



**MONSIEUR  
PROUST**  
CÉLESTE ALBARET

---

FOREWORD BY  
ANDRÉ ACIMAN

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS  
CLASSICS

## MONSIEUR PROUST

CÉLESTE ALBARET (1892–1984) was born into a peasant family in the mountainous region of Lozère, France. In 1913, she married Odilon Albaret, a Parisian chauffeur, whose clients included Marcel Proust. Odilon suggested that his new wife, who was lonely in the big city and at a loss for something to do, run errands for Proust, and before long Céleste found herself employed as the writer's full-time (indeed round-the-clock) housekeeper, secretary, and nurse, filling those roles until his death in 1922. In later years, Céleste ran a small hotel in Paris with her husband and daughter, and after Odilon's death in 1960, she became the caretaker of the Musée Ravel in the town of Montfort l'Amaury. *Monsieur Proust* was published in 1972. In recognition of her decade-long service to Proust, Céleste Albaret was made a commander of the French Order of Arts and Letters. She died of emphysema at the age of 92.

ANDRÉ ACIMAN teaches comparative literature at the City University Graduate Center in New York. He is the author of the memoir *Out of Egypt* and of *False Papers*, a collection of essays.

# MONSIEUR PROUST

**CÉLESTE ALBARET**

As told to

**GEORGES BELMONT**

Translated from the French by

**BARBARA BRAY**

Foreword by

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN**

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS

**nyrb**

*New York*

This is a New York Review Book  
Published by The New York Review of Books  
1755 Broadway, New York, NY 10019

Copyright © 1973, 2001 by Editions Robert Laffont, S.A., Paris  
Translation copyright © 1976 by Barbara Bray  
Introduction copyright © 2003 by André Aciman  
All rights reserved.

Photographic credits: Céleste Albaret 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 19, 29,  
30, 35, 36, 37, 54, 55, 57; Paris-Match 10; Mante-Proust 14, 17, 20, 24, 25, 31;  
Bibliothèque National de France 16, 21, 28, 33, 34, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 46,  
50, 53, 56; Lapad-Viollet 18; René Jacques 22; Jean-Louis Vaudoyer 23, 26;  
Roget-Viollet 32; Princesse Bibesco 48, 49; Duc de Grammont 51. All other  
photographs are in private collections.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Albaret, Céleste.

[Monsieur Proust. English]

Monsieur Proust / Céleste Albaret ; as told to Georges Belmont ;  
translated from the French by Barbara Bray ; foreword by André Aciman.  
p. cm.

Originally published: London : Collins : Harvill Press, 1976.

Includes index.

ISBN 1-59017-059-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Proust, Marcel, 1871-1922. 2. Albaret, Céleste. 3. Novelists,  
French—20th century—Biography. 4. Domestic—France—Biography.

I. Belmont, Georges. II. Title.

PQ2631.R63Z461613 2003

843'.912—dc22

2003017246

ISBN 1-59017-059-8

Cover photograph: Marcel Proust in the garden of Reynaldo Hahn, 1905

Cover design: Katy Homans

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

1 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

October 2003  
www.nyrb.com

## FOREWORD

In April of 1984 both *The New York Times* and *Le Monde* ran obituaries announcing the death of Céleste Albaret. News of the ninety-two-year-old Frenchwoman's death brought woeful reminders to literary communities on both sides of the Atlantic that an era had indeed come to an end. Céleste Albaret was not only one of the very few remaining individuals who had actually known Marcel Proust, but, in her capacity as his housekeeper from 1913 to his very dying day in 1922, she had become the writer's most trusted conduit to the world beyond his reclusive, cork-lined bedroom. From the tireless and sprightly gal Friday and Jeeves-of-all-trades—she was his errand girl, cook, seamstress, secretary, nurse, chambermaid, and cut-and-paste genius whose handiwork is the focal point of any exhibit devoted to Proust manuscripts—she had become his staunchest confidante. "It will be your beautiful little hands that close my eyes," he would say to her. Elsewhere she scolds him, "[There's] no reason for always talking about dying. . . . You'll live longer than I will." Monsieur Proust was not the sort to trust his eyes, much less his body, to anyone. Nor was Céleste the sort to quip with her perennially fastidious employer. Between them hovered a middle mist that neither would have dared cross and which stayed in place by something they both had an inexhaustible amount of—tact:

## FOREWORD

We were both orphans—he with his parents dead and his friends scattered, and I with my parents dead, my family far away, and my husband in the army. So we created our own sort of intimacy, though for him it was chiefly an atmosphere within which to work, while I forgot about my own tasks and could see nothing but a magic circle.

