



**To cite this article:**

Nelson, Brian. "Reading / Translating Proust." *The AALITRA Review: A Journal of Literary Translation* 20, (December 2024): 96-103.

[aalitra.org.au](http://aalitra.org.au)

Australian Association for Literary Translation

## Reading / Translating Proust

BRIAN NELSON  
Monash University

*The function and task of a writer are those of a translator*  
— Proust, *Time Regained*

*Brian Nelson offers some reflections arising from his ongoing work as general editor (with Adam Watt) of the new, 7-volume Oxford edition of Marcel Proust's In Search of Lost Time (scheduled for publication between 2023 and 2027). His translation of the first volume, The Swann Way, appeared in 2023.*

Christopher Prendergast, editor of the Penguin edition of Proust, has said: “the kinds of judgements and decisions bound up with literary translation make it one of the higher forms of criticism” (Tonkin). Is that an overstatement? Perhaps. But it’s a proposition I find very appealing. In any case, I’d like to bring out, with reference to Proust, the inseparability of criticism and translation, reading and translating.

*Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure.* In *Search of Lost Time* (traditionally called the *Search* for short) opens with a little jolt. Proust uses the *passé composé* where one would probably expect the imperfect; and the second sentence moves immediately, almost abruptly, to the imperfect (*mes yeux se fermaient*), which for the next 3,000 pages becomes the dominant tense of the narrative. I’d make two points about the effect of this oddity: the grammatical disorientation corresponds to the general feeling of disorientation described in the opening pages, figured in a sleeper awakening in a strange place and posture, not knowing who or where he is; and, more significantly, the tense form of the first sentence points to the most crucial aspect of Proust’s novel: temporal structure. The *passé composé* is a compound tense that combines the present of the auxiliary with the past of the participle; and the reader of the *Search* comes to realise that the “I” of the narrative is a double “I” moving fluidly between the present of the middle-aged narrator and the past of his younger self. These shifting perspectives continue until the narrator and his younger self meet up, so to speak, in the novel’s final volume. Moreover, as Christopher Prendergast has noted (Prendergast 164), there is a further grammatical feature of the first sentence that is emblematic of the entire novel: the splitting of the reflexive verb into nominative and accusative (*je / me*) heralds a narrative that is both by and about the “same” person.

Scott Moncrieff’s rendering of the sentence is: “For a long time I used to go to bed early.” Terence Kilmartin followed Moncrieff, but the “used to go” was subsequently changed to “would go” by D.J. Enright. Moncrieff, Kilmartin and Enright ignore Proust’s choice of tense and translate the French as if he had used the imperfect, normalizing the sentence, so to speak, by putting the verb in the tense of habitual action. James Grieve has: “Time was when I always went to bed early.” Alfred Corn suggests: “For a long time now, I have gone to bed early” (Corn 300). Richard Howard declared his preference for “Time and again, I have gone to bed early” (Howard 1989 16). Grieve and Howard are clearly attracted to the idea of starting the novel as it ends, with the key word “Time”. But Grieve’s rendering has a self-conscious and unnaturally colloquial quality, and the “always” is an addition; while Howard’s “Time and again” is oddly emphatic, gratuitously attributing significance to the idea of recurrence. William Carter, in his own revision of Moncrieff, has: “For a long time I went to bed early.”

Lydia Davis and I decided on the same formulation, but with the retention of the comma: “For a long time, I went to bed early.” I think this matches as well as possible the ambiguity of the original. There is potential for ambiguity in the use of the *passé composé* in French (but not in the use of the perfect tense in English) in terms of whether the action in question took place over an extended period of time in the past and is completed, or whether it’s open-ended and stretches up to the present. Corn and Howard want to indicate unambiguously that the *Longtemps* stretches up to the present. But *Longtemps*, conjoined with the *passé composé*, is indeterminate, an effect heightened by the comma that sets the word off in the original (but is absent from most of the versions I’ve just mentioned). What’s in a comma? Sometimes quite a lot.

I’d like to broach the question of the kinds of consideration that go into translating, and the variability of the choices made by translators, with reference to the title of the second volume of the *Search*. The title of that volume is *A l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*. It’s arguably the most difficult title to translate out of the seven volumes. The plethora of choices gives some idea of the complexities involved in any attempt to translate an entire novel by Proust.

