

THE CAMBRIDGE
COMPANION TO
PROUST

EDITED BY
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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2001

Reprinted 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Adobe Sabon 10/13pt *System* QuarkXpress® [SE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 521 66019 X hardback

ISBN 0 521 66961 8 paperback

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I

CYNTHIA GAMBLE

From *Belle Epoque* to First World War: the social panorama

A la recherche du temps perdu spans the period in France between the 1870s and the years of the 1914–18 war, together with an ill-defined post-war period: this represents more or less Proust's own life (1871–1922). Navigational aids are sparse in this work of fiction which is essentially non-linear and which moves rapidly and often imperceptibly backwards and forwards as in cinematographic flashbacks, but there are occasionally some markers to help the reader traverse the political and social seas. Balzac's aim as a novelist had been to paint a sociological canvas of his time, to produce an inventory of French society in the first half of the nineteenth century. Proust, however, observes and analyses essentially the interior world of his characters set against a background of selected exterior, actual events which provide an authentic sociological backcloth to his novel in the period commencing some twenty years after Balzac's death. As early as 1894, in his introduction to his first published work *Les Plaisirs et les jours*, he identified the best vantage point for observing social behaviour as from within an enclosed space, in this case Noah's Ark: 'Je compris alors que jamais Noé ne put si bien voir le monde que de l'arche, malgré qu'elle fût close et qu'il fit nuit sur la terre' (*JS*, p.6). ['Then it was I understood that Noah could never have had so clear a view of the world as when he gazed upon it from within his ark, sealed though it was, and when darkness was over all the earth'].¹ Proust's technique is to portray, throughout the whole of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, an interplay between life and fiction, the encounter between reality and imagination, what can be called 'l'imaginaire'. So successful is this method that boundaries become blurred and the reader may easily be lulled into believing that a fictional character, such as Mme Verdurin, actually existed.

The *Belle Epoque*, so-called retrospectively – Vincent Cronin suggests that the term was current from the 1920s² – is akin to 'the good old days', a golden age which never really existed, or a period which, if it did exist, did so for the affluent classes. It is chronologically ill-defined but is generally

regarded as that period of euphoria at its zenith in the centenary year of 1900 and the years of insouciance preceding the outbreak of the First World War. The expression immediately triggers an impression which has been deliberately cultivated of luxurious, carefree living, especially in Paris, of a romanticised, idyllic vision of a hedonistic society with great wealth and much leisure. It reflected a lost paradise, and bathed in a romantic afterglow in contrast to the horrors and grim realities of the slaughter of the war. To what extent is this true and how is this period depicted in *A la recherche du temps perdu*?

A main character who is present throughout, is the courtesan Odette de Crécy (who ascends in society through her sexual favours with wealthy men), later to become Mme Swann and subsequently Mme de Forcheville: the sense of stability she gives to the novel by her continued, yet changing presence, allows Proust to attach temporal markers to and around her. In 'Un amour de Swann', the love affair between Charles Swann, the Jewish dilettante, writer *manqué*, art collector, wealthy man about town, son of a stockbroker, and Odette de Crécy is analysed. A moment when Swann's passion is intensified is his receipt of an impassioned letter from Odette, written at midday, from the non-fictional, fashionable Parisian restaurant *La Maison Dorée*, at 1 rue Lafitte in the 9th *arrondissement*, and beginning: 'Mon ami, ma main tremble si fort que je peux à peine écrire . . .' (I, 222) ['My dear, my hand trembles so that I can scarcely write . . .'] (I, 271/319)]. That particular day, Swann recalls, was the day of a charity event in aid of those who had suffered in the floods in the coastal province of Murcia in South East Spain. In reality, the flooding occurred between 14 and 15 October 1879, and a charity ball, presided by the Queen of Spain, was held at the Hippodrome in Paris on 18 December 1879. The day of the ball was also the very day when Odette had been with another of her lovers, the Comte de Forcheville, a fact which she half reveals and half conceals when under interrogation by her jealous suitor Charles Swann (I, 364–5; I, 446/526–7).

Many years later in wartime and post-war Paris, in *Le Temps retrouvé*, the Narrator, on encountering Odette, now Mme de Forcheville, superimposes on her ageing body – she is soon described as being 'gaga' (IV, 530; VI, 325/383) – the memory of her youthfulness at the time of the Paris Exhibition of 1878 (IV, 526; VI, 321/377) and also his preferred image of her as the extremely elegant, fashionably dressed Mme Swann, in her carriage, in the Allée des Acacias in the Bois de Boulogne in 1892 (IV, 528; VI, 323/380). But on another occasion Mme Swann is depicted in the same Allée des Acacias, being pursued not by Charles Swann but by the Narrator of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, who is eager for a glimpse of Mme Swann,

the mother of Gilberte with whom he is in love. He overhears an un-named man, in the crowd, boast that he had slept with Odette, in fact on the very day on which President Mac-Mahon resigned, that is to say, 30 January 1879 (I, 413; I, 505/597). Mac-Mahon, with monarchist tendencies, was elected President of the French Republic in 1873, and Proust uses his period of office between 1873–9 to situate certain events in his novel and thereby give it also a greater sense of authenticity. Odette's early life of pleasure, in Baden-Baden, Nice and the Côte d'Azur, and her sexual relationship with Uncle Adolphe, the Narrator's uncle, before her marriage to Swann, belong to that period (I, 307–8; I, 376–7/444–5). Mac-Mahon is presented in Proust's novel as a cousin of the fictional Mme de Villeparisis (II, 46; III, 305/360).

We can, therefore, place the *demi-mondaine* Odette de Crécy in the 1870s, and as Mme Swann she was already the mother of a precocious daughter, Gilberte, by 1892, and a well-known society hostess by 1896 at the time of the visit of the Russian Tsar Nicolas II to Paris (I, 533; II, 134/159). Mme Swann finds herself in the middle of a *cause célèbre*, the question of the innocence or guilt of the wrongly accused French army officer, Captain Dreyfus, in the late 1890s. As Mme de Forcheville, and also the mistress of the aged Duc de Guermantes to whom she is shamelessly unfaithful, Odette remains a monument to the *Belle Epoque*, at the very end of Proust's novel.

