

JACQUES GUÉRIN: CHEMIST-PATRON AND CO CREATOR OF PROUSTIAN MYTH

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According to Seneca, the ability to excel beyond one's destiny in any circumstance makes one noble. One of those who succeeded without fail was Jacques Guérin, a chemist who made a major contribution to the creation and subsequent codification of a myth carefully moulded around one of the most important figures of modern culture, Marcel Proust. Although the relics of Proust's life and oeuvre, that the trained chemist and industrialist Guérin preserved, are held in considerable esteem, Guérin's own person has been much slower to find its way to public attention and recognition. Guérin's chemical identity, however, has remained almost entirely neglected. This is despite the fact that using the profits from applied chemistry (the production of perfumes) Guérin was able to render a vital service to French and world culture, as a patron, as a selfless supporter of poor artists and, above all, as a co-creator of the Proust myth. This article is dedicated to filling this gap in our collective memory. Moreover, one of the key memorabilia of Marcel Proust's life – rescued and restored at his own expense by Guérin – an otter fur-lined, dark grey wool overcoat, also represents an inspiring example of the material culture of the pioneering age of polymer chemistry. This admired and exceedingly venerated coat is, in fact, decorated with Bakelite buttons, i.e., the first ever synthetic material, which mankind owes to the Belgian chemist Leo Baekeland, one of the most important figures of applied chemistry of the early twentieth century.

Keywords: Bakelite, myth, Marcel Proust, novel, public image of chemistry

Last year, we drew attention to a little-known fact about the relationship between the work of the famous French writer Marcel Proust (1871–1922) and chemistry^{1,2}. Around the person of this author and his monumental novel *À la recherche du temps perdu* (In Search of Lost Time), a community of myriad admirers, known as Proustians, has formed, and Proust's life and work are associated with a number of legends and myths³. A relatively little known fact, not even mentioned in standard Proust biographies⁴, is the significant contribution of the chemist in preserving Proust's legacy and creating the Proust myth. This chemist was the French industrialist and perfumer Jacques Guérin (Fig. 1), who exemplifies how a successfully run chemical industry can be a lucrative source of funds to satisfy a collector's passion and consequently have a major impact on the world of high literature and culture.

Jacques Guérin was born on 23 June 1902 in Paris^{5,6}. His mother, Jeanne Louise Guérin, was a co-owner of the Maison D'Orsay perfume factory, still in operation today, founded in Paris in the early 19th century. Given the orientation of the family business, Jacques Guérin studied chemistry at the Université Toulouse, and it was also during this period that he began his bibliophilic passion, visiting antiquarian bookshops and buying his first rare books and manuscripts, especially by authors who were not yet



Fig. 1. Jacques Guérin (1902–2000)

famous at the time, such as Apollinaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine and Corbière⁷. After his military service, he joined the family business, where, in addition to managing the business, he successfully created new perfumes using his chemical knowledge⁵. He ran the business independently from 1936 until 1982; in the 1930s and 1940s

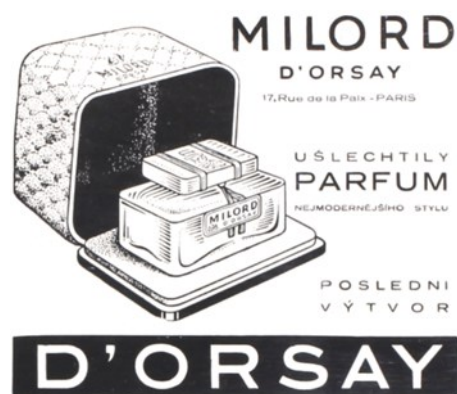


Fig. 2. Advertisement for Guérin's perfume Milord from 1934 (magazine *Eva*, časopis moderní ženy)

he also exported his production to the then Czechoslovakia (Fig. 2). In addition to his professional activities, he was active in the artistic world and was associated with numerous writers and artists such as Pablo Picasso, Jean Cocteau, Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette, Violette Leduc and Jean Genet. He used the funds that his chemical business brought him to support a number of artists as well as purchase books and manuscripts for his collection⁷. With his library of more than two thousand rare volumes, he was one of the greatest collectors of French books and manuscripts of the 20th century^{5,8}. From time to time he sold items from his collection at auctions, and donated some to French museums. He died on 6 August 2000 at his country villa in Luzarches⁸.