At an early stage of the Oxford Proust project I organized a collective email discussion of the problem by the translators involved (plus a couple of others). It went as follows (with names transposed into letters):

**A:** *A l’ombre de...* What did Proust want to imply? In the company of/close to? Not in their shade in the sense of overwhelmed by/made invisible by... In their company but more like trailing after them, following (they’re in the light, he’s in the shade). Under the protection of/protected by? So: “In the Shelter of...”? As for the question of blossoming, flowering, etc., we never say girls are “in flower”. We do say they’re blossoming, even blooming, and we definitely say budding, though that might be too “unpoetic”; and I can see that budding and in bud are too early in the process of blossoming.

**B:** I think “shade” is better than “shadow” or “shelter” (which makes me think of a bus shelter). “Young girls” is probably better than “girls” or “young women” (for rhythm, though I agree that “young girls” is perhaps literally younger in English than in French) and I’d keep “in flower”, I think. We could perhaps insert “the” before “young girls”? So we’d end up with: *In the Shade of the Young Girls in Flower*.

**C:** “In the Shelter of Young Girls in Flower”, perhaps? It has a certain lilt to it with the repetition of the “...er”, but the resonances of bus, refuge and rain are decidedly unromantic. “Sheltered” would avoid that and you still get a faint lilt. I think you need “young” for the rhythm.

**D:** I first thought simply “In the Shade of Young Girls in Flower”. The last word is a bit odd, though feminine with its last syllable, which makes the title wobble a bit. But it’s close to the original and works well, I think. However, slightly shorter and therefore quicker, not so odd, and also more grounded because of a stressed last one-syllable word, lead me to prefer “In the Shade of Young Girls in Bloom”. It’s more “English” as usage, more ordinary, and so the visual metaphor doesn’t upstage the process. I sense the presence of the young girls better, rather than inadvertently imagining pink flowers. “In bloom” makes them seem more vibrant and assured, less passive. The rhythm is right and you have closure, but gently, with the long vowel in “bloom”.

**A again:** I agree that “In the Shade of Young Girls in Bloom” is the most relaxed and “ordinary”. I’d begun to come round to “in flower” and its more overt sexuality. It’s like “in bud” except further along in the process. But I like what [D] says about the vibrancy of “in bloom”. I’m still not convinced the girls need to be as young as “young girls” suggests. On the other hand, “young” is poignant, should poignancy be called for.

**E:** I agree that “shelter” may be too redolent of wet afternoons waiting for the bus. *In the Shade of Young Girls in Flower* would be good. The combination of attraction, allure, vulnerability and fleetingness is captured, as is a glimmer of the oddity of the original.

So, no clear consensus, though that’s hardly surprising. I went round the houses a couple of times with the translator of the volume, Charlotte Mandell. Charlotte settled on *In the Shadow of Girls in Blossom*. She writes in her “Translator’s Note”:

I chose “shadow” instead of shade because, throughout the book, the narrator is very much in the girls’ shadow, first in Gilberte’s shadow and then in the shadow of the girls in the “little band”. He is never their equal; his love for them borders on a kind of idolatry, so that the girls take on a kind of superhuman power to bestow or withdraw an elusive (and never truly attained) happiness. And shadows themselves play an important part in the narrative, especially in the paintings of Elstir [...] I opted for “girls” instead of “young women” because the girls in the “little band” are still very much girls, playing childish games like hide-and-seek [...]; they are not [...] “young girls”, since their ages range from about 14 to 16 or 17 [...] I chose “in blossom” instead of “in flower” because I thought it had a little more of a sexual, first-bloom-of-youth connotation. (And I chose “blossom” instead of “bloom” mainly for the rhythm of the phrase.) Moncrieff’s *Within a Budding Grove*, while it does hint at a budding sexuality, loses all the nuances and hidden meanings of the original title, and leaves out the main subjects of the novel, the girls themselves. (Proust 2025 xvi)

This discussion shows that literary translation is an approximate art – always provisional, never definitive. It also illustrates what literary translation is. It’s a unique form of close reading and creative (re)writing, involving scrupulous attention to verbal patterns and effects – tone, texture, rhythm, register, syntax, sound, all those things that make up style and reflect the marriage between style and meaning. As Proust himself said, in *Time Regained* and elsewhere, “style ... is a question not of technique but of vision”. If you miss the style, you miss the vision.

Daniel Hahn, in his book *Catching Fire: A Translation Diary*, writes: “Every translator has a favourite metaphor to help to convey the rigours and joys of this strange profession...” (Hahn 5) I find myself drawn to the metaphor of mimicry. I think of translation as an art of imitation or impersonation, an attempt to find and re-create a text’s voice. Words in one language are replaced by words in another language; everything is changed so that the text stays the same, that is to say as close as possible to the translator’s experience of the original.

