Proust and America

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Introduction:
The Spirit of Liberty

In a little hotel where we stayed some time they spoke of us as English, no we said no we are Americans, at last one of them a little annoyed at our persistence said but it is all the same.

— Gertrude Stein, Paris France

It may appear willful not to say eccentric to regard Proust’s writing as having been in any way influenced by America. Proust never visited the United States nor showed any known inclination to do so. Even had he been offered passage to New York, as is Odette de Crécy by one of her young lovers, we can imagine him doing precisely as she does: handing the ticket to someone waiting at the dock side and returning straight to the comforts of Paris. Does this mean Proust was uninterested in the States? We might usefully approach the question from the perspective of his relationship with Britain. Despite plans to cross La Manche, Proust was never to set foot in England. His grasp of the language was by his own admission shaky. “[J]e lis l’anglais très difficilement” [I read English with great difficulty], he wrote Violet Schiff in 1919 (Corr. XVIII:475; my translation). His inability to speak English fluently he put down to his learning it while suffering with asthma: “et ne pouvais parler, que je l’ai appris des yeux et ne sais ni prononcer les mots, ni les reconnaître quand on les prononce” [and I couldn’t talk, I learned with my eyes and am unable to pronounce the words or to recognize them when pronounced by others] (Corr. III:221; SL I:290).

Proust grew up at the height of Anglophilia in Paris, and his interest in British art and culture is a reflection of the times. What knowledge he had
of Britain came either from his reading (the periodical *La Revue des deux mondes* advertised itself as “Anglophile”) or from friends such as Robert d’Humières, author of *L’île et l’empire de Grande-Bretagne: Angleterre, Egypt, Inde* and the translator of Rudyard Kipling; Robert de Billy, who worked for three years at the French Embassy in London, from where he kept Proust abreast of the Wilde scandal; the painter Jacques Emile-Blanche, who, a resident among the Anglo-French artists’ colony at Dieppe, was the source of much news and gossip about literary London; and Marie Nordlinger, the English cousin of the composer Reynaldo Hahn, with whom Proust worked on his translations of Ruskin.

The aim of this study is to extend the influence of the Anglophone world to embrace America. That Proust has influenced aspects of American literature is both incontrovertible and uncontroversial. In his influential chapter on Proust in *Axel’s Castle* (1931), Edmund Wilson sees Proust alongside James Joyce as marking the final “evolutionary” stage in the development of European fiction. After them, the baton would be handed over to those writers whom Wilson mentions at the close of the chapter: Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Wilder, and Parker. Wilson is, of course, looking forward to developments in American literature, where Proust’s influence has indeed proved significant. We might think of Edith Wharton, Edmund White, Harold Brodkey, James Baldwin, Richard Wright (who spoke of being “crushed” by the hopelessness of ever himself depicting the lives of black Americans with equal thoroughness), the sinuous poetry of C. K. Williams, or the plays of August Wilson (“Black America’s Proust”). Even Philip Roth’s fictional Zuckerman is touted as “The Marcel Proust of New Jersey.” While such future developments stand to one side of those with which this study is concerned, they nevertheless indicate that part of the attraction of Wilson’s argument lies in his having charted not only a clear line of development in Proust’s writings, one that moves from romanticism to modernism, but that he opens the door to the great emerging power of the twentieth century: the United States.

