

---

*H-France Review* Vol. 14 (February 2014), No. 29

Edward J. Hughes, *Proust, Class, and Nation*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. xv + 298 pp. Abbreviations, introduction, bibliography, and index. \$ 99.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 978-0-19-960986-4.

Review by Ingrid Ilinca, Westminster College.

It is hard to imagine how a contemporary reader could understand Marcel Proust's *A la Recherche du temps perdu* (*RTP*) in the absence of a minimal socio-historical background.[1] The changes in the characters' social status and group dynamics need to be placed against the backdrop of the major political events that marked the Third Republic. The work of patient documentation and comparison between literary representations and socio-political accounts of the era fulfills its *raison d'être* when it is integrated into the in-depth analysis of a carefully defined body of topics. This is what Edward J. Hughes accomplishes in his most recent study of the Proustian novel from the perspectives of class and nation.

In the introduction, the author asserts a difficulty in labeling Marcel Proust's ideological positions. The image of the French conservative socialite dividing his time between his creative endeavors and the cultivation of his aristocratic connections clashes with Georges Bataille's portraying of the young writer as a socialist. In an attempt to identify the biographical dimension in *Jean Santeuil*, Bataille points to the language and ideas that defined the Dreyfusard positions expressed by both Proust and the main character in his unfinished novel.[2] Proust engaged in a quest for justice, truth, and objectivity during the Dreyfus Affair. How can we reconcile it with his subsequent political indifference and his rejection, in 1905, of the separation between the State and the Church? Hughes highlights Proust's oscillations between conformity to and distancing from the values attributed to his social group. He argues that *RTP* is not devoid of reflection on ideological issues and that it actually incorporates multiple discourses on class and nation which play a central part in the narrative.

In chapter one, Hughes examines Proust's correspondence with Daniel Halévy and Maurice Barrès, along with two manifestos, one written by Romain Rolland and the other one by the Parti de l'Intelligence. According to Hughes, Proust rejects trends and phenomena associated with both sides of the political spectrum: Catholic authoritarianism and a nationalism based on the idea of racial superiority, on the right; communist internationalism, collectivism, and social homogenization on the left. While Proust's defense of the Church and of cultural Catholicism places him at the right of center, he proves his independence of thought when he designates literature as free of any obligation to promote national and class identities according to an agenda. Included in literary texts, social-class boundaries are nevertheless transcended into the realm of imagination: "there is only one way of writing for everyone, and that's to write with no one in mind" (p. 26). Creating revolutionary characters who match the language and habits of working-class readers reinforces social determinism, to which Proust opposes concepts such as the autonomy of the individual and of the private sphere.

In chapter two, Hughes chooses four benchmarks against which to assess Proust's attitudes towards class. The first two are represented by the different brands of social conservatism articulated by the Comte d'Haussonville and, respectively, by Paul Bourget. The other two are constituted by Daniel

Halévy's movement of the Université populaire and John Ruskin's social progressivism. As a young collaborator of *Le Figaro*, Proust endorses, in one of his articles, the kind of aristocracy embodied by le Comte d'Haussonville, who supports economic liberalism, a slight reduction of social inequality, the necessity of charity, and a parliamentary system. Proust doesn't accept Bourget's rhetoric, grounded in the latter's refusal of modernity and democracy. Bourget also criticizes the ideas of meritocracy and upward social mobility based on education and secularism. As Hughes convincingly demonstrates, the author of *RTP* is keenly aware of the mutations in social hierarchy which occurred at key moments during the Third Republic: "*Déclassement* is thus integral to Proust's social documentation. Far from being objects of opprobrium and censure *à la* Bourget, class movement and rivalries provide a rich source of peripeteia within the diegesis of the *Recherche*. Mobility may generate sobre reflection on a social landscape in flux" (p. 63).