This fairly long time-scale, although imprecise, enables Proust to chart the rise and fall of fortunes, families and values, and to show the fragility and collapse of a hedonistic upper-class society living an illusion of being impregnable. No one is prepared for any adversity, and any impending danger or sign of mortality is rejected: when Swann, seriously ill with cancer, announces to the Duc and Duchesse de Guermantes that he has only three or four months to live, his remark is brushed aside as being preposterous (II, 882–4; III, 689–91/817–19). Similarly, the death of Dechambre, Mme Verdurin's favourite pianist, is a taboo subject in her *salon* (III, 288; IV, 340/399). Death, in this pre-war society of the *Belle Epoque*, is something which the bourgeoisie and aristocracy depicted by Proust prefer, if possible, to ignore and is, therefore, not prominent in his novel, with the striking exception of the long account of the illness and death of the Narrator's grandmother.

Salons

The *salons* formed an important part of French society and Proust owed much of his literary and social success to the important network of influential contacts he made there. He was a regular visitor to 12, avenue Hoche,

the *salon* of Mme Arman de Caillavet, mistress of the writer Anatole France, and soon became a close friend of Mme de Caillavet's son, Gaston. He also frequented the glittering *salon* of the painter Madeleine Lemaire in the rue de Monceau where he first met Comte Robert de Montesquiou. Few people are spared in his acerbic vignettes of the *salons*. In *A la recherche du temps perdu*, through the *salons* in particular, Proust depicts the preoccupations and attitudes of much of upper-class, and aspiring upper-class society, toward political events such as the Dreyfus affair. There are, broadly, two contrasting sets of *salons*, that of the upwardly mobile bourgeoisie of Mme Verdurin, and those of the aristocracy, the Guermantes family.

Mme Verdurin is first described at the beginning of 'Un amour de Swann' as 'vertueuse et d'une respectable famille bourgeoise excessivement riche et entièrement obscure avec laquelle elle avait peu à peu cessé volontairement toute relation' (I, 185) ['a thoroughly virtuous woman who came of a respectable middle-class family, excessively rich and wholly undistinguished, with which she had gradually and of her own accord severed all connection' (I, 225/265)]. Through ruthless control over her guests, through single-mindedness, a degree of *savoir-faire*, a superficial but nevertheless adequate knowledge of art and politics, Mme Verdurin manages to acquire a varied assortment of followers at her first *salon* in the rue Montalivet in the 8th *arrondissement*, not far from the Elysée Palace (III, 706-7; V, 225/265). These include fictional characters such as the painter Elstir, the musician Vinteuil, Professor Brichot, Dr Cottard and many others. She moves astutely with the times, favouring intelligence and the arts, whereas the Guermantes *salons* despise intelligence and tend to ossify. Her *salon* evolves as a Temple of Music (III, 263; IV, 309/363): Mme Verdurin is a fervent supporter of Wagner, Russian Ballet, Nijinsky and Stravinsky (III, 140; IV, 165/193), music that was fashionable in Paris, driven by the prevailing spirit of Franco-Russian *rapprochement* favoured at governmental level. There was a Russian pavilion, among others, at the Great Exhibition of 1900, and the Alexander III bridge across the Seine was inaugurated in the same year in honour of the Emperor who had signed the Franco-Russian alliance. Russian Ballet became the craze, for Diaghilev had promoted his troupe vigorously in Paris, even persuading the Comte and Comtesse Greffulhe and other wealthy patrons to provide financial support for the performances. The dazzling Russian Ballet season opened in Paris in May 1909 and continued on a regular basis for several years. Proust, with his close friend the composer Reynaldo Hahn, saw a performance of *Scheherazade*, choreographed by Baskt and Fokine, with music by Rimsky-Korsakov, on the opening night, 4 June 1910, when Nijinsky was the slave, and Ida Rubinstein the Sultan's favourite wife. It was described as an orgy never before witnessed, the stage

a bright green tent with shadowy blue doors and a huge orange carpet. The sheer exoticism of this highly visual, wild circus act, with accentuated actions and thrills, was vividly captured by Hahn in his account published in *Le Journal* of 10 June 1910 (*Corr.* x, 114–15). Invited by Comtesse Greffulhe, Proust also attended a performance of the ballet *Cléopâtre*, at the Paris Opera on 11 June 1910, starring Ida Rubinstein and Nijinsky. Hahn was fêted by Diaghilev in Saint-Petersburg in March 1911 when he first played the music of his new composition *Le Dieu bleu*. Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* was first performed at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in 1913. The uncertain sexual identity, characteristic of the Ballets russes, and the transvestism of the Paris Music Hall, were intriguing stage developments which Proust incorporated into his novel, particularly in his construction of Odette. The latter is revealed through Elstir's painting *Miss Sacripant* as having been a transvestite music-hall actress.³