A defining feature of discussions and analyses of modernism is the difficulty of accounting for its origins. What consistently emerges from all such attempts is an agreement that modernism was an international movement that came to prominence in different places at different times. Overall, however, there has tended to be an emphasis on the Anglo-French axis in early developments of modernism. Thus the Founding Fathers of the movement include Flaubert, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Huysmans, after whom come Debussy, Valéry, and Proust himself. Only then do we find
the geographical and linguistic borders being pushed back to take stock of the wider English-speaking nations: Pound, Eliot, Joyce, Stein, Moore, and Woolf. Yet if behind the modernism of Proust we acknowledge the presence of Baudelaire and Huysmans, then we must learn to accommodate the influence of Edgar Allan Poe; if we recognize in Proust aspects of symbolism, then a key presence will be Ralph Waldo Emerson; and if we read Proust’s experiments in fiction alongside a near-contemporary, such as the composer Claude Debussy, then the provocative figure of James McNeill Whistler heaves into view. Certainly Proust himself went some way to acknowledging the fact. As he wrote to Robert de Billy in March 1910: “C’est curieux que dans tout les genres les plus différents, de George Eliot à Hardy, de Stevenson à Emerson, il n’y a pas de littérature qui ait sur moi un pouvoir comparable à la littérature anglaise et américaine” [It’s odd how in every genre, however different, from George Eliot to Hardy, from Stevenson to Emerson, there’s no literature that has a power over me comparable to English and American] (Corr. X:55; SL III:4). Elsewhere Proust described Poe as “dans la désolation de ma vie, une des bénédictions du souvenir” [in the desolation of my life, one of the blessings of memory] (Corr. XX:92; my translation); while Whistler remained for him throughout his life an artist of the first rank.

Leslie A. Fiedler’s *Love and Death in the American Novel* identifies longstanding ties between developments in literature and the conjoined histories of France and the United States prior to the lineage discussed by Edmund Wilson. The series of events which culminated in the American and French revolutions, Fiedler argues, gave birth to “a new literary form and a new kind of democratic society, their beginnings coincid[ing] with the beginnings of the modern era and, indeed, help[ing] to define it” (1967, 23). Fiedler goes on to discuss the situation of American authors who struggled to find a way to write prose fiction “in a land where there are no conventions of conversation, no special class idioms and no dialogue between classes, no continuing literary language” (1967, 24). This would appear an entirely alien situation to that which Proust found himself in. And in many ways the two are irreconcilable. Yet while Proust could rely on and exploit precisely the features which Fiedler’s American novelist found lacking, he also lived during a period of enormous domestic and international upheaval. *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–1927) is, then, a response to rapid and wholesale changes in conventions, idioms, language, and class within French society, as well as being a work of art the composition and structure of which was first
interrupted and then reconfigured in light of a global conflagration, the First World War, that only ended when it did because of the decisive entry of the United States.1

While Proust may have been less forthcoming about the wider impact of Americanization than he was about his literary and artistic influences, this is not to say that he was ignorant of its benefits. He knew enough to secure shares in the United States Steel Corporation, and he owned New York City bonds; the proceeds from the sale of his infamous cork-lined apartment at 102 Boulevard Haussmann were reinvested in American securities; and he enjoyed close contacts with influential members of the Stock Exchange, including Walter Berry, “the most well-known American in Paris” (see Lee 2007, 286), dedicatee of Pastiche et mélange (1919), and from 1917 to 1922 president of the American Chamber of Commerce in Paris.

It would be astonishing had Proust not been affected by the growing cultural, economic, and political presence of America in France during the period between his birth in 1871 and his death in 1922. In 1867, of the approximately 119,000 foreigners living in the city, some 4,400 (including Confederate political refugees fleeing the States after the Unionist victory in 1865) were American. By the late twenties, the estimate rises to over three times that number (Higonnet 2002, 328). The painter William Merritt Chase no doubt spoke for many when he declared in 1912: “My God, I would rather go to Europe than go to Heaven.” Chase, who studied in Munich but exhibited in Paris, was acutely aware of the importance of Europe to American artists and of how cultural exchanges between the two were producing “a new type ... the offspring, as we know, of European stock, but which no longer resembles it” (cited in Adler, Hirshler, and Weiberg 2006, 14). As such he typifies the view that the flow of influence between the Old and New Worlds tended to run predominantly in one direction: westwards. Increasingly, however, Parisians were themselves becoming enamored of their American visitors and what the country had to offer.

