

Off-white

For the first time in almost twenty years I have just now hefted onto my desk the six volumes of my Gallimard edition of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* – a small cloud of dust is still settling, and fragments from the books are already migrating across the notebook in which I'm writing. These volumes are worse than foxed or frail: every one had turned a dirty buff colour, almost brown; the spines are long gone from three of them, and frayed bits of binding thread stick out of the pile. Some are undated, two printed in 1926, another in 1937. I had not noticed before the way, though all are bordered in the classic black and red of the NRF series, no two covers are exactly alike in design. Here, a single name – 'Gallimard' – but there, the legend 'Librairie Gallimard'; on a third, 'PARIS' in sturdy capitals, and the full address of the press: '3, rue de Grenelle (VI^{me})'. There are stars or asterisks in the centre of the cover – one, two or three – but they seem not to be linked to the sequence of volumes.

Among the oldest of the six, there are pages still uncut. In the most decrepit the paper on the flyleaf is so rough it is hard to read what's been pencilled there. A signature: possibly 'John...'. And a peremptory comment, hastily scrawled: 'Very poor proof reading – full of mistakes – both in punctuation and spelling'. Perhaps this reader (the first reader?) has been so put off by the deficiencies of the edition, printed just four years after Proust's death, that he refused to take a paper knife to the remaining pages. Or maybe he had other matters on his mind, because here, tucked a few pages into the book, where I have failed to find them all these years, are two tiny black-and-white photographs showing a young woman dressed in oil-stained overalls – the stains look just like the marks of age on the book's cover – and a flying helmet with goggles. Flip the snapshots over and there she is: 'Priscilla Peyton, 1946'. If she's alive, this reader's beloved aviatrix will be in her mid eighties at least; I spend an hour Googling Priscilla Peyton, but she's nowhere to be found.

These six Gallimard volumes, the first Gallimard books I ever owned, have sat unloved and unread on my shelves since I bought them in a sale at university in Dublin, in the winter of 1993. What was I thinking? My French was hardly adequate to the task of reading Proust, and there were anyway modern editions – still in the same livery of the NRF, but not so decayed – at the library. Perhaps it was the price on the cover of Tome I: '6 vols., £1'. Or just as likely, it was the very idea of these creamy, or once-creamy, Gallimard paperbacks that attracted the somewhat pretentious student that I was: the ranks of uniform *blanche* promised a certain idea of French intellectual life with which I was in love.

(And who knows: the same may have been true of Miss Peyton's admirer, though he at least possessed a linguistic advantage: his volume, it turns out, was printed in Quebec.)

If I failed actually to read, or even to open, all the books I bought that day – tied up with string, shedding flakes of 1920s Gallimard paper stock as I took them home – the notion of the series stayed with me. The elegant austerity of the volumes produced by French (and more generally European) publishers looked to the Anglophone reader, who was more used to the garish covers of even serious literary fiction in English, or the needlessly renewed designs of academic books in the same language, like a guarantee of rigour but also a commitment to radical intent. The starkness of design signalled a proper concentration on content. And so, always I think with the model of the NRF in the back of my mind, I have long been ruinously attracted to particular series: the plain white ground, blue device and black text of Les Éditions de Minuit (Samuel Beckett, of course, and the journal *Critique*), or the small format and acid colours of Suhrkamp (Bertolt Brecht, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin). At times, Anglophone publishers have even managed some of the same glamour of the series: the pocketable black paperbacks of Semiotext(e), for example, or the deeply alluring Zone Books.

But the seductions of a series like Gallimard's lie not only in the clarity and longevity of design, nor in the prestige of the publisher's list. (Here, on the back of one of my Prousts: a price list that includes La Rochefoucauld, Baudelaire, Dostoyevsky, Conrad and André Gide, who notoriously turned Proust down at first for publication by the NRF.) The attraction for a writer lies elsewhere, in the idea of submitting modestly to the conventions of the series, in seeing one's work become part of a sequence, part of a pattern. Paradoxically, there is nothing more gratifying for the writerly ego, and I have found myself trying to persuade editors to place a book of mine in an extant series, even to invent one where none existed. As a writer, I aspire to end up in a series, because it seems that is where my book will be most itself.

