

A Strange Bee

My brother, the foot doctor, once asked me if I ever did anything simply for the sake of converting the experience into prose. Naturally, I repelled the notion with a haughty persiflage in an endeavor to persuade him that such hackneyed stratagems were unnecessary for the genuinely talented gentlemen of the quill. After all, great writers are heralded for their style, not their content. Marcel Proust is a classic example....

Proust spent much of his adult life sitting up in bed in the quiet luxuriance of his dead mother's boudoir. The walls were plied with cork. He seldom ventured beyond that womb-like chamber in the course of writing his masterpiece, *Remembrance of Things Past*.

A confidante, Anna de Norilles, sent Proust a note following her perusal of some early drafts of his novel. "Dear Friend," she wrote, "perhaps I am narrow minded, but I cannot understand how a man can take thirty pages to describe how he keeps shifting his position in bed before falling asleep."

Perhaps Madame de Norilles was not accustomed to much movement upon a mattress.

The point that needs to be made, however, is that Proust wrote so brilliantly that it didn't much matter what he was writing about. There is more joy to be had in reading the thirty pages describing how he keeps shifting his position in bed before falling asleep than there is in any account I've seen describing someone's ascent of Everest.

On the other hand, I have read a few accounts of men shifting positions in bed that were even more compelling than Proust's, but that was probably because, unlike Proust, these other fellows were not in bed alone.

Although the Frenchman's prose is magnificent, the content of his work does tend towards the mundane (from time to time). This may explain why there has never been an attempt to make a movie of *Remembrance of Things Past*. But as Proust said, "The writer, you see, is a strange bee who indiscriminately sucks his honey from flowers and from excrement. What matters is the quality of the honey."

Of course, bees don't suck honey. They collect nectar with which they secrete honey. And as far as I can imagine, there is little, if any, nectar to be had from sucking excrement. Then again, he did say the writer is a "strange bee"—and Proust was certainly a sucker for

metaphors. "I believe only metaphor," he said, "can give a style a kind of immortality."

When you spend most of your adult life lying in a bed in a quiet, womb-like room with cork-lined walls, odds are your metaphors are going to be slightly, shall we say, extravagant, every so often. It's a fair assumption that Proust did not conduct any field studies on the behavior of bees. Nevertheless, few writers have ever achieved the brilliance of his metaphorical style.

Actual experience was of small concern to Marcel. Biographers would have you believe that he was seldom engaged in the existential aspects of human relationships. The love of his life was his own imagination, and the magical power of that imagination bodied forth a pageantry of characters and circumstances as rich and impassioned as any that have ever prevailed within the realm of great literature.

Still, there is no denying that the fellow was exceedingly peculiar. On the subject of sex, for example, he compared it to preparing a meal.

"You love a woman the way you love the chicken whose neck you happily wring to eat it at dinner, except with women you want to kill them, not so much for the pleasure, as to deprive them of pleasure with other people."

Psychologists love Proust.

The truth, however, is that Proust probably never made love to a woman. He adored his mother and his grandmother. Otherwise, he was part-owner of a male brothel. Boys were commissioned to pose naked at the foot of his bed and masturbate. If aroused by this spectacle, Marcel would masturbate, too.

Figuratively speaking, it could be argued that Proust's entire life was an exercise in masturbation. Certainly the idea of wringing a chicken's neck was just another flight of fancy. Yet, despite being completely unfamiliar with making love to a woman or wringing a chicken's neck, Proust was clever enough to fashion a comparison between the two activities. Another case of imagination triumphing over experience, or . . . masturbated mutant metaphors run amok.

Those who have aspirations for a literary career, but lack the fecundity of Proust's imagination, and aren't particularly keen on spending most of their adult lives lying in bed with themselves, will be apt to rely on a more scrupulous contact with reality in order to fashion their prose. In varying degrees, these are the sort who will go out of their way to accumulate experiences like Native American Indians—bless their noble souls—used to collect scalps. Climb a mountain, plunge the depths of the sea, or run with the bulls in Pamplona. . . .

Just the thought of such escapades would undoubtedly have caused Proust to shift about in his bed for another thirty pages.

Aristotle said that the genius for metaphor is unteachable. That may well be. A curious aspect of Proust's genius for metaphor was that he often had very little acquaintance with the components of his metaphors. However, it was his belief that, "Experiences are less real when you have them than when you either remember them or imagine them."

I'm willing to give that a try. The research for writing adventure stories doesn't appeal to me. So, roll down the bed sheets, fluff up the pillows, and pass the lubricant....