1 The first volume of A la recherche, Du côté de chez Swann, was published in 1913 with a note on the flyleaf announcing that the second and final volume, Le Côté de Guermantes, would appear the following year. As it was, the outbreak of war meant that the second and greatly augmented section, A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, had to wait until 1919 for publication. In the intervening years, Proust's original conception of the novel had undergone massive development and change. For a detailed summary of these developments, see Tadié 2000, 600–608, 664–667.
Only a short stroll from the family home at 9 Boulevard Malesherbes, the young Proust was taken often to the Parc de Monceau. There survives an undated photograph of him playing there with Antoinette Fauré and an unknown male friend. With its small lake known as the Naumachie, a semi-circular Corinthian colonnade, Greco-Roman “ruins,” and a child-sized pyramid, the entrance to which is guarded by two stone sphinxes, the Parc remains today much the same as it was when described in a contemporary Baedeker as “a pleasant and refreshing oasis in the midst of a well-peopled quarter of the city.” Modernity, then, is hardly the first word that comes to mind when strolling there. If, however, one clear day in December 1881, the ten-year-old Proust should have halted in his game of partie de barres and looked into the cold blue sky above the tree-lined Boulevard de Courcelles to the north of the Parc, he would have seen an unfamiliar addition to the Paris skyline – a statue that was just commencing to reach above the houses, and before the end of the following spring would overlook the entire city.

Designed by Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi, plans for the erection of La liberté éclairant le monde (Liberty Enlightening the World) dated back to the mid-1860s and growing dissatisfaction with Napoleon III’s failure to move decisively toward a more democratic form of government. What republicans aspired to was a constitution on the American model. Not even tacit U.S. support for Prussia in 1870–71 (a tit-for-tat response by the U.S. government to French sympathy and aid for the Confederate South during the American Civil War) dampened their enthusiasm for the “American school.” So the idea arose of presenting the statue to the United States as a gift to mark the centenary in 1876 of the American War of Independence. Republicans thus hoped to arouse domestic support for political change by appealing to France’s revolutionary, antimonarchical past and the decisive part the country had played in securing American freedom from British rule.

Though the shattering military defeat of 1871 and the subsequent war of attrition between left and right conspired against the statue’s immediate construction, the idea was not shelved. In November 1875 an appeal for funds was launched at the Grand Hôtel de Louvre, followed by a gala benefit performance of Gounod’s newly composed motet, named after Bartholdi’s proposed statue, at the Paris Opéra. As it was, insufficient funds were raised, hardly surprising given the ongoing war indemnity imposed by Prussia and the heavy cost of rebuilding work made necessary by the firestorm of the Commune. Not until October 1881 (the same year,
incidentally, as a square in the 16th arrondissement between the Palais du Trocadéro and the Étoile was renamed the place des États-Unis) did work on the statue begin in the foundry of Monduit and Béchet at 25 Rue de Chazelles. By December, as noted earlier, Bartholdi was able to boast that the statue already overlooked the surrounding area.

The erection of the statue marked, literally, a high point in Franco-American relations. It symbolized a history of shared revolutionary ideals: the light the statue was to shed on the world being that of reason, democracy, industry, and a sustained confidence in the future. This was vitally important to France following the *annus terribilis* of 1871. Yet it is also important to recognize that there existed a strong antagonism toward the United States. As I will return to in my first chapter, the unease felt by many when faced with the reality of Haussmann’s revamped Paris increasingly took the form of anti-Americanism. The Goncourt brothers, for example, registered their disillusion with “the Americanized modern world and hidebound Paris”; yet others feared that Paris was becoming a kind of “American Babylon.” Why, though, should Haussmannization and the United States have become synonymous? Haussmann’s project, the building of a unified and rational city, Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson writes, opened up a fracture between the Paris of the past with “its layers of settlement; its dirty, crowded central section; its crooked, winding streets; and its multiple-dwelling, and often multistory, housing stock” and the city of the future. The latter was clearly associated with the emerging cities of the New World, and the governance of centralized urban planning. The difference lay between Washington D.C., the city of the republic, and Paris, the city of revolution (1994, 31). Haussmann’s designs, then, became a battleground for possession of the city’s past as well as its future. What was at stake was Paris’s claim to being the presiding genius of precisely those revolutionary attributes given symbolic form by Bartholdi’s statue. In short, would future generations call the revolution by the name of *Liberté* or *Liberty*.

