Rick Anthony Furtak, *Love, Subjectivity, and Truth: Existential Themes in Proust*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023.

Rick Anthony Furtak, a philosopher with past work on Kierkegaard, Rilke, Thoreau, and the nature of the emotions, has written an intriguing book on Marcel Proust, which is meant to be "not merely compatible, but continuous, with . . . [Furtak's] work about emotion, literature, and existential thought" (xi). Its main claim is that, despite the narrator's many expressions of skepticism, Proust's *Recherche* ultimately endorses the view that love—understood not as erotic love alone but broadly as a person's entire affective orientation of cares and concerns—is, or at least can be, a way of knowing, indeed "a prerequisite of veridical apprehension" (xii).

The book's style is worth comment; as Proust said in a 1913 interview, "Style is in no way an embellishment" (*Essais et articles* 255). It's beautifully written, as one might expect from an author who is also a poet and translator. It also contains 550 endnotes, which reference almost every philosopher who has written on Proust and many who haven't (most prominently, contemporaneous European thinkers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Scheler). Practically every other sentence contains a quotation; sometimes one sentence contains multiple quotations by different authors, which occasionally makes attribution difficult.

A limitation of this style is that there is very little explicit argument or critical engagement with alternative interpretations of Proust, readings that don't take him to be a kind of existential phenomenologist (82); instead, nearly every quotation is positively assimilated in support of the idea that only for a person with affective capacities will the world show up as valuable and meaningful. Any such reading of the novel has to contend with its many expressions of doubt about the content of particular emotional experiences: Proust's narrator "never entirely ceases to be tempted" by the thought that our emotions are only projections, rather than disclosures, of value (34). Across five chapters, therefore, Furtak traces, in order to dispute, the narrator's skepticism.

I am in complete agreement that the novel does not endorse a skeptical perspective, even about erotic love; indeed, I have argued that love in Proust is ultimately depicted not as solipsistic but as directed at the partially knowable reality of another (Kubala). On the whole, I suspect Proust believes what his narrator says in the final volume: "The subjective element that I had observed to exist in hatred as in vision itself did not imply that an object could not possess real qualities or defects" (*Time Regained* 326).[1] This puts Furtak and me in a rather small camp, given the number of commentators who have highlighted the novel's solipsistic passages.[2] Still, I have some reservations about his method of arriving at this conclusion.

Furtak's central third chapter, which comprises almost eighty pages, is the heart of the book, employing the ten classical Pyrrhonian modes of suspending judgment, from Sextus Empiricus, to taxonomize the narrator's "more and less skeptical opinions" (40). For each mode—from perceptual and affective differences among human beings to ethical differences between cultures—we are given textual evidence that the narrator entertains this flavor of skepticism, along with some reasons, both philosophical and textual, to resist it.

The overwhelming impression of this chapter is that the novel is much less skeptical than many have thought. While the Pyrrhonian modes are meant to rationalize suspended judgment—a refusal to decide between the skeptical hypotheses and the anti-skeptical appearances—only rarely does the narrator himself suspend judgment (see, e.g., 94). Rather, he tends to cycle through competing judgments, some of them decidedly *anti*-skeptical. One of Furtak's cases of the first Pyrrhonian mode is the narrator's absorption in reading, such that he fails to register the hours chiming from the Combray church steeple (42). When the narrator hears the clock "sound two strokes more than the last," he judges that there has been "an hour which I had not heard strike" and concludes that "something that had taken place had not taken place for me" (*Swann's Way* 120). This is an instance in which the narrator becomes *more* confident in the reality of a mind-independent world, owing to his ability to correct the distortions in his initial perception.

Yet there is something odd about devoting so much attention to this skeptical taxonomy only to conclude, as Furtak does, that the narrator is "in a state of bad faith . . . when he protests that love is merely subjective" (120). Again, this interpretation is highly plausible, but if the narrator is ultimately engaged in motivated reasoning—if his skepticism is based on *practical* considerations—then why should we take the *epistemic* considerations so seriously, as though he were a disinterested skeptical inquirer? If the most weighty reason to refrain from suspending judgment is "our existential imperative" to affirm one or another appearance—"a practical imperative to choose" (114)—then the epistemic reasons would seem to lose much of their interest.