Ridiculous as Mme Verdurin may appear at times in Proust's novel, such as when she feigns a cold in her head and neuralgia as the consequences of listening to Vinteuil's sonata (I, 203; I, 247/291), and has her nose greased with the far from pleasant smelling 'rhino-goménol', a decongestant and antiseptic ointment which Proust himself frequently used,⁴ as a preventative measure (III, 745; V, 271/320), or when Proust depicts her as some strange bird from a zoo, on a lofty perch, emitting sounds in an indistinct and garbling manner (I, 202; I, 246/290), she nevertheless succeeds in drawing attention not only to herself, but to this new music which she patronises and publicises, thereby encouraging artistic activity and commerce and reinforcing her position in society. There is a superb portrait of Mme Verdurin's role in relation to the Ballets russes: 'depuis que le goût [du public] se détournait de l'art raisonnable et français d'un Bergotte et s'éprenait surtout de musiques exotiques, Mme Verdurin, sorte de correspondant attitré à Paris de tous les artistes étrangers, allait bientôt, à côté de la ravissante princesse Yourbeletieff, servir de vieille fée Carabosse, mais toute-puissante, aux danseurs russes' (III, 741) ['now that the public taste had begun to turn from the rational Gallic art of Bergotte and was developing a taste for exotic forms of music, Mme Verdurin, a sort of accredited representative in Paris of all foreign artists, would soon be making her appearance, by the side of the exquisite Princess Yourbeletieff, as an aged Fairy Godmother, grim but all-powerful, to the Russian dancers' (V, 266–7/314)]. After the Ballet, the dancers, their director, their designers, the composers Stravinsky and Richard Strauss, would repair to Mme Verdurin's for an exquisite supper, where gossip and discussions, for example about *Scheherazade*, would continue. In this description, Proust interweaves fact and fiction so effortlessly that Mme Verdurin acquires a reality which increases her authenticity.

In contrast to Mme Verdurin, the large Guermantes family, hostile to the bourgeoisie, have the strongest position in the aristocratic world of *Belle Epoque* Paris society, generally known as the Faubourg Saint-Germain. Geographically, the Faubourg Saint-Germain is the area comprising the 7th *arrondissement*, on the left bank of the Seine. Why, therefore, does Proust situate the Guermantes *salon* on the right bank? This is a source of puzzlement to the young Narrator. 'Il est vrai que mon esprit était embarrassé par certaines difficultés, et la présence du corps de Jésus-Christ dans l'hostie ne me semblait pas un mystère plus obscur que ce premier salon du Faubourg situé sur la rive droite . . .' (II, 330) ['It is true that my mind was perplexed by certain difficulties, and the presence of the body of Jesus Christ in the host seemed to me no more obscure a mystery than this leading house in the Faubourg being situated on the right bank of the river . . .' (III, 26/30)]. An examination of a fragment of Proust's manuscript not included in the main body of the published text of *A la recherche du temps perdu* reveals that the 'leading house' is in fact situated partly in the Faubourg Saint-Germain and partly elsewhere: '. . . alors que l'entrée de notre escalier à deux mètres de l'hôtel Guermantes était à cent lieues du faubourg Saint-Germain, en revanche le paillason d'entrée de cet hôtel . . . faisait essentiellement partie du plus pur faubourg Saint-Germain' (II, 1065) ['the entrance to our staircase, two yards from the hôtel Guermantes, was a long way from the Faubourg Saint-Germain, whereas the doormat at the entrance to their house . . . was firmly part of the genuine Faubourg Saint-Germain']. This is an indicator of how the old Faubourg Saint-Germain is changing and extending both socially and geographically, spilling onto the Right Bank and the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, a phenomenon which Proust charts throughout his novel.

The Faubourg Saint-Germain is both a state of mind and an exclusive group generally comprising royalists, nationalists, Catholics and anti-Dreyfusards, that many, including the Narrator of *A la recherche du temps perdu* at the beginning, aspire to join, believing it to be the pinnacle of society. The Duchesse de Guermantes is regarded as having 'le premier *salon*, la première maison du faubourg Saint-Germain' (II, 328) ['the most exclusive drawing-room, the leading house in the Faubourg Saint-Germain' (III, 24/28)]. However, at the very end of the novel we witness the collapse of the old aristocratic and exclusive house of Guermantes, 'comme une douairière gâteuse' (IV, 535) ['like some senile dowager' (VI, 331/390)], or like a machine whose enfeebled, broken springs can no longer keep out the crowds. A revolution, as well as an evolution, has taken place in the structure of Proust's society in post-war, post-*Belle Epoque* Paris, and the hostess

at the final Guermantes *salon*, at the ‘*matinée chez la princesse de Guermantes*’, is none other than the upstart, at times vulgar, bourgeois Mme Verdurin who has finally achieved her ambition to penetrate the Guermantes coterie through marriage, but who is presiding over a *salon* not in the coveted Faubourg Saint-Germain, but in the less well-regarded 16th *arrondissement*. Proust’s canvas of the wasted, futile lives of all the dilettanti at that afternoon gathering is a masterly portrayal of the decomposition of upper-class society and enables his Narrator to take the decisive step in his life, that of becoming a writer and of realising that he had already accumulated the very material of his book that he was about to write.

Entertainment and leisure

The fascination for a visual and live spectacle, on stage, was part of Parisian life in the *Belle Epoque*. The rise of the Ballets russes had been preceded by the rise of ‘le Music-Hall’ (the English word was introduced into French in 1862). The area around Montmartre, the hill-top village as it was at the end of the nineteenth century, was becoming a mecca for artists, musicians and poets. The famous night-club and dance hall *Le Moulin Rouge*, inaugurated in 1889, was ensured a strange kind of immortality in the colourful, sometimes licentious posters by Toulouse-Lautrec. The *Folies-Bergère*, in the rue Richer, originally opened as a theatre in 1869: it was later enlarged and developed a repertory of pantomime, acrobatic displays, ballets and light opera. The *Olympia* Music Hall at 28, boulevard des Capucines, close to the Opéra, was also a flourishing venue for popular music and night-time entertainment from the end of the century. In Proust’s novel, the *Olympia* is loosely associated with the prostitution, sadism and sado-masochism depicted in Jupien’s homosexual brothel in wartime Paris (IV, 392, 404; VI, 152/179, 166/196), and is invoked in the course of bawdy conversations on at least two occasions. Julot’s ‘godmother’ is ‘la dame qui tient le chalet de nécessité un peu plus bas que l’*Olympia*’ (IV, 392) [‘the woman who looks after the toilets just beyond the *Olympia*’ (VI, 151/178)]. Charlus obtains additional sadistic pleasure by his crude linguistic flagellation of a male protégé accusing him of infidelity: “Toi, c’est dégoûtant, je t’ai aperçu devant l’*Olympia* avec deux cartons. C’est pour te faire donner du ‘pêze’” (IV, 404) [“You’re disgusting, you are, I saw you outside the *Olympia* with two tarts. After a bit of brass, no doubt” (VI, 166/196)]. The ‘taverne de l’*Olympia*’ is a favourite haunt of Proust’s character Rachel, the dancer (II, 461; III, 183/215). There were cabarets such as the *Chat Noir*, where Charlus, in Proust’s novel, claimed he had taken Odette (I, 310; I, 380/449):