The *Statue of Liberty* was completed in June 1884. It remained in the yard behind the Rue de Courcelles until the following spring, when it was finally dismantled in preparation for its voyage to New York. By then thousands of French visitors including ministers of state, ambassadors, President Jules Grevy, and Victor Hugo, the noted advocate of all things American, had visited the yard to goggle at the statue as it took shape. Among them was the American painter Edmund Charles Tarbell. “I expected to see a large statue,” he wrote in 1884, “but when I … saw this huge black thing rising
up against the sky above the tops of the houses I was startled.” Having seen the statue as it towered over the Parc de Monceau, it is difficult to imagine that the young Proust did not persuade a member of his family or one of the family servants to accompany him on a pilgrimage to take a closer look at Liberté. Whether such a hypothesis is true or not, there remains a neat symmetry in the fact that Proust’s childhood games took place in the shadow of Bartholdi’s statue while his final months at 44 Rue Hamelin were to be overlooked by the Eiffel Tower, erected to mark the 1889 Exposition Universelle. For it was Eiffel who designed the steel supporting structure for the Statue of Liberty, a structure that anticipated that other defining image of the American skyline: the skyscraper.

If Proust grew up at the height of French Anglophilia, so too must he have been aware of an often strident anti-Americanism. “Everyone knows,” Phillipe Roger writes, “how the Statue of Liberty was finished before its pedestal. The statue of the American Enemy raised by the French, however, is a work in progress: each successive generation tinkers at it, tightening its bolts. But its pedestal is well established” (2005, xi). Roger looks to understand the historical phenomenon of anti-Americanism with reference to a narrative the rhetoric of which had been “broken in as early as the 1890s.” A by-product of this “narrative” has been the almost total silence surrounding Proust’s American influences, and the representation of America and Americans in A la recherche. While no single study of Proust’s debt to the Anglo-Saxon world has been as extensive as Pierre-Edmond Robert’s Marcel Proust lecteur des anglo-saxons (1976), the emphasis is placed firmly on Proust’s debt to Britain rather than the States. Such, too, is the situation with more recent studies: Emily Eells’s Proust’s Cup of Tea (2002) and Daniel Karlin’s Proust’s English (2005). Eells’s great contribution to Proustian studies is to have coined the term “Anglosexuality,” by which she signifies the uses to which Proust put his reading of nineteenth-century British and Irish writers, and his appreciation of such artists as Turner and the pre-Raphaelites, in his complex and ambiguous portrayal of gender and sexuality. Karlin, meanwhile, is interested less in Eells’s “third sex” than the “second language” of A la recherche. Through a study of the French phenomenon of Anglomanie – the craze for all things English – he aims to

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2 Cited in Hirshler 2006, 105. Tarbull’s response puts us in mind of Marcel’s experience in Du côté de chez Swann of seeing the steeples of Martinville peeping above or through the surrounding trees as he approaches the town by road (148–149; I:180–181).
uncover a world-within-a-world in the novel, one determined by Proust’s usage of English words and phrases.

While Eells’s emphasis on Englishness is clearly defined, Karlin’s avoidance of any discussion of America is harder to explain. There is no doubt that Karlin contributes much to our understanding of Proust’s extraordinary attentiveness to aspects of Englishness; what he does not address is the fact that English was spoken beyond the narrow provinces of the British isles. The repercussions of this are felt as early as Karlin’s introduction, where he announces that his interest in the subject was sparked by a reference to Marcel owning a pair of “snow boots” (1164; III:546). The word, Karlin informs us, “was very recent in French … and belongs to a large group of English words which the French language borrowed from new products, technologies, and social practices of the nineteenth century. Many more of these occur in *A la recherche: from les films to les cocktails, from le revolver to le golf*” (2005, 2). What Karlin doesn’t register is that snow boots were not of English origin. Also known in French as *caoutchoucs américains*, they were of American design and manufacture. Proust may have been using a word taken from the English language; the origins of that word, as with defining aspects of successive waves of modernism, lay across the Atlantic.

