



Swan's Way

Henri Raczymow

Robert Bononno, Translator

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This is a remarkable book, but not easy to encapsulate. Perhaps best described as a meditation *à partir de Proust*, it is a parallel exploration of the fictional character of Charles Swann (a central figure of *In Search of Lost Time*), and the man upon whom Swann was partly modeled: Charles Haas, a dandy, wit, and habitué of the most rarefied circles in late nineteenth-century French high society, the backdrop of Proust's monumental work.

This description, however, scarcely does justice to the wide-ranging, impressionistic, sometimes elusive imagination of author Raczymow, a French novelist and critic whose previous work has addressed many issues that reappear here: identity (particularly Jewish identity), the interplay of reality and fiction, and the long arc of narrative and memory that confers immortality upon an author and his characters alike.

Raczymow, born in France in 1948, is the author of a biography of Maurice Sachs and several works of fiction and non-fiction, including *Writing the Book of Esther*, *Pauvre Bonilhet*, and *Quartier Libre*.

Raczymow at once affirms and denies Proust's claim that, while acknowledging that he used Haas as a model, he "filled him with an entirely different personality." The key congruences are undeniable: like Haas, Swann is not merely a Jew but one of the few ever to become a member of the ultra-exclusive Jockey Club; and like Haas, Swann threaded a careful course through an anti-Semitic *haute monde*, which, in life as in Proust's novel, was suddenly polarized by the Dreyfus Affair. As Raczymow points out, persuasively, Swann also embodied many characteristics of Proust himself, thus resonating against another authorial avatar, the narrator Marcel, in a complex symphony of identity.

As he pursues his research, Raczymow also reveals a paradox central to the Proustian vision: that, in remembering and recasting the "real," fiction preserves characters that life itself soon forgets—*for who would remember the once-celebrated Haas now, were it not for Swann and his creator?* Raczymow deftly underlines this *à propos* by juxtaposing Haas's actual obituary notice with Swann's invented one; this is but one of many details that, taken together, form a fascinating mosaic of literary insight.

More suggestive than definitive, *Swan's Way* is a book for connoisseurs of Proust; readers unfamiliar with his extensive cast of characters or with the French social history that came to crisis in the Dreyfus Affair will be hard-pressed to follow the twists and leaps of Raczymow's arguments and perceptions. For those already well versed in Proustiana, however, it is a unique and thought-provoking work.

PEYTON MOSS (November / December 2002)

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