My Gallimard Prousts smell of decay, and I had better put them away before they infect the laptop on which I'll type this little essay. In a hole burrowed into the spine of Tome III, lie the desiccated remains of a tiny insect, which may well be as old as Priscilla Peyton. But once upon a time – or rather, *il était une fois* – these books sat in serried ranks on shelves in a bookstore in Paris (or Montreal) and broadcast, in their restrained and suggestive style, an endless series of promises.

Brian Dillon

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Blanche ou l'Oubli

Blanche or Forgetting

Like many archetypes, the design of the celebrated collection *Blanche/White* published by the Nouvelle Revue Française (NRF) and Gallimard is the result of compound sensibilities – the taste and direction of the founders, which included André Gide and Jean Schlumberger – and the implementation by the printer Edouard Verbeke of the St. Catherine Press in Bruges.

There's a collectively inherited idea of what constitutes a 'Blanche' – an off-white cover stock which gives the collection its name, a paperback you can hold comfortably in your hand but perhaps not in your pocket, a single black ruled frame containing a double red frame, centred text alignment, a title coloured red, the author's name in black and the publisher's italicised NRF device. The specific peculiarities are harder to define. Which white or cream exactly? Was it always this colour or has time taken its toll? Text set in a high-contrast Didone or a Garalde? Titles set in all capitals or upper and lowercase, roman or italic? A warm typographic orange or a deep blood red?

Like the narrator of Aragon's *Blanche ou l'Oubli* / *Blanche or Forgetting* who attempts to recall his love for Blanche, a woman he loved some forty years ago, we can forget what our love looks like, and over time her appearance changes. Here we attempt to capture an image of the *Blanche* collection. In this attempt to find the truth about the past, we are left in a state of uncertainty – though still in love with Blanche, we don't quite know who she is.

Our selection classifies over 400 books into twenty-five thematic sections named after a book title within that theme. Within *Pastiches et Mélanges* we see the nuances and evolution in design of the same titles through time, in this case Gide's *Les Nourritures terrestres* / *The Fruits of the Earth* from 1937 to 1951, and Mallarmé's *Poésies* from 1917 to 1941. *Nouvelles du cœur* / *News from the Heart* gives us Breton's *L'Amour fou* / *Mad Love*, the obsessional kind of love that deranges the senses and two episodes of *Le Crève-cœur* / *Heartbreak* from Aragon. *Un nom toujours nouveau* / *A Name Always New* gathers Elsa, Barny, Nadja, Héloïse, Tristan, Anny, Sylvia, Creezy and Isabelle amongst others. Those without a home, the orphans, or the difficult are housed in *Fils de personne* / *Nobody's son*, here we place both *L'Enfant de cœur* / *The Choirboy* and *Le Pire* / *The Worst*.

John Morgan with Alex Balgiu, Jean-Marie Courant and 6a architects.
Typojanchi 2013 Seoul. Set in *Berthe* created by Charles Mazé with John Morgan studio
for an edition of *Madame Bovary*, Four Corners Books