The point may reasonably be raised as to whether it is up to Karlin to make a distinction or recognize the elements of American rather than English word origin if Proust does not himself do so. If Proust means the word to refer to the fashion for all things English, we should honor his intention – whether or not he is mistaken. The situation, however, is more interesting than this economy allows. Karlin’s comments on the importation of English words and phrases into French are similar to Malcolm Bowie’s discussion of the passage in *A la recherche* where Proust refers to Giotto’s angels in the Arena Chapel as “exécuter des loopings” (2093; V:612). “Looping,” Bowie says, “in the sense of ‘looping the loop’ is recorded by Paul Robert’s dictionary as making its first appearance in French in 1911, and both examples given are from Proust’s novel”; “No sooner had English adopted a vigorous expression from a fairground attraction of the day, than French had borrowed it in an abbreviated form” (Bowie 1998, 89). Karlin, too, cites Proust’s use of the word, describing it as one of those “rare, privileged moments for English in the novel” (2005, 56). The problem for Karlin’s thesis is that this “privileging” of English turns out to be a privileging not of *Anglomanie* but an example of Proust’s sensitivity to the Americanization of the French language and culture: the
aeronautical stunt called “looping the loop” (although the first pilot credited with accomplishing the feat was the Frenchman, Adolphe Pégoud) took its name from a rollercoaster ride called “loop-the-loop” built by Edwin Precott at Coney Island in 1901. As a result, though there may be times when the second language of *A la recherche* is English, on many such occasions it is a form of the language that hailed from the States and it is spoken with a distinct American twang.

It is not just America’s contribution to linguistic developments in the English language that we need to consider with relation to *A la recherche*. In not acknowledging the origins of words that are American-English we overlook the significant impact of U.S. technology, enterprise, sexual mores, art, literature, fashion, and economics on the novel. Karlin’s curious sensitivity to the translation of *caoutchoucs américains* as “American rubbers” (he objects to the modern slang sense of “rubber” as condom) in both the Vintage and Penguin editions of *In Search of Lost Time*, preferring instead “galoshes,” is entirely to miss the point. The word galoshes is derived from the French *galoches*. To use it would be to remove from the passage the textual evidence of Marcel’s awkwardness. Why should he feel he has committed a faux-pas wearing French footwear? The reason Proust has *caoutchoucs américains* is that America, for the Parisian upper echelons, was associated with the mass-production of clothing rather than *haute couture*. We can only imagine Mme de Parme’s comment “Oh! Quelle bonne idée … comme c’est pratique!” [Oh! What a good idea! … It’s so practical!] being said in a tone similar to that which would have greeted Marcel announcing, say, that he had taken to wearing a ready-made bow tie. The Faubourg is hardly the place to display a keen interest in the effects of democratization on high fashion. And the incident has repercussions later in the novel. Witness, as discussed below in Chapter 3, Marcel’s desire to dress Albertine in exclusive designs by the couturier Fortuny rather than a figure-hugging mackintosh (“la tunique guerrière de caoutchouc”) made of the same *caoutchouc américains* as his shoes. What is at stake in the scene (and in the language) is not only Marcel having committed a faux pas but the difficulties that aspects of French society were experiencing in adapting to the growing American presence. The United States may have been eminently pratique but what would be the effects of the wider application of such practicality?

Some aspects of this become clearer if we look more closely at another of Karlin’s examples: Proust’s reference to *le revolver* as in “revolving-door.” Looking to invent a French equivalent for the word, Proust, Karlin
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says, finds “not one but two native terms for a revolving door” before he comes up with “the bastardized form porte revolver, which carries ludicrous associations with le revolver, the firearm, a word used on several occasions in A la recherche” (2005, 51). The passage appears in Le Côté de Guermantes when Marcel is invited to dine at an exclusive Parisian restaurant by Robert de Saint-Loup. The two arrive in thick fog and, while Robert gives instructions to the cabdriver on when to collect them, Marcel attempts to enter the building. In a scene straight from a Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton movie, things go from bad to worse:

pour commencer, une fois engagé dans la porte tournante dont je n’avais pas l’habitude, je crus que je ne pourrais pas arriver à en sortir. (Disons en passant, pour les amateurs d’un vocabulaire plus précis, que cette porte tambour, malgré ses apparences pacifiques, s’appelle porte revolver, de l’anglais revolving door.)