it was Montmartre's most renowned artistic cabaret in the 1890s, situated at 12, rue Victor Massé, not far from the busy Place Pigalle. *Les Variétés*, the theatre on the boulevard Montmartre, was well-known from about 1870 for its variety shows, and was recorded by the genre painter Jean Béraud in his famous painting *Devant les Variétés*, with the elegantly dressed wealthy ladies and gentlemen of the period, and the Morris column in the distance announcing forthcoming entertainment, perhaps *Le Testament de César Girodet* by A. Belot and E. Villetard, or Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, or *Les Diamants de la Couronne* or *Domino Noir*, comic operas by Scribe and Auber, all of which the young Narrator found fascinating (I, 73; I, 86/101). Adam's comic opera *Le Chalet* was also popular and is one of the Duc de Guermantes' favourite works (II, 781; III, 567/673).

An integral part of *A la recherche du temps perdu* is the theatrical panorama and the juxtapositioning and involvement of real-life and fictional players. In his hierarchy of talent, the Narrator places Sarah Bernhardt just before La Berma, the fictional tragedienne who plays the role of Phèdre in Racine's eponymous play and whose performance so much disappoints the young Narrator. The beginning of Swann's frequenting the Verdurin *salon* is given historical authenticity by his promise to obtain a 'coupe-file' (I, 212) ['a special pass' (I, 259/304)] for Mme Verdurin for the re-opening of the play *Les Danicheff*, by the Russian-born writer Pierre de Corvin-Kroukowsky, which took place at the Paris theatre of Porte-Saint-Martin in 1884.

Through the fictional, female Jewish character known simply as Rachel (she has no surname, but her name is identical to the real-life French actress Rachel (1821–58), thus creating some confusion for the reader), a Parisian music hall actress, mistress of the aristocrat Saint-Loup, prostitute, 'une énigme, un véritable sphinx' (II, 578) ['an enigma, a regular sphinx' (III, 323/382)], Proust explores the underworld or the seedy side of the *Belle Époque*. Rachel is first introduced working as a prostitute in a heterosexual brothel: that is where the Narrator first encounters her (I, 566–7; II, 174/206). This is also the brothel to which the Narrator has donated furniture which had belonged to his aunt Léonie in Combray and in particular a divan, a most appropriate and useful item for such an establishment. Rachel is depicted on stage (II, 472–3; III, 196/231) and 'au promenoir des Folies-Bergère' (II, 578) ['in the promenade at the Folies-Bergère' (III, 323/382)]. To the uninitiated reader, this may appear an innocent kind of stroll. The 'promenoir' at the *Folies-Bergère* did exist, and was the equivalent of the famous, or rather infamous, promenade at the Empire Theatre Music Hall, Leicester Square, in London, notorious as the place at the back of the theatre,

usually next to a bar, where high-class prostitutes paraded, particularly during the interval. Manet captured and immortalised the atmosphere of such a bar with his painting of 1882, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*. At the end of Proust's novel, Rachel has risen in society to become a close friend of the Duchesse de Guermantes, pandering to high society's 'constant thirst for novelty to entertain themselves, for people who were interesting and even a little notorious'.⁵ Similarly, Mistinguett and Louise Balthy are the real-life music hall actresses, singers and dancers whom the Duchesse de Guermantes finds 'adorables' (IV, 571; VI, 380/447).

Another leisure and social activity is centered on hotel life. There are two grand hotels in *A la recherche du temps perdu*: the fictional Grand Hôtel de la Plage at Balbec, and the authentic Ritz on the Place Vendôme in Paris, which opened in 1898, the first hotel to install private baths.

The Grand Hôtel de la Plage at Balbec is modelled on opulent hotels which Proust had known, but in particular the new Grand Hôtel at Cabourg, on the Normandy coast, some six to seven hours from Paris by train via Mézidon.⁶ It had re-opened in 1907 in a blaze of publicity emphasising 'le Modern Style' and its Casino, bathing facilities, golf course, gardens.⁷ The Narrator's room at Balbec is like a show bedroom at an Ideal Home exhibition with its colourful and modern décor; Ripolin, then a new gloss paint, was being advertised on posters in 1898. 'Celle [ma chambre] du Grand Hôtel de la Plage, à Balbec, dont les murs passés au ripolin contenaient, comme les parois polies d'une piscine où l'eau bleuit, un air pur, azuré et salin . . . et sur trois côtés . . . des bibliothèques basses, à vitrines en glace' (I, 376) ['my room in the Grand Hôtel de la Plage, at Balbec, the ripolin-painted walls of which enclosed, like the polished sides of a bathing-pool in which the water glows blue, a finer air, pure, azure-tinted, saline . . . and . . . on three sides of it, a series of low book-cases with glass fronts' (I, 461/545)]. Yet his bedroom does not seem to have en-suite facilities, for there is a basin-stand and a servant brings hot water for his ablutions (II, 33-4; II, 289-90/341-2). In contrast, the Narrator's family apartment in Paris has two bathrooms (III, 520; V, 2/3).

The luxurious life-style of the leisured classes on vacation at Balbec, typified by Andrée's husband in 'l'audace frénétique qu'il portait jadis, à Balbec, aux sports, au jeu, à tous les excès de table' (IV, 310) ['the frenzied daring which he had shown in the old days at Balbec, in sport, in gambling, in excesses of eating and drinking' (VI, 50/59)] was brought to a close at the onset of the Great War when the Grand Hôtel Cabourg was requisitioned and transformed into a military hospital. In Proust's novel, Charlus has turned his large house into a military hospital, and the manager of the Grand

Hôtel, Balbec, ends up in a concentration camp (IV, 387, 325; VI, 146/172, 69/81).