The fateful encounter that made Guérin one of the most important saviours and supporters of the Proust myth began in the summer of 1929 with a banal appendicitis⁵. Coincidentally, the operation was performed by the Parisian surgeon Robert Proust (1873–1935) – Marcel Proust's younger brother – who, among other things, was instrumental in completing the publication of Marcel's most famous work^{1,9}. In addition to the successful treatment, the meeting with Proust's brother was of another, and crucial, importance for Guérin. Of all his favourite writers, it was Marcel Proust who fascinated him the most; Guérin began reading Proust's seminal novel at the age of twenty and never stopped reading it^{5,7}. And, as he was astonished to discover when he visited Robert Proust's household, in Robert's possession was the entirety of Marcel's estate: manuscripts, books, photographs, as well as items and furniture from Marcel's former apartment. From that moment on, Jacques Guérin had a strong feeling that his mission was to save Proust's relics. In 1935, Guérin succeeded in buying most of Marcel's belongings, including his famous bed, on which he created his stunning novel and on which he died^{4,10}. In 1973, he gave part of these memorabilia to the Musée de l'Histoire de Paris free of charge, with the commitment that it would reconstruct Proust's bedroom in its exhibition. Guérin also purchased notebooks containing the manuscript of Proust's iconic work, henceforth referred to as the "Cahiers Guérin" (Guérin

Notebooks). These were later acquired from him by the Bibliothèque nationale de France^{7,11}.

The Proustian memorabilia rescued by Guérin are of great importance both for understanding the author's work and its genesis¹² and for approaching Proust's life. At the same time, they show that chemists are important creators even in areas of human life where their focus on "matter" would not suggest it. On the contrary, the successful practice of chemistry can be a source for patronage. Guérin's selfless generosity on behalf of the underprivileged creators of culture was summed up with typically French eloquence by the writer Jean Genet when, shortly before his death, he declared⁸: "Your generosity is unpardonable." The importance and prominence thus gained by the chemist Guérin was reflected, among other things, in the fact that he became – along with Marie Curie and the Scottish chemist Joseph Black – one of the few chemists to have an opera dedicated to his life¹³. Specifically, it is an opera *Trois Contes* (Three Stories)¹⁴. The production of this "explosive lyrical triptych," by the duo of Gérard Pesson (composer) and David Lescot (libretto), which was its world premiere in 2019, has been described by critics as "intelligent, poetic and inventive."

In addition to Proust's manuscripts, a large otter-skin lined overcoat, also saved by Guérin and now kept in the Musée de l'Histoire de Paris, is considered an important reminder of his life and work. Proust's long-time housekeeper Céleste Albaret testifies to the importance of this piece of clothing when she describes how Proust used it while writing his seminal work¹⁵: "Then he asked me to change his hot water bottles, and he would throw an old fur coat over his legs, which he had especially for this purpose ... the old overcoat always had to hang over the legs of the brass bed." For Proustians, therefore, the overcoat represents an eminent witness to the author's life and work, an essential relic evoking the physical form of the writer and also giving him a kind of aura of mystery (the Italian writer Lorenza Foschini even dedicated an entire book to it⁵). From the chemical point of view, Proust's overcoat is interesting in another aspect. It is the material



Fig. 3. Bakelite buttons on the Proust overcoat

used to make the buttons that fastened it. In fact, the six buttons in two rows are made of Bakelite, the world's first synthetic plastic (Fig. 3). Its synthesis was discovered in 1907 by the Belgian chemist Leo Hendrik Baekeland (1863–1944)¹⁶, who was based in the United States. The new material quickly found widespread application in everyday life because of its excellent properties. Bakelite made it possible to produce a variety of objects, even of very complex shapes, easily, efficiently, and quickly, which was not possible with the materials used until then. And thus, it found its way onto the afore-mentioned Proust's overcoat – let us remember that Marcel Proust died in 1922, so he acquired Bakelite buttons very soon after the discovery of Bakelite itself.

Chemistry is said to be the “enabling science” that is at the origin of many fundamental improvements in the quality of human life¹⁷. It is more than gratifying that, by cultivating the world of fragrance, Jacques Guérin not only uplifted the private lives of his customers and made the world more pleasant in general, but also made a major contribution to a better understanding of the fate and work of one of the key figures of modern culture. In this way, he was able to create a lasting link between our science and the world of fine literature, offering young chemical talents just another of the many stimuli to consider whether and why to study chemistry. Our look back at the role of the chemist and chemistry in the Proustian myth can therefore be more than appropriately concluded with a quote from the afore-mentioned Leo Baekeland, who said¹⁸ of chemists: “to be a chemist is to be an apostle of progress and civilization, of justice and truth.” And so was Jacques Guérin.

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