One’s experience of Proust: what is that experience? The novel opens with an evocation of the shadowy world of sleep and semi-sleep. The narration describes the kinds of disorientation produced by falling asleep in an armchair or while reading a book. A deep sleep, the narrator tells us, will make him lose all sense of the place where he fell asleep. The in-between state he describes corresponds to a precarious sense of identity. What appears as a source of salvation is memory, with its ability to recompose or recreate the self. The structuring motifs of the opening pages are: uncertainty, instability, memory, and the search for the self.

“Where am I?” leads immediately to “Who am I?” The *Search* is about the ways in which identity is formed – how we come to be who we are. And the borderland between sleep and waking is where it all begins: inside the narrator’s mind. The opening of the *Search* inaugurates a 3,000-page mapping of the mind. “Every page of Proust,” writes Edmund White, “is the transcript of a mind thinking” (White 138). Translating Proust means getting inside that mind, seeing things as it sees them. Getting into the skin of the writer, entering fully into their sensibility and style – the idea makes me conjure with method acting as another metaphor for translation.

Proust’s sentences are typically long and serpentine. With their “coiling elaboration” (Howard 2004: 98), their parentheses and subordinate clauses, they embody the syntax of the mind. As they uncoil, the sentences express the shape of thought. My aim was to re-create that quintessential Proustian style, because... style is vision. It was crucial, I felt, to stay as faithful as possible to the structure and rhythm of Proust’s sentences, while producing a living, breathing text in English, so that the reader can see the processes of thought unfolding in their full complexity, with their peculiar twists and turns, their particular tonality and resonance.

It’s important, I think, to recognize how boldly experimental the *Search* was. It was quite unlike what contemporary readers understood to be a work of fiction. Instead of a conventional linear story with a clearly identifiable plot and a quasi-omniscient narrator, it uses a kaleidoscope of memories to create a startlingly new form of first-person narrative. It’s important also to note that Proust sounded strange in French, to his French audience, because of his highly original literary style. It’s a strangeness – a stylistic otherness – the translator should keep in order to enable Anglophone readers to experience that originality of style in their own language.

All translations are interpretations, and they inevitably differ from each other to varying degrees. Their dissimilarities aren’t the result of “mistakes”, or proof of the impossibility of translation, but the result of the passage of time, changes in sensibility, new readings, new readerships, different approaches. Classic texts in particular are susceptible of multiple retranslations over time. Retranslations of classic works afford an opportunity to celebrate the art of translation, the richness of the translated text, and language itself. Readers should welcome variety in translation, as they do different interpretations of symphonies by different orchestras and conductors. These would be some of the points I’d make in response to the question: “It’s been done before, so why do it again?” – a fair enough question, as long as it isn’t meant rhetorically.

For decades, Scott Moncrieff’s translation of the *Search*, published between 1922 and 1932, was Proust for Anglophone readers. Moncrieff had an excellent ear for the cadences of Proust’s prose. His translation has a poetic, almost musical quality. But his language dated over time, especially in dialogue, and he was prone to tamper with the text, through embellishment or the heightening of language. The reservation commonly voiced about his translation is that it changed Proust’s tone. He tended to make Proust sound flowery, whereas Proust’s style is not in the least affected or ornate. His prose is precise, rigorous, exact. Grand rhythm and maxim-like concentration often work together. Proust’s sentences are elaborately constructed, but they have a beautiful balance, a musicality that becomes particularly apparent when the text is read aloud. (My own aim was to restore Proust to what he was all along: intricate but straightforward; poetic but precise; musical but matter-of-fact.)

Moncrieff’s choice of English title, the “poetical” *Remembrance of Things Past*, taken from a Shakespeare sonnet, hardly reflects the plainness (or the thematic implications) of *A la recherche du temps perdu*. John Sturrock has commented that that choice is symptomatic of “the unhappy way in which Moncrieff contrived to play down the stringent intelligence of his author by conveying it in an English prose that is constantly looking to prettify. It’s as if the

translator had been taken aback by how acrid and how ruthless Proust can be in his exposure of the deep falsities of the inhabitants of the Parisian *beau monde*, and was determined to muffle its cruelty by the gentility of his English” (Sturrock 115).

Moncrieff was revised by Terence Kilmartin in 1981, and ten years later D.J. Enright produced a further revision in the light of the new Bibliothèque de la Pléiade edition (1987–89) of the *Search*. Kilmartin and Enright made hundreds of small, deft changes, making Proust’s prose plainer (on the whole) and more accurate. But the revised edition remained essentially Moncrieff’s.