Proust was an *habitué* of the Ritz and it is therefore surprising that this famous hotel does not have a more prominent presence in his novel. For the fictional Albertine, it is the place which provides her with exotic, sensual ice-creams, in taste and shape ‘des colonnes Vendôme de glace . . . , des obélisques de framboise’ (III, 636) [‘Vendôme Columns of ice . . . , raspberry obelisks’ (V, 140/165)]. For the fictional Robert de Saint-Loup, when on leave from the front, the Ritz provides the setting for an imaginary farce acted by characters in their night attire (IV, 338; VI, 85/100). For Swann, the Ritz was not an exclusive place ‘puisque tout le monde peut y aller en payant’ (IV, 543) [‘since anybody can go to these places who pays’ (VI, 343/404)]. His lofty position was guaranteed by his membership of select clubs, such as the Jockey. The theme of social exclusivity, be it the tightly-knit family group in Combray, the ‘little clan’ at the Verdurins’, or the Faubourg Saint-Germain, is abundantly represented throughout Proust’s novel.

Speed of change

Turner’s painting *Rain, Steam and Speed*, of 1844, was a precursor to Claude Monet’s *Gare Saint-Lazare* of 1877: both depicted the emerging mode of rail travel, together with a hint of the accompanying problem of pollution. The railways had developed at a fast pace in France and by 1894, when Proust was 23 years old, there were about 24,000 miles of railways, offering 1st, 2nd and 3rd class travel, owned by the Government (le Réseau de l’État), six large companies and a considerable number of smaller ones.⁸ Sometimes there were two stations in the same town belonging to different companies as at Cabourg, where the Gare de l’État was next to the Gare départementale (Gruyer, *Normandie*, p.321). The London–Paris rail and boat service in 1899 via Calais or Boulogne provided up to five services a day, with a journey time of about eight hours.⁹

The medieval town of Combray first appears, not really from a cup of tea, as the Narrator poetically claims (I, 47; I, 55/64), but ‘de loin, à dix lieues à la ronde, vu du chemin de fer’ (I, 47) [‘at a distance, from a twenty-mile radius, as we used to see it from the railway’ (I, 56/65)]. Proust provides snapshots of the poetry of emerging rail transport in his novel. As the Narrator and his grandmother journey to the fictional seaside resort of Balbec, we glimpse ‘le bar du train’ with its friendly barman and attendants (II, 12; II, 264/312), and ‘la fenêtre dont nous avions abaissé le rideau qui ne remplissait pas tout le cadre de la vitre, de sorte que le soleil pouvait glisser

sur le chêne ciré de la portière et le drap de la banquette' (*ibid.*) ['the window, the blind of which, though we had lowered it, did not completely cover the glass, so that the sun could shed on the polished oak of the door and the cloth of the seat' (*ibid.*)].

Railway stations are, for the Narrator, both marvellous and tragic places. Proust demonstrates the particular social function of the little halts on the slower lines – almost a mini-*salon* – and in a letter to Mme de Maugny recalled some of the social activities at Thonon station: 'A Thonon, long arrêt, on serrait la main d'un tel qui était venu accompagner ses invités, d'un autre voulant acheter les journaux, de beaucoup que j'ai toujours soupçonnés de n'avoir rien d'autre à faire là que retrouver des gens de connaissance. Une forme de vie mondaine comme une autre que cet arrêt à la gare de Thonon' (*Corr.* XIX, p.538). ['At Thonon there was a long wait, while the passengers shook hands with someone who was seeing his guests off, or another who's come to buy newspapers, or a good many who, I always suspected, came only as an excuse to chat with their acquaintances. The stop at Thonon was a form of social life like any other.']¹⁰ Proust fully developed the theme of railway stops as the setting for social intercourse in his novel (see III, 494–5: IV, 590–2/695–7). On a more modest level, bicycles were all the rage: Béraud's famous painting *Au chalet du cycle au Bois de Boulogne* captures this *joie de vivre* and shows off female cycling attire. In Proust's novel, the energetic, sports-loving Albertine is closely associated with bicycles (II, 146, 151–3; II, 426/503, 431–3/509–12).

Norman Davies, in *Europe: A History*, has conveyed the speed of change of this *fin de siècle* in his observation: 'In 1895 Henry James, the American novelist living in Europe, acquired electric lighting; in 1896 he rode a bicycle; in 1897 he wrote on a typewriter. And that was in a period which a British Royal Commission had called "the Great Depression"'.¹¹

Two major displays of grandeur in Paris, the Great Exhibitions of 1889 and 1900, encapsulated a sense of pride in the technological achievements of the time, the importance of the French capital as an influential city on the world stage, and France as a dominant, colonial power. The centrepiece of the 1889 exhibition was the controversial and impressive Eiffel Tower, that iron structure built to commemorate the centenary of the French Revolution: it was equipped with lifts and at its inauguration was illuminated by a vast array of gas lights. Posters advertised railway tickets at special rates to encourage crowds to marvel at this phenomenon. The Polish pianist, composer and politician, virtuoso interpreter of Chopin, Ignace Paderewski, came to Paris for this exhibition and played before thousands on Bastille Day, as well as performing at private recitals in the homes of the

wealthy. In Proust's novel, Paderewski's name is dropped casually at Mme Verdurin's *salon*, but his prowess is not really recognised by Mme Verdurin, who considered his talent to be inferior to that of the second-rate fictional pianist Dechambre (III, 289; IV, 341/400).

