

PROUST & CONFINEMENT

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In these times of self-imposed quarantine and voluntary confinement, it seems fitting to ponder on the impact of being isolated from direct societal contact. Human beings are social creatures who enjoy the company of others, therefore being in a situation where our social connections are limited - or worse, completely eliminated - is against our natural tendencies. Proust was an expert on the subject – he lived the latter part of his life isolated in a cork-lined apartment that not only insulated his work area against the outside noise in the busy Boulevard Haussmann, but also protected him against anything that endangered his health and aggravated his asthma.

Proust was a germophobe and as pointed by his maid, Céleste Albaret in her book, *Monsieur Proust*, he ordered a long metal box which he filled with formol solution in order to disinfect the letters he received in the mail before opening them. Today's terrible world of coronavirus that has become a way of life for us these days, was the kind of world Proust lived in, with the difference that he was alone in this fight while we are in this together. He could not get the understanding that we get today by talking to each other. He was considered odd for being extra careful for his health and ridiculed for lining his walls with cork. He endured the suffering and anxiety alone with little consolation from others. The society ladies who would snub him in his youth, now wanted to visit him. He kept on refusing and they thought he was snubbing them because of the fame he had gained after receiving the Prix Goncourt, but the real reason was his fear of getting sick and also his newly-acquired aversion to society.

The last time Proust traveled outside of Paris was in 1914. He had an asthma attack during his annual trip to Cobourg, the resort city in Normandy that was the source of his inspiration for fictional Balbec. From 1914 to 1922, the year of his death, he didn't venture out much except for some occasional outings. One of these outings was to a dinner at the Majestic Hotel on the Avenue Kléber, one of the avenues radiating from Arc de Triumph. The dinner was given on May 18, 1922 exactly six months before his death. The gathering was planned after the premiere of a Stravinsky ballet performance, in honor of the musician Stravinsky and the ballet impresario, Diaghilev. In addition to Proust, the dinner was attended by James Joyce and Picasso and there is a book on the subject, *Proust at the Majestic* by Richard Davenport-Hines.

Although Proust led a solitary life, he did not live a lonely one. Solitude can be a pleasant and agreeable experience. It gives us the opportunity to reflect and reach deep inside our psyche - the part we disconnect from when the distractions of a social life make us lose focus. Gatherings and interactions deprive us of the reflective aspect of a solitary moment. After all, spiritual moments are mostly solitary. Proust wrote obsessively during these years of isolation and based on his housekeeper, Celeste's narration, he put the word "Fin" at the bottom of the last page only a few months before his death.

Proust was forced to lead a life of a hermit, not only by the deterioration of his health, but also because he knew that his busy life of social climbing and partying with the society elite was a hindrance to his long-sought ambition of becoming an author. He therefore decided to withdraw from society and focus on his work. His writing has all the elements of the ruminations of an introverted and solitary man pondering the various aspects of human life. Even though his book is filled with social connections and interactions, his solitary moments are the ones generating his most powerful and insightful commentaries on life. When reading Proust's reflections, you can feel the measure of his solitude by the mood of detachment and by his pure observatory narrative.

Proust died at the age of 51 a short while after he ventured out one night for dinner with friends and contracted pneumonia. Images of Proust on his deathbed are not of a clean-shaven man with a well-groomed mustache, but of a heavily bearded man. This is telling of his solitary life and his abandonment of the regular grooming and priming. These days at home, I relate to that...

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