[to begin with, once I had engaged with the unfamiliar workings of the turning door, I became alarmed that I should never get out of it. (Let me add, for the lovers of precise vocabulary, that the drum-shaped entrance in question, despite its harmless appearance, is known as a “revolver,” from the English term “revolving door.”)]

Marcel’s ignorance of how to operate the door earns the attention of the restaurant’s owner:

la rieuse cordialité de son accueil fut dissipée par la vue d’un inconnu qui ne savait pas se dégager des volants de verre. Cette marque flagrante d’ignorance lui fit froncer le sourcil comme à un examinateur qui a bonne envie de ne pas prononcer le dignus est intrare. Pour comble de malchance j’allai m’asseoir dans la salle réservée à l’aristocratie d’où il vint rudement me tirer en m’indiquant, avec une grossièreté à laquelle se conformèrent immédiatement tous les garçons, une place dans l’autre salle.

[the smiling cordiality of his welcome vanished at the sight of a stranger trying to disengage himself from the revolving glass panels of the door. This flagrant sign of ignorance made him frown like an examiner who is totally disinclined to utter the words: Dignus est intrare. To cap it all, I went and sat down in the room reserved for the young aristocrats, from which he made no bones about coming]
to oust me, pointing me, with a rudeness from which all the other
waiters immediately took their cue, to a place in the other room.]
(1056; III:399–400)

Neither is this the end of Marcel’s humiliation or discomfort, as he finds
himself sitting on an already crowded wall seat staring straight at the door
reserved for “Hebrews” and “which did not revolve, but opened and closed
continuously, exposing me to a horrible draught” [“qui, non tournante celle-
là, s’ouvrait et se fermant à chaque instant, m’envoyait un froid horrible”].

The passage marks a moment in the novel when Marcel is made aware
of how vulnerable is his place within Parisian society. Where exactly
does he belong? Let down by his ignorance of modern technology, he is
humiliated in terms of class and race. He may begin the evening confident
of his status; he soon finds himself overlooked and ignored – sitting on
benches reserved for a race of exiles. Some kind of revolution has taken
place. Paris has turned inhospitable; Marcel is an alien. In moving through
the revolving door, it is as though Marcel, like the Clark Kent of the
comic-strips and movies, has swapped identity. Only in Marcel’s case he
goes from the privileged status of a “Superman,” a friend of the aristocracy,
to a nobody.

Marcel’s ignorance of revolving doors can be forgiven. The scene at the
restaurant is set in the late 1890s, when few would have been the buildings
in Paris fitted with a door which its inventor, Theophilus Van Kannel of
Philadelphia (who had only received a patent for his “storm-door structure”
as recently as 1888), guaranteed would not, unlike the door set aside for the
hotel’s Jewish customers, blow open in a gale. Relatively quickly, James
Buzzard has written, Van Kannel’s invention became recognized across the
globe as “a symbol, even a synecdoche, of modern American life” associated
with “the fast-paced, skyscrapered American city” (2001, 560). Far, then,
from pointing the reader in the direction of Proust’s Englishness, the text
acknowledges the presence of a powerful and disorientating American
presence in Proust’s novel. Furthermore, if we take Proust’s “bastardized”
le porte revolver as a more deliberate and ambiguous coinage than Karlin
allows, the image of Marcel in the revolving door doubles as a disconcerting
vision of him locked in the spinning chamber of one of Samuel Colt’s
revolvers, recognized across the world as a defining image and product of
America. Such references disrupt or do violence to the text, forcing Proust
to adopt a kind of “bastardized” or creolized French. Disruptions of another
kind are often implicit in his choice of these words. If le revolver entails
Marcel getting caught up in a kind of Russian roulette, with himself the single bullet being spun round in the chamber of the gun, loopings contains the haunting presence of Alfred Agostinelli, Proust’s chauffeur and possibly lover, whose death in a flying accident in 1914 scarred Proust’s final years and contributed to his depiction of the doomed affair between Marcel and Albertine. We can only imagine Proust’s emotions when, in a passage from the same scene in *Le Côté de Guermantes* where Marcel and Robert dine out, he imagines himself “en compagnie d’un aviateur qui ne vole pas en ce moment” and watching “les evolutions d’un pilote exécutant des loopings” (in the company of an airman who is not flying that day [watching] the moves of a pilot looping the loop) (1055; III:398). At these moments, the importation of American English seems to register some deeper mode of personal or cultural anxiety on Proust’s part.