The Great Exhibition of 1900 epitomised the optimism and excitement of experiencing the birth of a new century. Not only did it portray French achievements and discoveries, but tried to be representative of the universe, with Paris at the centre. Proust's friend, the artist Jacques-Emile Blanche, conveyed this spirit of universal brotherhood in his painting, *André Gide et ses amis au café maure de l'Exposition universelle de 1900*, now in the Musée des Beaux-Arts at Rouen. The catalogue of the 1900 Exhibition presents a breathtaking variety of stands, palaces (such as the palaces of the French and English Colonies, even the palace of England), entertainments, exotic restaurants, pavilions, including the heavy and proud promotion of the State tobacco and matches industry employing 16,660 workers in its twenty-one factories in a country where 990 grams of tobacco were consumed per person per year. The new-found uses of electricity were promoted – electric clocks, railways, signals, detonators, mines, civil engineering, medicine, telegraph and telephone systems – and displayed prominently in the eighty-metre high Palace of Electricity, a monument to Progress and 'le Génie de l'Electricité'. In *A la recherche du temps perdu*, the news, on the good authority of the electrician Mildé (whose shop specialising in electrical goods opened in 1900 at 52, rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré: it is identified in I, 1416), that Mme Verdurin's recently acquired town house will have the luxury of electricity, with electric lights with lampshades, causes a stir (I, 596; II, 211/249). In his bedroom in Paris with a fireplace but no central heating, Proust's Narrator has a 'poire électrique au-dessus de [son] lit' (III, 521–2) [an 'electric push . . . hung above [his] bed' (v, 4/4)]. The Grand Hôtel de Balbec is equipped with electricity, 'les sources électriques faisant sourdre à flots la lumière dans la grande salle à manger' (II, 41) ['hidden springs of electricity flooding the great dining-room with light' (II, 299/353)].

There were fifty-six public telephone booths at the Exhibition, as well as a telephone service on the first and second floors of the Eiffel Tower. This represented an impressive display of this new invention, for subscribers in France of 1900 numbered only 40,000, of whom more than half, 22,468, were in Paris.¹² The Wagram and Gutenberg telephone exchanges in Paris are mentioned in *A la recherche du temps perdu* (II, 435; III, 151/178). The novelty of the possibility of having a private telephone incites the fictional Mme Cottard, generally a rather naive woman, to foresee its disadvantages: 'Le premier amusement passé, cela doit être un vrai casse-tête' (I, 596) ['Once

the first excitement is over, it must be a real headache' (II, 211/250)], as well as the luxury it affords of being able to place an order for delivery without going out. In *Le Côté de Guermantes*, there is a reference to the Narrator's parents having had a private telephone at home for a short while (II, 422; III, 136/160). Without the telephone at home, to which one subscribed, and of course electricity, Proust would not have been able to have a 'théâtrophone' enabling him to hear live performances of works such as Chabrier's *Gwendoline*, or Wagner's *Meistersinger* from the Paris Opera, or Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, libretto by Maeterlinck, from the Opéra-Comique (*Corr.* XI, 294; *Corr.* X, 250). A théâtrophone network, operated by the 'Compagnie du théâtrophone' with its main exchange in the rue Louis-le-Grand, analogous to the telephone network, connected some Paris theatres, in particular the Opéra, Opéra-Comique and Le Théâtre Français, with individual subscribers' homes. Powerful microphones and horn-shaped loudspeakers placed on the stage transmitted the performance via telephone lines. In London a similar device called an electrophone was used to transmit theatre performances to subscribers, but the service was not successful and was short-lived.¹³

Tensions and upheavals

The *salons* were, to some extent, a microcosm of the tensions in French society at the time. In particular, the Dreyfus affair which had repercussions throughout France, and beyond, created conflict within the small social groups of the *salons*, thus reflecting the national situation.

The reverberations of the Dreyfus affair continued after Dreyfus's acquittal, as Proust himself observes: 'l'affaire Dreyfus était pourtant terminée depuis longtemps, mais vingt ans après on en parlait encore' (III, 548) ['The Dreyfus case was long since over, but twenty years later people would still talk about it' (v, 36/42)]. Proust underestimated its impact, for Eric Cahm has demonstrated in the epilogue to his study of the Affair that it is still a sensitive topic today:¹⁴ Winock also maintains that 'the Affair has produced a phenomenon of remanence lasting to our own time'.¹⁵

The Dreyfus affair is extremely complex: secrecy, suspicions, hatred, prejudice and some unexplained deaths helped to conceal the truth. In brief, an army officer, Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a wealthy Jew, originally from Mulhouse, in Alsace, was wrongly accused of releasing secret information concerned with national defence to the German military attaché in Paris in the form of a written document known as the *bordereau*. He was arrested in 1894 as a spy, and sentenced by court martial to be deported to the remote Devil's Island (L'Île du Diable), off the coast of French Guyana, in South

America. The writer Emile Zola publicly took up Dreyfus's case in a famous open letter to the President of the French Republic, Félix Faure, published in the radical newspaper *L'Aurore*, on the front page, under the heading 'J'Accuse . . . !' Zola attacked the army cover-up and asserted Dreyfus's innocence. In *L'Aurore*, there was an 'Intellectuals' Manifesto' demanding a retrial and Proust was one of the signatories, along with the writers André Gide and Anatole France. Zola was tried – 'L'Affaire Zola' was blazoned on the front cover of the newspaper *Le Petit Journal* on 20 February 1898 – and sentenced to a year's imprisonment and a fine for writing this incitement. He escaped to exile in England for a year. A revision of Dreyfus' case took place in August 1899 in Rennes, in the heart of traditional and Catholic Brittany, after Colonel Henry had been found guilty of forging evidence. Henry was sent to prison where he committed suicide. Dreyfus was nevertheless found 'guilty but with extenuating circumstances', and sentenced to ten years' imprisonment. He was eventually pardoned and set free, but the verdict was only finally quashed in 1906, by which time Dreyfus was a broken man. The long campaign against Dreyfus, waged on the whole by Catholics, anti-Semites and nationalists, was partly responsible for the anti-clerical reaction which ensued.

