

Marcel Proust On his mother's side

14 April – 28 August 2022

Born in 1871 to a Catholic father and Jewish mother, baptised and brought up as a conventional Catholic, Marcel Proust kept close ties with his mother's family, the Weils. It was this dual ancestry and the Jewish social contacts he maintained that forged this complex and little-known aspect of both the man and writer. His fascination for the aristocrats of the Faubourg Saint-Germain yet attachment to his maternal family, his friendships with notorious anti-Semites such as Léon Daudet yet commitment to the Dreyfus cause, and his social conservatism yet prodigious literary creativity combine to paint a contrasting portrait. For Proust, involuntary memory, bringing the past alive in the present, became both a writing method and the very subject of his work. Although, as he maintained, the novel must not mirror the writer's life, the Jewish side of his identity is not absent from his writing. It most often manifests

itself implicitly and in an encrypted manner through his Jewish characters, the question of anti-Semitism, and his vision of the homosexual as *alter ego* of the Jew faced with stigmatisation and persecution. Proust's discretion regarding his maternal family's Jewishness, the caricatural traits of his Jewish characters and the anti-Semitic commentaries in *In Search of Lost Time* have sometimes been interpreted as reflecting an ambiguous attitude, but they bear witness to the stereotypes of the time. In the 1920s, Zionist reviews began taking an interest in Proust as spokesman of a Jewishness imbuing him with an exceptional capacity to observe the society of his time. In the light of this dual identity, Marcel Proust could be regarded as a "Marrano" writer whose Jewishness diffracts in his work. It is this new interpretation of a literary genius that this exhibition explores.

The Weils, a modern Jewish family

The Weils, originally from Wurtemberg, were established in Alsace in the 18th century. At the end of the century, Baruch Weil (1780-1828), Proust's great grandfather, directed a renowned porcelain manufactory at Fontainebleau. He was the official mohel (circumciser) of the synagogue in rue Notre-Dame-de-Nazareth, the first location of consistorial worship built in Paris. The eldest child of his second marriage, Nathé (1814-1896), was Marcel Proust's grandfather. He married Adèle Berncastell (1824-1890) and together had a daughter, Jeanne Weil (1849-1905), Marcel's mother.

Although perfectly integrated into the modern-minded bourgeoisie of their time, the Weils maintained links with the Jewish institutions they supported philanthropically.

In 1870, Jeanne married Adrien Proust, a brilliant doctor from Eure-et-Loir and probably a freemasonry acquaintance of her father. They had two sons, Marcel and Robert (born in 1873).

The writing laboratory

When he was seventeen, Proust contributed to the *Revue verte* then the *Revue lilas*, founded by his classmates at the Lycée Condorcet. Some of his first writings were first published in *Le Banquet* and *La Revue blanche*.

From 1899 to 1906, Proust was dazzled by the writings of the English art critic and aesthete, John Ruskin (1819-1900). In 1900, following in Ruskin's footsteps, they went to Venice together.

After Jeanne Proust's death in 1905, Marcel gradually began working on the manuscript of *In Search of Lost Time*. His revised manuscripts have numerous notes in the margins whose structure and form evoke transcripts of the Talmud with their peripheral commentaries surrounding the text.

Proust's worlds

In his writings, Proust attached great importance to places transposed from reality: the house in Auteuil where he was born, the house at Illiers that became the fictional home of aunt Léonie at Combray; the apartments on Boulevard Malesherbes, rue de Courcelles and Boulevard Haussmann in Paris that inspired numerous scenes of *In Search of Lost Time*.

The resorts on the Normandy coast depicted in paintings by Boudin or Monet – Trouville, Houlgate, Cabourg, Deauville – where Proust stayed regularly from 1880 to 1914, became the settings for *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*. The society that this Jewish intelligentsia formed on the Normandy coast is ironically evoked in the novel, notably in the character of the narrator's Jewish friend, Bloch.

Esther or the revelation

The Book of Esther, read during the Festival of Lots (*Purim* in Hebrew) is a narrative, full of twists and turns, reversals and inversions of social positions, is stood on its tilts when the Jewish identity of Queen Esther.

The story of Esther had particular significance in Marcel's family. Jeanne Proust greatly admired the biblical heroine. In 1905, Sarah Bernhardt played Jean Racine's *Esther* in a production accompanied by music by Reynaldo Hahn, who performed it at the Proust's home one evening in April 1905. The family also owned a picture by Frans Francken the Younger portraying Esther and Ahasuerus.

Proust and the Dreyfus Affair

For Marcel Proust, the Dreyfus Affair was not an occasion to disclose his Jewish identity, but to demonstrate his commitment to the Dreyfusard cause. Although his father was an anti-Dreyfusard and he had everything to lose by joining Dreyfus partisans, he took his mother's side. After Émile Zola's article "J'accuse" was published in *L'Aurore* on 13 January 1898, Proust signed a protest

“against the violation of judicial forms”.