One needed to be resourceful, quick-witted, and have more than a strong backbone to serve an ailing workaholic like Proust. But even that was not enough. One had to be as dutiful, as scrupulous, and as selfless as a mother. Céleste anticipated every one of his needs. He grew to expect that she would do no less. They spoke in silences, exchanging secrets and pleasantries, confident that both would never for a moment forget their place. Monsieur Proust did not need reminding that he was the boss. Céleste was too self-effacing to presume that he gave her a second thought. If over the years they developed a certain affection, neither would ever have dared call it love. But love it must have been. Not the love of a servant or of a master, nor the love of equals, but of people who are thrown together in one apartment and who, to their complete surprise, discover that they have achieved a degree of intimacy without ever finding the other unbearable.

Céleste stole in and out of Monsieur Proust's day-to-day life, ministering to his tiniest whims: his very hot coffee, his croissant, his second double-boiled coffee, his mounds of dirty towels, his handkerchiefs, his asthma attacks, his fumigations for his asthma attacks, his hand-delivered messages, especially after he had the telephone removed from his home. Sometimes he went hours, even days without ringing for her in the kitchen. Sometimes he would go out very late and return just before dawn, which meant she'd have to wait up for him; Monsieur Proust never carried house keys.

## FOREWORD

Life in his employ became one unending vigil. Waiting for him to wake up. Waiting for him to come back. Waiting for him to feel better. Waiting for him to leave the apartment in order for her to air his bedroom or perform heavy-duty work, which, in other circumstances, might prove too noisy and disturb the world's latest riser. Waiting. Waiting. Waiting.

To keep up with Monsieur Proust, Céleste learned to mold her life to his. She kept his hours. She turned night into day and day into night. The curtains that draped all of his windows kept the sunlight out, but they also threw time off course.

Sometimes, when he would come back very late at night, Monsieur Proust just wanted to talk. He would ask Céleste to step into the living room or into his bedroom and there he would unfold the events of the evening and unburden himself of his thoughts. Theirs was, and would always remain, a *ménage à un* in which she was allowed to play the part of the fly on the wall:

I almost can see M. Proust sitting on the end of his bed in the faint light of the room, telling stories and imitating one person after the other, with delight or sudden sadness, I realize I was the privileged spectator of the most beautiful theater in the world, and I understand why he enjoyed it too. His bringing home the drama of the outside world and unfolding it before me was an attempt to hold back time, to stop it from fleeing and taking his characters with it.

There is something almost magical in seeing these two noctambulists, who couldn't have been more different, doing the one thing both had grown to love together: gossip.

He urged her to keep a diary. "Better still, Céleste: you write it and I shall make comments on it as you go along." In this Proust was probably hoping to emulate in yet another way his model

## FOREWORD

Saint-Simon, who had annotated the courtier Dangeau's historical journal of the reign of Louis XIV before realizing that he, not Dangeau, was the one to memorialize the age.

Céleste, however, never kept a diary. And Proust never did have the opportunity to jot down his commentary. That is a loss.

But the greater—incalculable—loss is the disappearance of Proust's *cahiers noirs* (black books), which Céleste describes as containing "the first drafts of the book, long fragments and even whole chapters written in the course of earlier years, even of his youth." Proust had ordered her to burn all thirty-two of them. She obeyed. Sometimes, because he had more than just a tendency to distrust everyone and must have suspected her slightly mischievous side, he began to fear that she might disobey him and spirit the notebooks away. But no, Céleste was faithful to a fault. She carried out the incineration, blindly, reducing all thirty-two notebooks to ashes. Max Brod proved himself a far more judicious friend when he broke his promise to a dying Kafka and decided not to burn the latter's manuscripts.

History, meanwhile, has not only forgiven Céleste Albaret her obedience; it has showered upon her recognition the likes of which very few servants have known. One is hard put to think of another servant who was made a commander of the French Order of Arts and Letters, or who has had a movie devoted entirely to her career in the service of a famous artist—as was the case with the charming German film *Céleste* (1982). No biographer writing about Proust today can afford to overlook Céleste's testimony.