In his correspondence with Halévy, Proust admits his incapacity to relate to the urban proletariat, which he perceives as different, almost exotic, through the lenses of his belonging to the bourgeoisie. Proust's experience with manual workers is limited to his interaction with those employed in domestic services. The French writer doesn't join his peers of the Université populaire in the effort to bridge the educational gaps between workers and intellectuals, and doesn't subscribe to Ruskin's view according to which bourgeois comfort and enjoyment of arts are made possible by the exploitation of servants. However, in *RTP*, the Narrator challenges that social determinism when he takes stereotypical class features and attributes them to characters from a different class: it is the case for distinction, the aristocratic quality par excellence, displayed by Jupien, the tailor.

In chapters three and five, the author analyzes the way in which taste, gender, sexuality, and speech constitute social markers and multiply the levels at which class and power relations are interweaved into the novel. In *Un amour de Swann*,<sup>[3]</sup> the Verdurins and their coterie promote those works of art and literature that counter the hierarchy established by aristocrats, in a sequence that anticipates the dismantling of the established social order in *Le Temps retrouvé*.<sup>[4]</sup> Both Swann's love for Odette and his subsequent disenchantment with her are articulated through Swann's artistic preferences and comments on cultural values which often rely upon class prejudice. Characters' cross-class communication reveals the way in which new speech habits accompany social transformations, such as the one illustrated by the lift operator, whose lexical shifts stress his belonging to the urban proletariat: "The socially progressive terms *tunique* and *traitement* ['tunic' and 'remunerations'] thus replace *livrée* and *gages* ['livery' and 'wages'] with their connotations of feudal servitude" (p. 185). Bourgeois prescriptiveness and hierarchy underlie Proust's views on language. Nonetheless, Hughes has another opportunity to notice the French writer's tendency to stray away from the conventional positions of his group when the latter relativizes the authority of the academy and the prestige of the written language, the norms of which reflect just a stage among others in the linguistic evolution.

In chapter four, Hughes follows the main character's transition from the fixity of Combray, a microcosm structured as a caste-like system, to the modernity and movement that characterize life in Balbec, an imaginary sea resort. Seen as a new sociological phenomenon, the leisure is described along with the forms of sociality it facilitates and its economic consequences in the context of technological progress. The use of mass transportation and the instability of the social markers point to the process of democratization and cultural equalization. Hughes's masterful analysis of the interaction between the guests and the employees of the hotel reveals the way in which the Narrator uses this space as a stage on which the cross-class rivalries are played. For instance, in order to reject Balbec's social mix and to counter the effects of contiguity specific to everyday life in a hotel, Madame de Villeparisis finds symbolic ways to distance herself from the non-aristocratic crowd. Hughes patiently exemplifies Proust's willingness to explore social differences, attitudes and bodies shaped by class, exploration that leads him to the conclusion that the individual is socially situated: "Atavism and sociality combine in a determinism which the Narrator presents as ineluctable; in so doing he demonstrates the strength of

---

connection with the Third Republic to be found in *A la Recherche* and the novel's embeddedness in the discourses of class and race of its day" (p. 155).

Chapter six, entitled "Masters, Laws, and Servants," opens with the identification of cultural references in Proust's correspondence with the financier who administers his wealth. Hughes considers it as an illustration of the de-differentiation of fields, as defined by Fredric Jameson, who observes that the process of production of commodities and financial activities present cultural components, while culture entails economic aspects and commodity-oriented activities (pp. 201-202). In *Albertine disparue*,<sup>[5]</sup> the fusion of these two fields is accompanied by examples of a second kind of conflation, of the moral and the material. It is from this perspective that Hughes analyzes the triangle Marcel-Françoise-Albertine, which in terms of class can be formulated as the relations between the Parisian bourgeois *rentier*, the financially dependent servants, and the representative of provincial bourgeoisie. The dominance of the *rentier* is menaced by the relative autonomy of the subalterns, as well as by Albertine's refusal of material advantage in exchange for her love and submission.