The appearance of the Penguin Proust in 2002 brought the *Search* to new audiences and stimulated wide discussion both of Proust and of literary translation – clear testimony to the value of retranslations of classic authors: they can breathe new life into those authors (think of what Emily Wilson has done with Homer!). Lydia Davis’s translation of the first volume, entitled *The Way by Swann’s*, is marked by a commitment to exactitude. Davis writes in her Translator’s Introduction: “I wanted to reproduce as nearly as possible Proust’s word choice, word order, syntax, repetition of words, punctuation – even, when possible, his handling of sounds, the rhythms of a sentence and the alliteration and assonance within it” (Proust 2002 xxxi). This determination to cleave to the original in every possible way is often successful, producing sentences that are crisply precise, but it can also result in an awkward literalism which can cause Proust’s ironic, poetic voice to be muted.

There was an earlier translation of *Swann’s Way*, by James Grieve, published in 1982 by the Australian National University, and republished last year by *New York Review Books*. Grieve (who also translated volume 2 of the Penguin Proust, with the title *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*) adopted an approach starkly different to Davis’s, in pursuit of what he called “real English”. He took a very liberal approach, opting for an idiom that sounds more like spoken English, with difficult expressions glossed over or rephrased to make their meaning easier to grasp, and changing the order of the phrases in a sentence so that it would sound smoother in English, and sometimes even breaking up sentences. By departing so much from Proust’s text, and by giving Proust’s narrator a more modern, breezy style of speech, he loses the flavour, the unique voice, of the original. His version of Proust is idiomatic, but it tends to read more like a rewriting than a translation – whereas what readers want, surely, is to read what Proust wrote.

The contrast between Grieve and Davis corresponds in some measure to the difference between so-called domesticating and foreignizing approaches to translation. Foreignization denotes, in its milder form, a determination to stay as close as possible to the original, and, in its more zealous form, a kind of interventionism that heightens the reader’s awareness of the foreign and reminds them that they are reading a translation. There is of course a foreignness inherent in the text, in that different languages reflect different cultures. And who wouldn’t want to respect foreignness in that sense – for instance, by keeping culturally specific words and phrases in the original (“Bourse” rather than “Stock Exchange”, for example; even “*curé*” rather than “priest”)? But foreignize linguistically? Christopher Prendergast, in his General Editor’s Preface to the Penguin Proust, describes as “demented” Terence Kilmartin’s statement: “A translator ought constantly to be asking himself: ‘How would the author put this if he were writing in English?’” (Proust 2002 xv) Demented? Kilmartin’s statement expresses a view widely held, I believe, by translators. To quote Daniel Hahn again:

[Translation is] an incredibly *writerly* challenge. And the *writing*, for me – that’s the pleasure of it. It’s a piece of new writing, and a re-writing, at once. You might think of it as writing the book I believe the author would have written if they’d been writing a book in English. (Hahn 9)

How stylistic foreignization might work, beyond producing varying degrees of literalism, is not clear to me. I'm reminded of a *New Yorker* cartoon showing a disconsolate-looking translator asking his disappointed-looking author: "Do you not be happy with me as the translator of the books of you?" (Polizzotti 60) In any case, translating Proust's "strangeness" does not mean somehow making him sound "foreign".

Part of my job as editor of the new Oxford Proust with oversight of the various translations has been to facilitate unity of voice and tone across the volumes (while bearing in mind stylistic variations produced by Proust himself). Early on, I wrote some "Standardization Notes". These include an A-Z glossary addressing standardization of recurring words, phrases, terms, modes of address, and so on; and the notes also include some minor suggestions designed to produce maximum smoothness of expression. I have a section on syntax: what I said above about capturing "the syntax of the mind" was accepted as a common approach. I also made some suggestions about tone. Edmund White has commented: "Proust [...] is extremely companionable as a writer. He holds your hand. He tells you everything. He lives with you throughout the book[...]" (qu. Najm 2013). I felt it was important to give appropriate stress to the personal, confidential quality of Proust's expression (of which the opening sentence of the *Search* is emblematic, even more in French than in English). So we've given him a more spoken tone of voice than found in Moncrieff (but less jarringly colloquial than sometimes found in Grieve). We've done this by using a range of contracted verb forms ("I'd feel", "we'd go", etc.) in the narrative, not just in dialogue, as well as by opting for everyday overly elevated expressions where possible, and seeking the maximum of syntactic concision compatible with the structure of Proust's sentences.