Blanche Chronology

- 1911 The first three books of the collection Blanche published by the Nouvelle Revue Française (NRF) printed by Verbeke in Bruges: *L'Otage* by Paul Claudel, *Isabelle* by André Gide and *La Mère et l'Enfant* by Charles-Louis Philippe.
Use of an Elzévir typeface, printed in black and red with a single black frame and double red frame.
Paul Claudel asks for a short horizontal line to separate the name of the book to that of the authors.
The NRF logotype is a reproduction of Jean Schlumberger's drawing.
- April 1912 Changing of address (1, rue Saint-Benoit).
- August 1912 Changing of address (35 & 37, rue Madame) and removal of the distributor's name from the cover.
- January 1913 The book titles switch from italic to roman.
- 1913 Publishing of *Poésies* by Stéphane Mallarmé.
- October 1918 *César Caperan* by Louis Codet is an exception, 'Éditions Gaston Gallimard' appears on the cover without the NRF logo.
- 1919 Redesign of the NRF logo.
Publishing of *Pastiches et Mélanges* by Marcel Proust.
- 1921 NRF logo set in bold Didone typeface, changing of address (3, rue de Grenelle).
- 1922 *Le Camarade infidèle* by Schlumberger printed by the company of Pigelet and Sons in Orléans.
- September 1924 'Librairie Gallimard' appears above 'Éditions de la Nouvelle Revue Française', triple border continuing on the spine.
- 1930 Changing of address (43, rue de Beaune).
- May 1931 Removal of 'Éditions de la Nouvelle Revue Française' and the address.
- October 1933 'Librairie Gallimard' becomes 'Gallimard'.
- 1949 Appearance of Blanche sub-families in which wider audience titles are published, more expressive use of type, use of heavy sans-serif, thicker triple frames, colour inversion (red/black), long titles break frames. NRF logo redesigned.
- 1950s Appearance of texts on the back cover, replacing the sole NRF logo, the frame or the catalogue excerpt.
- 1958 NRF logo is updated by Massin using a Didone face.
- 1961 Occasional appearance of book jackets or book covers.
- 1964 All the volumes are sold trimmed.
- 1967 Publishing of *Blanche ou l'Oubli* by Louis Aragon.
- 1983 The matt paper used for the cover is replaced by a glossy Kromekote paper, satin-finished and yellow, less sensitive to dirt.
Bad reception, including from some authors.
- 1989 New smooth offset paper, produced by the company Libert, covered with a matt varnish.
- 2011 Gallimard celebrates 100 years of publishing with the exhibition 'Gallimard: a century of publications' at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF) in Paris.

Classification

<i>Pastiches et Mélanges</i>	1	<i>Pastiches and Mélanges</i>
<i>Sous le lien du temps</i>	2	<i>Under the Aegis of Time</i>
<i>Les Plaisirs et les Jours</i>	3	<i>Pleasures and Days</i>
<i>Partage de midi</i>	4	<i>The Break of Noon</i>
<i>Nouvelles des yeux</i>	5	<i>News from the Eyes</i>
<i>Nouvelles du cœur</i>	6	<i>News from the Heart</i>
<i>Ailleurs</i>	7	<i>Elsewhere</i>
<i>Gravitations</i>	8	<i>Gravitations</i>
<i>Volière</i>	9	<i>Aviary</i>
<i>Les Jeux et les Hommes</i>	10	<i>Man, Play and Games</i>
<i>En marge des marées</i>	11	<i>Within the Tides</i>
<i>Un nom toujours nouveau</i>	12	<i>A Name Always New</i>
<i>L'Écrivain public</i>	13	<i>The Public Writer</i>
<i>Lettres à quelques-uns</i>	14	<i>Letters to a Few</i>
<i>Poèmes offerts</i>	15	<i>Offered Poems</i>
<i>Le point où j'en suis</i>	16	<i>Where I am</i>
<i>Le Livre ouvert</i>	17	<i>The Open Book</i>
<i>Les Mots</i>	18	<i>The Words</i>
<i>Traité du style</i>	19	<i>Treatise on Style</i>
<i>La Parole en archipel</i>	20	<i>The Word as Archipelago</i>
<i>L'Espace littéraire</i>	21	<i>The Space of Literature</i>
<i>Variété</i>	22	<i>Variety</i>
<i>Un champ de solitude</i>	23	<i>Domain of Solitude</i>
<i>Fils de personne</i>	24	<i>Nobody's Son</i>
<i>Du plus loin de l'oubli</i>	25	<i>Out of the Dark</i>