In chapter seven, Hughes examines the way in which, in *Le Temps retrouvé*, conventional social categories are destabilized by a number of sometimes unrelated hierarchies, such as the one of mental and manual labor, expressed in Marcel's work on his book alongside his servant, Françoise; the one that emerges on the battlefields, during First World War, in which the aristocrat Saint-Loup presents the working-class soldiers as heroes whose merits transcend the mediocrity of their social origin; and the one that emerges in Jupien's male brothel, where Charlus, one of the few representatives of immemorial nobility, receives sadomasochistic pleasures from sex workers who belong to the popular strata. Ageing, bodily functions (such as sleep), and levels of intelligence even out social differences as well. Proust's alternate models of interaction, structured around other principles than class, are interpreted by Hughes as an attempt to escape an alienating social compartmentalization.

Chapter eight is devoted to a comparison between the views of Julien Benda and Proust on partisanship, ideological struggles, group identities, history, and the autonomy of literature. In *La Trahison des clercs*, Benda defines the writer-clerk (or the learned, the intellectual) as a dispassionate defender of truth, and not of temporal interests. Both writers decry the absorption of the individual into collectivist formations which promote intolerance, virulent hate, and various kinds of violence.<sup>[6]</sup> In *Le Temps retrouvé*, Proust makes a conscious effort to "deliver detribalized reflection on group antagonisms" (p. 242), and to abstract himself from the flux of hatred that inspires individual and collective actions alike. However, unlike Benda's *clerc*, in *RTP*, there are many instances in which Proust takes bourgeoisie's side. Hughes also contrasts Benda's detachment from contemporary history with Proust's distancing effect he obtains by moving from particular to general. More precisely, Proust doesn't embrace the kind of history that consists of an enumeration of aristocratic exploits over the centuries, nor does he yield to a form of historicism that would boast the triumph of the bourgeoisie under the Third Republic. He chooses instead to rely upon individual and familial stories that constitute a complementary history of bourgeois private life, connected to the vast tableau of radical changes triggered by the Dreyfus Affair and the First World War.

It is difficult to be original in the analysis of a literary text from the perspective of class, because it necessarily focuses on class rivalries and struggles, on relations of dominance and power games. Yet Edward J. Hughes's approach to this topic is unique in its scope and depth, and especially, through the erudite incorporation of the historical dimension. His documentation and use of bibliographical resources are to be commended as well. The comparisons between Marcel Proust and some of his well-known contemporaries allow him to describe with refinement the French writer's ideology and attitudes towards nation, which offers a solid grounding to his interpretation of *RTP*. As some of the chapters comment on relatively disparate subjects in distinct sections, the reader might feel the need for some partial conclusions that would bring together the different threads. However, in its condensed form, the postscript brings such a closure, inviting us to reflect upon the three images of Proust, amply

exemplified in the book, “as the free-floating iconoclast and radical commentator, as the social conservative and fitful defender of class hierarchy, and also as a writer who...resisted bourgeois compartmentalization” (p. 276). The contradictions between these images might disappoint those who are looking for a perfectly coherent portrait of the novelist as either a socialist or a reactionary. I would argue that this is exactly what makes one of the strengths of the book: it allows us to understand the prodigious complexity of the Proustian oeuvre, with its paradoxes and internal variations, and it provides us with a model of thorough and nuanced scholarship.

## NOTES

[1] Marcel Proust, *A la Recherche du temps perdu* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1987-1989, 4 volumes).

[2] Marcel Proust, *Jean Santeuil, précédé de Les Plaisirs et les jours*, ed. by Pierre Clarac (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1971).

[3] Proust, “Du côté de chez Swan,” in Proust, *A la Recherche du temps perdu*, vol. 1.

[4] Proust, “Le Temps retrouvé,” in Proust, *A la Recherche du temps perdu*, vol. 4.

[5] Proust, “Albertine disparue,” in Proust, *A la Recherche du temps perdu*, vol. 4.

[6] Julien Benda, *La Trahison des clercs* (originally published 1927; 5<sup>th</sup> edition, Paris: Grasset, 1975), p. 110.

Ingrid Ilinca  
Westminster College  
[ingrid.ilinca@westminster-mo.edu](mailto:ingrid.ilinca@westminster-mo.edu)

Copyright © 2014 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172