French, *Si vous m'auriez ennuyée, je vous l'aurais dit*. Par for the course for translators of Proust's satirical voices; but that's no excuse. The third is "if you would stop by for a moment" (136). The speaker being the Marquise de Gallardon, this apparent borrowing from Davis's American version makes this aristocrat of the 1880s sound like a character in *Seinfeld*. Why not 'drop in' or even 'pop in'? The dialogue, just before, of male characters is markedly English ('old chap', 'my dear fellow') and apt for the period.

There are more than 100 endnotes, many giving helpful information about things which Proust assumed his first readers were familiar with. Some which seem superfluous, such as the

one explaining ‘Eurydice’, could have been replaced by others on *cocotte*, *demi-monde*, ‘table-turning’, on ‘the Châtelet’, ‘the Musée Grévin’ or ‘the Luxembourg’, or the sociographical significance of ‘the Faubourg Saint-Germain’, which will be apparent to few readers. At least three, to pages 70 (see below) and 119, and the first note to page 174, give perplexing misinformation which any attentive reader can see is incorrect. That to page 119 also prematurely divulges the shocking outcome of the affair, thus spoiling one of Proust’s most ironic and off-hand revelations.

There is another unfortunate consequence of footnoting certain things: to date exactly the *fête de Paris-Murcie*, Gambetta’s funeral, or the first performance of *Francillon*, etc., giving more information than original readers had, probably than Proust had, for he was only approximately suggesting the 1880s, is to make too precise the timing of the affair between Swann and Odette and contradict what the narrator says of it. If we are to believe these dates, it had been going on for about eight years between December 1879 and 1887, whereas, by the chronology of the narrative, unannotated, it takes place in the rough compass of a few seasons, little more than a winter, the spring following, then the summer of Bayreuth. The first kiss seems therefore to date from 1879; and soon after, at the moment of Swann’s banishment from the Verdurin salon, he reflects that Odette has *vécu plus de six mois en contact quotidien avec moi*. This further perplexes the reader who tries to make sense of Proust’s chronology, which suffers from a design flaw or two: two pages after the banishment, Swann looks at photographs of Odette and remembers how she was two years before, suggesting that the non-sexual phase of love between a womanizer and a woman of easy virtue had lasted for an implausibly long time, or that the photos date from before the start of the affair, equally implausible. Towards the end of the affair, Proust mentions Swann’s love of music, through his rediscovery of the Vinteuil sonata, dating it to *depuis plus d’une année*; yet, not much later, he says *cette existence durait déjà depuis plusieurs années*.

There are, as one would expect, few mistranslations, though “corridor” for *couloir* (p. 48) is probably, in this context, one of them. Another is “because it was good for her peasants” (70), an error common to most of Nelson’s predecessors (*cela faisait bien pour ses paysans* = ‘it made a good impression on her peasants’). Other mistakes I class as slips; and if the volume is to remain in print for a long time, I would hope that, before reprinting, Oxford will make good several small errors (which I have communicated to the translator). Some of these slips, though noticeable to the knowing eye, may not confuse an unknowing reader who reads only this part of the *Recherche*. However, they make one wonder how attentive was the eye doing the revising or the editing.

One of these oversights (actually several in one) shows how confusing tiny things can be in a translated text. The aristocratic name “La Trémoille” (67), misprinted as “La Trémouille” (68), reverts to “La Trémoille” (69), confusing enough. This is soon compounded by Brichot’s mispronunciation of it as ‘La Trémouaille’. Or rather it is not compounded, because here the name, mistakenly again, is given as ‘La Trémouille’. To this a footnote adds misinformation: that Brichot’s faux pas lies in not pronouncing the diaeresis. But that diaeresis is never pronounced by those in the know, and neither of Brichot’s solecisms is that. His first is that the form *ces de la Trémouaille*, intended by Proust as a faulty hypercorrection of *ces la Trémoille*, suggests that Brichot is not just a pedant but an ignorant pedant, the use of the *particule nobiliaire* being, in French, much less common in such collocations than in English (Proust, commenting on Mme Verdurin’s ignorance of such niceties of social discrimination, refers to it as a *vicieuse façon de parler*). More importantly, Brichot’s other solecism is to mispronounce the name with his discrepant *a* — which this translation omits! The misinformation given in the note is contradicted by Tadié (1216). This all makes for a dog’s breakfast, which is then aggravated by the addition of a third faulty variant of the same name, ending with an *s* this time (‘Madame de La Trémouilles’, 70).

Despite my strictures, this edition could make a commendable introduction to further reading of Proust in English, especially in the English of those of Nelson's predecessors, which is the majority, who cleave close to the syntax of the original.

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