His name figures on a petition for an appeal, alongside those of his brother Robert and his friends. The Dreyfus Affair occupies a central position in his writing since it revealed profound changes in the social order.

The Jewish characters in *In Search of Lost Time*

The situation of Jews in society and anti-Semitism are omnipresent in the novel. He invents characters that represent different facets of the Jewish identity, in contrasting situations and with ambivalent behaviours.

Proust has sometimes been criticised for treating his Jewish characters in a caricatural, even anti-Semitic manner but that reflect prejudices of the period and not the writer's opinions. These stereotypes include remarks on a supposed Jewish physiognomy: Charlus compares Bloch's face to that of Sultan Mehmet II in the portrait by Gentile Bellini.

The Bloch character embodies an uneducated, expansive and versatile Jew, whereas Swann represents the refined, elegant and cultivated side of enlightened Judaism.

Charlus' secret

Although he never admitted being a homosexual himself, several of his affairs were common knowledge. Baron de Charlus was partly inspired by his relationship with Comte Robert de Montesquiou-Fezensac.

The writing process is an indicator of hidden truths that echoes the clandestinity of homosexual practices. Proust is mentioned in a police report of 1918 following a raid on the Hôtel Marigny, which became the “temple of indecency” frequented by Charlus in the novel.

In Proust's time, Jews and homosexuals were subjected to the same stigmatization constraining them to the greatest discretion.

The Ballets Russes

In 1909, his attention switched to his monumental novel to which he devoted almost all his time. Simultaneously, he developed a new sensibility to an aesthetic brought to France by the Ballets Russes, enthusiastically adopted by the modern-minded intelligentsia.

The troupe, created in 1907 by Serge Diaghilev with the best dancers from the Mariinsky Theatre in Saint Petersburg, performed for the first time in Paris in 1909. The sets and costumes for its productions were designed by Léon Bakst who was rapidly adopted by the Parisian aristocracy

The very wealthy Misa Godebska, muse and patron of modern art, became a model for Proust's Princess Yourbeletieff in *Sodom and Gomorrah*.

Proust in Zionist reviews in the 1920s

French Zionist journals such as *Menorah* and *Palestine* began taking an interest in Proust in 1922, the year he died. In his obituary in *Menorah*, Georges Cattai was the first to stress Proust's Jewishness: in his view, feeling profoundly Jewish when facing an ordeal is a stance as strong as religious practice.

Several articles on Proust and excerpts from his writings and correspondence were published in Zionist journals, in which there were also contributions by Albert Cohen and André Spire, considering Proust's oeuvre through the dual prism of his Jewishness and his universal genius in the context of a Jewish cultural renaissance in French literature.

Publication

Catalogue of the *Marcel Proust: on his mother's side* exhibition

A mahJ – RMN-GP publication
256 pages, 39€
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Guided visits

Marcel Proust: on his mother's side

15 May
by Isabelle Cahn, curator
25 May, 2 June, 10 June, 14 June,
22 June, 3 July, 21 July, 3 August
by Yaële Baranes, Elisabeth
Kurztag or Raphaëlle
Laufer-Krygler

An exhibition, a work

Ida Rubenstein's headdress in *Scheherazade*

8 June
by Anaëlle Gobinet-Choukroun

The Asparagus by Édouard Manet

23 June
by Cécile Petitot

Singing visit

22 May, 15 June, 5 July
by Grégoire Ichou

Walking tours

mahJ- musée national
Jean-Jacques Henner

Proust's Paris

19 May, 28 June, 10 July
by Ingrid Heid

Proust and the Plaine de Monceau salons

12 June
by Ingrid Heid

Cooking workshop

At Proust's table

15 June, 24 July

Concerts

César Frank

21 April
Quatuor Tchalik
Dania Tchalik

Gabriel Fauré and Reynaldo Hahn

2 June
Cyrille Dubois, Tristan Raës

Concert-reading

Marcel Proust Reynaldo Hahn

18 May
Quatuor Tchalik
Pierre Hancisse

Reading

Marcel Proust, Correspondence with his mother

15 June
Anne Alvaro, Emmanuel Noblet

Cinema

Proust and the cinema

25, 26 June

Conferences

Proust and the Jews

14 April
by Antoine Compagnon

Exhibiting Proust, the hidden story

19 April
by Isabelle Cahn

Bloch versus Swann

24 May
by Philippe Zard

Panel Discussions

The Dreyfus Affair in *In Search of Lost Time*

11 May
with Yuji Murakami, Philippe Oriol
chaired by Pierre Benetti

The Salons in Proust's time

14 June
with Catherine Nicault,
Cyril Grange, Eric Mension-Rigau,
chaired by Pierre Benetti

Family workshops

In Proust's kitchen

15 May, 12 June

Workshops for children

Marcel at the theatre

26 April, 12 July

Get in, Marcel!

28 April, 13 July

Writing workshop

Writing from memory

13 – 17 June
by Maïa Brami

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