The book's largely judicious and measured stance gives way to some questionable claims in its final chapter. On Furtak's reading, the narrator arrives at a Nietzschean affirmation of the value of his subjective experience: "The splendidly enchanted world that he experienced one summer at Balbec ends up being vindicated as the only kind of truth he has ever known" (125). Though Furtak's view is that, in affirming what moves us most deeply, we learn truths both about ourselves and the external world (143), he does not discuss the episode of the paving stones and the "truth" the narrator discovers about the "extra-temporal being" (*être extra-temporel*) that he is or has (*Time Regained*

262), however difficult this is to understand. Nor is there any extended engagement with the narrator's theory of art, which is said to be "the most real of all things" (*de plus réel*) (*Time Regained* 275). Furtak calls this chapter "Reality as We Have Felt It to Be" but does not draw attention to the context of the quotation, which is that it is *art* that enables, indeed "obliges," us to discover "our true life" (*notre vraie vie*) (*Time Regained* 277). As such, it cannot be the narrator's "conviction that the cohesion of his life depends on a series of loves" (140). Rather, he sees his literary project as what might sum up his "whole life," in the same passage—reminiscent of Plato's *Symposium*—where he claims that "the whole art of living is to make use of the individuals through whom we suffer as a step enabling us to draw nearer to the divine form which they reflect" (*Time Regained* 304). While I believe this can be reconciled with the possibility of erotic knowledge of individuals, it would take more argument to establish than Furtak provides here. At the very least, it would have been helpful to engage further with the narrator's famous claim, which Furtak mentions only briefly (139), that only through art "are we able to emerge from ourselves, to know what another person sees" (*savoir ce que voit un autre*) (*Time Regained* 299).

I certainly do not claim that the existentialist reading is a nonstarter.[3] But it comes across as highly selective. Proust's famous 1914 letter to the literary critic Jacques Rivière warns us about his philosophical designs: "I am therefore obliged to depict errors, without feeling compelled to say that I consider them to be errors; too bad for me if the reader believes I take them for the truth" (*Correspondance* 13:99–100). But Furtak does not seem interested in constructing a global interpretation that can account for the text's internal inconsistencies via the attribution of a larger organizing framework. Despite the many worthy instances of recent philosophical engagement *with* Proust, of which Furtak's is undeniably one, I fear that the last two decades have brought us no closer to a plausible philosophical interpretation *of* Proust, one that grapples with his work as a whole.[4]

In other words, I suspect the view on offer is more Furtak than Proust. Yet this is not necessarily a complaint. For what could be more Proustian? Though we should be cautious in identifying the narrator's theory of art with Proust's own, the narrator claims, in the crucial passages of *Le Temps retrouvé*, that "every reader is, while he is reading, the reader of his own self [*le propre lecteur de soi-même*]. The writer's work is merely a kind of optical instrument which he offers to the reader to enable him to discern what, without this book, he would perhaps never have perceived in himself" (*Time Regained* 322). The *Recherche* has clearly been that kind of optical instrument for Furtak, and his book may well be such an instrument for us.[5]

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NOTES

1. Furtak quotes this passage on page 65, though some indication of his affirmative attitude can be seen in the fact that he elides the references to "hatred" and "defects."

2. To name just one, Martha Nussbaum has written that "the novel as a whole discourages optimism about knowledge of another within personal love and appears to endorse Marcel's solipsistic conclusion" (274n18).

3. For more on this kind of interpretation, including further bibliography, see Levy.

4. Any list of superlative earlier attempts would have to include Henry; Descombes; and Landy.

5. Thanks to Josh Landy for very helpful comments on a draft of this review.

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