In Mme Straus's *salon*, as early as October 1897, Joseph Reinach, himself of Jewish origin, author of the monumental seven-volume work *Histoire de l'affaire Dreyfus* and politician – he was *député* for the Basses-Alpes at the time of the Dreyfus affair, having been elected in 1889 – had proclaimed his firm belief in Dreyfus's innocence. The effect was electric on those present, some of whom left as a sign of disagreement. Mme Straus's *salon*, like Mme Verdurin's in Proust's novel, became the headquarters of a pro-Dreyfus faction. The real Joseph Reinach, Emile Zola, Colonel Picquart, Clemenceau, Labori and Anatole France gather at the *salon* of the fictional Mme Verdurin (III, 144, 741; IV, 169/199, V, 267/315).

'L'Affaire', as it came to be known, stirred up emotions and furious passions, and ensured that people could not remain indifferent to the plight of one of their countrymen. People were divided into the Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards, sometimes changing allegiance through expediency. As Léon Blum recalled: 'On était dreyfusard ou on ne l'était pas.'¹⁶ A wave of anti-semitism had been fostered by Etienne Drumont (1844–1917) through his book *La France juive* of 1886, and his anti-semitic daily newspaper *La Libre Parole* (1892–1910) which generally carried propaganda denouncing Jews, Protestants and 'métèques', a pejorative word for undesirable immigrants, while promoting the Catholic church and 'France for the French'.

Proust, the son of a Jewish mother and a Catholic father, with a very wide circle of Catholic, Jewish and Protestant friends and contacts, experienced

the entire Dreyfus affair at first hand. In spite of his own father's position as an anti-Dreyfusard, Proust openly and courageously took the side of Dreyfus and campaigned on his behalf from a very early stage, and also for Picquart (*Corr.* II, 251). Proust, in a letter of 1919 to Paul Souday, the official critic for the newspaper *Le Temps*, proudly declared: 'Je crois bien avoir été le premier dreyfusard, puisque c'est moi qui suis allé demander sa signature à Anatole France' (*Corr.* XVIII, pp.535–6) ['I do believe I was the first Dreyfusard, since I was the one who asked Anatole France to sign the petition': my translation]. In *La Prisonnière*, when the discussion centres on Dreyfus at the *Guermantes*, the Narrator wishes to avoid confrontation and quickly steers the conversation to the subject of dresses (III, 551; V, 39/46). Recanati interprets this behaviour by the Narrator as a tendency to avoid argument, and as if he was an outsider or afraid.¹⁷ I do not believe the Narrator was afraid: he was emulating the diplomatic behaviour of his mother who, in *Le Côté de Guermantes*, had remained silent about her opinions on Dreyfus. The Narrator is as much pro-Dreyfus as his father is anti-Dreyfus, a state which causes a temporary rift: 'Il ne me parla pas de huit jours quand il apprit que j'avais suivi une ligne de conduite différente' (II, 450) ['He refused to speak to me for a week after learning that I had chosen to take a different line' (III, 169/200)].

Proust, who as a novelist was conceptually and stylistically in many ways diametrically opposed to Zola, supported Zola's political stance without faltering. He even attended Zola's trial, and transposed his presence through the Jewish character Bloch in *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Bloch attends several hearings of Zola's trial which he describes as a 'beautiful dream' (II, 531; III, 266/315: translation altered). He is totally engrossed in the trial, but not to the extent of forgetting his nutritional needs: 'Il arrivait là le matin, pour n'en sortir que le soir, avec une provision de sandwiches et une bouteille de café, comme au concours général ou aux compositions de baccalauréat' (*ibid.*) ['He would arrive there in the morning and stay until the court rose, with a supply of sandwiches and a flask of coffee, as though for the final examination for a degree' (*ibid.*)]. In Proust's novel, the fictional Mme Verdurin is seated next to the real Mme Zola at Zola's trial 'aux pieds du tribunal, aux séances de la Cour d'assises' (III, 741) ['immediately below the judges' bench, during the trial in the Assize Court' (V, 267/315)] and in the evening she entertains at her home Picquart and Fernand Labori, Zola's lawyer (III, 742; V, 268/316): all this in order to have a more prominent and important position in society.¹⁸

Contributing to the changing social panorama were the anti-clerical laws – which Sprinker believes to be a backlash against Catholic anti-Semitism and anti-Dreyfusism¹⁹ – such as the expulsion of religious congregations,

introduced by Emile Combes when he was Président du Conseil (Prime Minister) between 1902 and 1905, culminating in the act of separation of the Church and State on 9 December 1905. Proust himself took a strong public stance against the proposed legislation which he eloquently denounced, invoking the support of Ruskin and Emile Mâle, in his article in *Le Figaro* of 16 August 1904 entitled 'La Mort des Cathédrales' (CSB, pp. 141–9). Although this Church versus State debate does not percolate into his novel to the same extent as the Dreyfus Affair and the Great War, echoes of it are apparent. The new Mayor of Combray is anti-clerical: 'un maire radical à Combray, qui ne salue même pas le curé' (IV, 255) ['a Radical mayor now at Combray, who doesn't even lift his hat to the priest' (v, 779/920)]. Charlus remarks on how unlikely such anti-clerical measures had seemed: 'Les républicains les plus sages pensaient qu'il était fou de faire la séparation de l'Eglise' (IV, 376) ['The most prudent republicans thought that it was mad to separate the Church from the State' (VI, 132/156)].

The Narrator returns twice to Paris in wartime after a stay in a sanatorium. These breaks are a useful device, enabling him to distance himself from Paris and to see the capital with fresh and rested eyes, as well as to witness the effects of war sometime after its commencement and after an interval of two years, in 1916, and on a third occasion after the war (IV, 433; VI, 202/238).