Finally, some comments on a key aspect of "style as vision": Proust's comedy. I'd like to stress Proust's humour, because it's a dimension of his work not usually associated with him, and because it's a deeply enjoyable feature of his writing. The *Search* is one of the funniest novels in French literature. Comic vision is central to Proust's work and is expressed in multiple registers, from wry and whimsical to savagely satirical. Comedy of manners, comedy of love, comedy of character: not only does the *Search* contain a wonderful parade of comic characters, the narrator's younger self (named 'Marcel' on one occasion) is himself in part a comic character. This relates to the double vision of the narrative, as it shuttles between the present of the narrator and the past of his younger self. As Roger Shattuck puts it: "Marcel and the Narrator form a contrasting pair like comic and straight man" (Shattuck 69). Marcel is a comic figure in that he continually misreads people and situations. The *Search* is a narrative of error and disillusionment. The older, wiser narrator, as he looks back on his younger self, chronicles the tantalising gaps between desire and reality, illusion and truth – which means that comedy and irony suffuse the narrative.

Much of Proust's comedy is a matter of catching an ironic tone. But it can also be specifically linguistic, with direct implications for the translator. Proust was fascinated by language as a medium in which personal and social identities are created and expressed. He's a brilliant caricaturist of speech. He plays with many different voices: the peasant servant Françoise's malapropisms and invented words; Odette's fondness for Anglicisms and trendy phrases; Bloch's preciousness; the aristocratic Guermantes's attachment to a rather archaic French as a mark, as they see it, of their continued contact with the peasantry; Norpois, the former diplomat, with his sententiousness and long-windedness; Baron Charlus, with his supercharged, over-the-top style of rhetoric; the manager of the Grand Hotel in Balbec, who likes to use expressions he thinks are distinguished, without realizing they're incorrect. There's so much verbal play. Françoise, the servant, grappling with her feelings after the death of her mistress, Marcel's Aunt Léonie, confuses the word *parenthèse* (parenthesis) with *parenté*

(kinship): “*Elle était tout de même de la parenthèse, il reste toujours le respect qu’on doit à la parenthèse.*” Lydia Davis has: “All the same, she was your own kith and kindred, and there’s a proper respect we owe to our kith and kindred...” Grieve has: “Say what you like, she was kithing kin. There’s nothing like respect for your own kithing kin ...”. Moncrieff–Kilmartin–Enright have: “All the same she was kith and kindle; there’s always the respect due to kindle...” Moncrieff (unrevised) has: “All the same she was a geological relation; there’s always the respect due to your geology...” I went with the geological gambit too: “After all, she was part of the family geology, and you’ve always got to respect your geology...” A suitable note, possibly, on which to conclude.

## Bibliography

Corn, Alfred. “Time to Read Proust.” *The Hudson Review* 35.2, Summer 1982, pp. 298–305.

Hahn, Daniel. *Catching Fire: A Translation Diary*. Charco Press, Edinburgh, 2022.

Howard, Richard. “Intermittencies of the Heart.” *The Proust Project*. Ed. André Aciman. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 2004, pp. 97–99.

———. “*from* In Search of Lost Time.” *Paris Review* 111, Summer 1989, pp. 14–33.

Najm, Daoud. “An Interview with Edmund White.” *Asymptote*, January 2013.

Polizzotti, Mark. *Sympathy for the Traitor: A Translation Manifesto*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2018.

Prendergast, Christopher. “English Proust.” *The Triangle of Representation*. Columbia University Press, 2000, pp. 161–176.

Proust, Marcel. *In the Shadow of Girls in Blossom*. Translated by Charlotte Mandell. Oxford University Press, 2025.

———. *The Swann Way*. Translated by Brian Nelson. Oxford University Press, 2023.

———. *Swann’s Way*. Translated by James Grieve. *New York Review Books*, 2023 (Australian National University, 1982).

———. *Swann’s Way*. The C.K. Scott Moncrieff translation edited and annotated by William C. Carter. Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2013.

———. *The Way by Swann’s*. Translated and with an Introduction and Notes by Lydia Davis. Allen Lane/Penguin Books, London, 2002. (“General Editor’s Preface”, pp. vii–xxi.)

———. *Swann’s Way*. Translated by C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin. Revised by D.J. Enright. Vintage, London, 1996.

———. *Remembrance of Things Past*, volume 1. The original Moncrieff translation (1922). Penguin Classics, London, 2023.



———. *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Ed. Jean-Yves Tadié et al. 4 vols. Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris, 1987–89.

Shattuck, Roger. *Proust's Way: A Field Guide to In Search of Lost Time*. Penguin Books, London, 2001.

Sturrock, John. "Proust in English." *The Word from Paris: Essays on Modern French Thinkers and Writers*. Verso, London, 1998, pp. 110–118.

Tonkin, Boyd. "Christopher Prendergast: 'Proust is an invitation to slow down'." *The Independent* 12 October 2002.

White, Edmund. *Proust*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1999.