Even if we want to argue that examples such as *loopings*, *revolving door* and *snow boots* were not intended by Proust specifically to signify America, we nevertheless have to contend with the fact that many times in the novel he is a good deal more explicit about the importance of the United States. There is for example the moment in *À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* when Marcel sees one of Elstir’s paintings and declares: “Ah! que j’aimerais aller à Carquethuit!” [How I would love to go to Carquethuit]. The significance of this is easy to overlook, referring as it does to one of Elstir’s landscapes, *Porte de Carquethuit* [Harbor at Carquethuit], which would appear to depict a quintessentially French coastal scene. However, not only is Carquethuit a place wholly untypical of resorts on the Brittany coast, Elstir tells the wondering Marcel, it is unlike anywhere else in France: “Carquethuit, c’est tout autre chose avec ses roches sur une plage basse. Je ne connais rien en France d’analogue, cela me rappelle plutôt certains aspects de la Floride. C’est très curieux, et du reste extrêmement sauvage aussi” [Carquethuit is completely different, with its rocks and its low sandy beach. I’ve never seen anywhere else like it in France – it looks more like somewhere in Florida. A most curious place, and very wild country too.] (671; II:433).

America here serves as a touchstone for Proust’s imagined topography and as an example of why Elstir’s art matters. The painting moves Marcel: literally, in that he wants to visit the town; metaphorically, in that concealed within the desire to see the place for himself is the overwhelming desire to become an artist. Carquethuit thus represents all that Marcel feels to be just out of reach. It is a province less of France than of the Imagination. Of all his various mentors, it is arguably Elstir who contributes most to Marcel’s aesthetic. And it is only he (or so this passage seems to suggest)
who has visited the States and brought back with him an influence that allows him to re-imagine France as both elsewhere and “Other.” The scene is a vital moment in the novel. It tells us that Elstir has discovered some new capacity for picturing the everyday world in a way that is exotic, profound, and unsettling, and that it is inextricably linked to the idea as much as the reality of America.

Though as I highlight at the opening of Chapter 5 James McNeill Whistler is a significant and acknowledged presence in *A la recherche*, a reader suspicious or doubtful of the wider claims I am making in this book for the influence of the United States on Proust’s writings will no doubt feel justified by the fact that Proust makes just one reference apiece to Poe and Emerson in the novel, and no mention at all in any of his fiction, essays, or correspondence of George Beard, the “discoverer” of American Nervousness. My hypothetical reader might, borrowing a phrase from John Donne, say that such a thesis relies on material that is “extreme and scattering bright.” There are two ways of approaching this diffuseness: either to see it as nothing more than coincidental, as being imported into the novel by sheer force of the enormous centripetal force of Proust’s imagination; or, as I prefer, seeing all such fragments, hints, and allusions as containing matter that gives off a radiance and energy of its own. While the former model turns the novel into the equivalent of a black hole, with nothing being allowed to escape the gravitational pull of Proust’s sentences, the latter returns the novel to us as something that radiates rather than absorbs light.