The effects of war are apparent. There is a brief mention of a lack of coal and light: the Louvre and all other museums are closed: lights have to be turned off promptly at 9.30 pm and restaurants closed. There are constant 'Taube' raids on the city as well as Zeppelin and Gotha raids.²⁰ The dark city was periodically lightened by 'les projecteurs [qui] se remuaient sans cesse, flairant l'ennemi, le cernant de leurs lumières jusqu'au moment où les avions aiguillés bondiraient en chasse pour le saisir' (IV, 338) ['the searchlights [which] strayed ceaselessly to and fro, scenting the enemy, encircling him with their beams until the moment when the aeroplanes should be unleashed to bound after him in pursuit and seize him' (VI, 84/99–100)]. Shelling and blazing buildings do not deter the Narrator. In the blackness, he stumbles against dustbins: clocks have been put forward as a daylight saving device, a law decreed in June 1916 in the face of much opposition as the editors of the Pléiade edition explain (IV, 1219). There are special police regulations in force and hotels are purported to be full of spies.²¹

Comte Robert de Saint-Loup is killed in action. Charlie Morel, after working as a Press Officer, joined the army, but was later arrested as a deserter, then sent back to the front. The image of dying soldiers, engaged in the act of writing as their last earthly task, goads the Narrator into tackling his inability to write his novel (see IV, 616, 620; VI, 439/517, 445/524).

In spite of these deprivations, deaths, war casualties, slaughter, the sickening insouciance of high society, of its women in particular, the *Belle Epoque* continues. As the Narrator remarks: 'La vie continuait presque semblable pour bien des personnes qui ont figuré dans ce récit' (IV, 351) ['Life continued almost unchanged for many of these who have played a part in this story' (VI, 101/119)]. The Verdurins give dinner-parties and their *salon* becomes a political *salon*. Mme Verdurin, almost a Marie-Antoinette figure, continues to take great selfish pleasure in her regular morning *croissant* which she has obtained on prescription from Dr Cottard for her migraine, indulging in a luxury in a city where people queue for bread and coal rations, while she superficially sympathises with the sinking of the *Lusitania*, the British liner, one of the great casualties of the war, torpedoed off the Irish coast on 7 May 1915 by a German submarine with the loss of twelve hundred lives (IV, 352; VI, 102/120).

The so-called *Belle Epoque* was a period of rapid change and technological advances. The speed of communications in transport – bicycles, railways, omnibuses and aeroplanes – and in telecommunications, such as the telegraph and telephone, was rapid. Alongside these developments, there was political and social instability, such as the Dreyfus Affair which rocked French society and created divisions. The Catholic church and the French State were to separate irreparably in 1905. Diseases such as cholera, tuberculosis, typhoid fever (IV, 459; VI, 234/276) were rife: drug addiction was becoming common and in Proust's novel the Vicomtesse de Saint-Fiacre has become unrecognisable and a physical wreck due to her dependence on cocaine and other drugs (IV, 523; VI, 315/371). Brothels and promiscuity encouraged the spread of syphilis which at the time was very difficult to treat. The First World War, which killed and wounded millions of men, in which gas was used for the first time, in which soldiers endured miles of stinking, flooded trenches, shattered any latent illusions of permanent prosperity and happiness.

NOTES

- 1 Quoted by André Maurois, *The Quest for Proust*, translated by Gerard Hopkins (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books in association with Jonathan Cape, 1962), p.87.
- 2 Vincent Cronin, *Paris on the Eve: 1900–1914* (London: Collins, 1989), p.17.
- 3 For a fuller discussion of this point, see Cynthia J. Gamble, 'Zipporah: a Ruskinian enigma appropriated by Marcel Proust', in *Word & Image*, vol.15, no. 4, October–December 1999, pp.392–4.
- 4 François-Bernard Michel, *Proust et les écrivains devant la mort* (Paris: Grasset, 1995), pp.89–93.

- 5 Seth L. Wolitz, *The Proustian Community* (New York University Press, 1971), p.155.
- 6 Paul Gruyer, *Normandie*, Collection des Guides-Joanne (Paris: Hachette, 1912), p.319.
- 7 Christian Péchenard, *Proust à Cabourg* (Paris: Quai Voltaire, 1992), pp.28–30.
- 8 Karl Baedeker, *Northern France from Belgium and the English Channel to the Loire excluding Paris and its Environs. Handbook for Travellers* (Leipsic: Baedeker; London: Dulau, 1894), p.xv.
- 9 See advertisement in *La Chronique des Arts et de la Curiosité*, 23 September 1899, p.280.
- 10 Quoted in George Painter, *Marcel Proust* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983), p.229.
- 11 Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (London: Pimlico, 1997), p.781. See in particular chapters x and xi.
- 12 *La Grande Encyclopédie*, Tome 30, 1887–1902.
- 13 See Asa Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting* (Oxford University Press, 1995), I, 39.
- 14 Eric Cahm, *The Dreyfus Affair in French Society and Politics* (London and New York: Longman, 1996), pp.185–93.
- 15 Michel Winock, trans. Jane Marie Todd, *Nationalism, Anti-Semitism, and Fascism in France* (Stanford: University Press, 1998), p.111.
- 16 Léon Blum, *Souvenirs sur l’Affaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993 [1935]), p.34.
- 17 Jean Recanati, *Profils juifs de Marcel Proust* (Paris: Editions Buchet/Chastel, 1979), p.71.
- 18 Proust provided a much more comprehensive and documentary account of Zola’s trial through the eyes of the young man Jean (Santeuil), in some of the fragments which were entitled *Jean Santeuil* by Bernard de Fallois in 1952. (See *JS*, pp.620–7, 649–51 and also *Jean Santeuil*, translated by Gerard Hopkins, preface by André Maurois (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp.350–3 for one of the extracts.)
- 19 Michael Sprinker, *History and Ideology in Proust* (London: Verso, 1998), p.111.
- 20 References to the preceding allusions are as follows: IV, 311; VI, 52/61. IV, 302; VI, 41/48. IV, 313; VI, 54/64. IV, 330; VI, 74–5/88. IV, 337–8; VI, 83–4/98–9. IV, 341, 356; VI, 89/105, VI, 108/127.
- 21 References to the preceding allusions are as follows: IV, 412–13; VI, 176–7/207–8. IV, 341–2; VI, 89/105. IV, 312–15; VI, 53–6/62–6.