By her own admission, Céleste Albaret never had any intention of entering Proust's permanent employ. Because her husband was Proust's personal chauffeur, she was asked to fill in for a few days and help run errands. Surely the starry-eyed, easily intimidated

## FOREWORD

young girl from the country must have had something that pleased her employer, and over the course of weeks and months he not only decided to keep her on a full-time basis, but ultimately fired the woman for whom she was originally meant to substitute. But what she never could have dreamed is that she would wait on his every need for nine years. After his death she opened and ran a small hotel in Paris, keeping her silence and, for reasons known only to her, distancing herself both from those who wished to seek her out and from the ever-rising wave of Proust's fame. She disappeared as quietly as she had tiptoed into his life.

Then, in the very early Seventies, fifty years after Proust's death and after a half-century in which Céleste kept his memory to herself, the French publishing house Laffont approached her and persuaded her to tell all she knew of the private life of Marcel Proust. Céleste Albaret dictated seventy hours of taped material to Georges Belmont, a man known to French letters for his interviews with American movie stars and for his translations of Anthony Burgess, Graham Greene, Henry James, and Henry Miller.

The book did exceptionally well, not least because what emerged was a portrait of Proust that was not drastically different from the Marcel of the novel. Monsieur Proust may have been more retiring, more reticent, and far more intimidating as an employer than one would imagine the perennially dreamy, starstruck, awkward adolescent Marcel to be. But both are fussy, calculating, whimsical, ironic, and unremittingly penetrating in their perceptions. They see through people, through things, through life. And everyone around them knows it.

Céleste's Monsieur Proust and Marcel Proust share one further trait: both are locked in the past and are eager to find a pathway to the bygone universe of their childhood. They are loyal to anything that reminds them of it—old stores, old clothiers, old ways of doing and of cooking and of saying things.

## FOREWORD

And perhaps there is a reason why Céleste Albaret's Proust, unlike the Proust of so many recent biographers, is so similar to the narrator of *Remembrance of Things Past*. Either the two were indeed extraordinarily similar individuals, which suggests that Céleste's portrait is perhaps the more accurate of the lot; or, something else is afoot. Perhaps Proust's compulsive nostalgia may have belonged less to the man who paid Céleste's salary than to the man she came to read and reread and had heard everyone rave about for fifty years. Even if Céleste had never read *À la recherche* in its entirety but was able to piece together a good-enough likeness of it from what others had said, perhaps she simply transferred to the man she had known in the flesh the very same yearnings and personality he claimed were his in his prose. By echoing his own voice, by frequently repeating that Proust was obsessed with memory and lost time, Céleste Albaret reproduced the same character we encounter in his novel. In the end, she gave to his readers a Proust whom Proust had labored a lifetime to create, to perfect, to invent.

Which is another way of saying that she not only echoes his vision but fails to see through so many of his disguises. Her inability—or unwillingness—to accept that Proust had a homosexual side is a large-enough blind spot to alert the reader that hers is not only the voice of a loyal partisan who will continue to transmit to posterity Proust's elaborate fibs about his sexuality, but that, all told, she would rather be taken in by them than expose areas to which, without knowing, perhaps, she had already turned a blind eye during his lifetime.

And yet Céleste Albaret is by no means naive or so easily bilked. She understood that between Proust's self-sacrificing devotion to his magnum opus and his irrepressible capacity to see through everyone's most elusive foible there really was no room left for a human being to step into his life and do what would have

## FOREWORD

been so normal to anyone else: share it. She understood, moreover, "that he must have let, or even made, a lot of people think he felt affection and friendship for them, whereas in fact—it was the thing that always struck [her]—he could do without all of them with the greatest of ease." She also understood that "by dint of analyzing himself and others . . . he'd left himself with nothing but motives and explanations."

There is a sort of trenchancy to these observations that is as much Proustian as it is Freudian. One is tempted to suggest that perhaps these insights are less those of the chambermaid Céleste than of Georges Belmont, the man to whom she dictated them. The taped conversations with Céleste, when and if they are made public in their entirety, could resolve the matter easily enough.

But what if—what if these insights into the man Proust are indeed those of a chambermaid who saw him as he really was, dirty linen and all? Then the answer stares at us with a starkness that is almost frightening: Marcel Proust had found in his chambermaid a sister-soul whose sensibility was not only supremely compatible with his own but who, within a short period of time, turned out to have the one quality he sought as desperately as he sought to avoid it: she had become indispensable. To have her and yet keep her at bay, Proust did something that readers of *À la recherche* will recognize—he made her his prisoner. And Céleste, as was her wont, was only too happy to oblige.

—ANDRÉ ACIMAN