My aim throughout is to take what might otherwise be overlooked and, with attention to *A la recherche* and Proust’s other writings, to tease out a whole new world of influence which, on close scrutiny, becomes compelling in its assertion that not only did Proust weave through the novel textual echoes of Emerson, Poe, and Whistler, but that important aspects of his aesthetic draw their energy from his lifelong engagement with what they individually had achieved. Because this approach means shuttling back and forth across the many thousands of pages of Proust’s oeuvre, my approach has been to avoid making any sweeping generalizations but rather gradually to work outward from what Proust himself wrote and to unravel a fascinating and intriguing system of correspondences. These are often elusive and tantalizing, and as a result there is a necessary element of the speculative in my approach. Speculative, though, in the truest sense of
the word: that what we do as readers is to “watch over” the literary text, to engage with it, explore it and give it our fullest imaginative regard. Such a process must always be speculative in that we take the risk that it will not repay our investment of that most Proustian and finite of resources: time. My feeling here is that the particular approach of this book brings to light aspects of the novel that otherwise remain in the shadows.

*A la recherche* demands that we read it not as a hermetically sealed text but as a work of art that re-admits us to, and re-acquaints us with, the world and our own lives. Such ultimately is the conclusion of Marcel’s own search. It is a novel uniquely open to the worlds of language (among them American English) as well as the more specialized arenas of art, science, social studies, linguistics, and philosophy. As such it would, as I said earlier, be remarkable had Proust not been influenced by American culture. In Chapter 1, therefore, I look at the impact of US technology, enterprise, sexual mores, art, literature, fashion, and economics on the progress of *modernité* in order to examine how those same American influences that contributed to the building of Bartholdi’s statue came to affect Proust in the writing of arguably the twentieth century’s greatest work of prose fiction. As we might guess, these influences are widespread and important. What is more surprising is the attention afforded by Proust to the seemingly mundane aspects of American material influence. The chapter goes on to examine these in some detail, describing how they contribute to a number of the novel’s key themes and motifs. A case in point, as I examine in Chapter 3, is the discourse of neurasthenia as it evolved under the American physician and neurologist George Beard. Beard it was who in *Neurasthenia, or nervous exhaustion* (1869) defined the *fin de siècle* malady *par excellence* as a condition determined by a whole complex of symptoms including fatigue, anxiety, impotence, and depression. What began, however, as an illness the causes of which were subjective evolved to become a defining symptom of western civilization, American Nervousness.

My hypothetical reader, disposed to incredulity, will counter that there is no hard evidence that Proust had read Beard. This is true. What we do know, however, is that Proust’s father most certainly had read Beard in translation, probably as soon as his *Sexual Neurasthenia (Nervous Exhaustion, its Hygiene, Causes, Symptoms and Treatment)* first appeared in French in 1895. Prior to this, M. Proust was introduced to Beard’s ideas when he attended Charcot’s lectures in the late 1880s, as well as in his reading of Charcot’s preface to Fernand Villain’s *La Neurasthénie* (1891). We also know that Proust’s father, himself the co-author with
Gilbert Ballet of *L’Hygiène du neurasthénique* (1897), was enough aware of “American Nervousness” to insist on a distinction between neurasthenia as it manifested itself in America and in Europe. Proust, then, even before he was himself diagnosed as neurasthenic, was well and truly submerged in the language of Beard. Little wonder, then, as Michael R. Finn says, that Proust and any number of his characters are “paralysed by ... neuroses, half-way between Beard’s neurasthenic and Charcot’s hysterie” (1999, 45). Short of our discovering a memorandum from Proust to his twenty-first-century critics stating that on such and such a date he went into his father’s study and took down from the shelves a copy of Beard’s work, it is difficult to imagine what further evidence is required to show that Proust, in his life and his writing, was inescapably and inextricably influenced by American Nervousness.

Where Dr. Adrien Proust wanted to keep America and France distinct and separate, his son was minded to see confluence. Rarely does the United States figure in the novel as an unmediated presence. As with the American flora described by M. de Guermantes entered France by being caught in the wool of a traveling rug and was dispersed across the county via the railways, or like the liminal Florida of Elstir’s *Porte de Carquethuit*, America functions as both actuality and metaphor. Just as the way by Swann and the Guermantes way are finally revealed as having the same source, so the United States appears in the novel less as an unmediated presence than as an amalgam. What Proust shows us is a culture in transition. In doing so he gives us a road map to what was already in the process of becoming, with all its continuing implications and reverberations, the American Way.