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978-0-521-45342-4 - History and Ideology in Proust: A la Recherche du Temps Perdu and the Third French Republic

Michael Sprinker

Excerpt

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Introduction

If we speak of realism, that is because like all the great works of the classical bourgeois novel, like Balzac's *Human Comedy*, and Zola's *Rougon-Macquart*, *A la recherche du temps perdu* is also a novel-epic that treats of 'man' and 'society' in their mutual relations. More than that, Proust's realism is also 'critical,' although his critical spirit has nothing in common with the critical spirit of Balzac, of Stendhal, of Flaubert, and derives from a completely different source.

(N. Rykova, "The Final Stage of Bourgeois Realism" [1936])

This is a book about Proust and the Third French Republic. It attempts to recover some of the historical specificity that permeates *A la recherche du temps perdu* and makes it the text that it is. Why write such a book? In the first place because, as far as I can tell, it has never been done. In addition, my conviction is that only by undertaking this type of investigation can we begin to understand the true complexity and assess the importance and lasting value of those literary works that, for whatever reason, have been enshrined in the European high-culture pantheon. Proust's reputation is already well established; the question remains, however, whether and on what grounds his inclusion in the canon is deserved. I shall, then, be defending Proust, albeit not uncritically, but for reasons that have only rarely been urged in his behalf.

The principal – and in the end the only intellectually defensible – reason for pursuing such a study is historical. Eric Hobsbawm has put the matter well in the "Overture" to his

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Age of Empire, arguing that the peculiar contradictions of our own time were born of the period that comes to a climax with August 1914. He characterizes the break as one with the world of liberal capitalism, and opines that “since 1914 the century of the bourgeoisie belongs to history.”¹ Whether or not we affirm his judgment about the bourgeoisie’s demise, it is difficult to disagree with the view that bourgeois society’s familiar institutions reached maturity and found general acceptance in the period just preceding the Great War. Parliamentary democracy (accompanied by universal male suffrage), corporate enterprise, mass-produced consumer goods (along with the modern advertising industry that sustained a taste for them), mass communications – all these now familiar features of advanced capitalism came to fruition in this period. This was the moment when the Euro-American bourgeoisies attained at one and the same time the apogee of their direct global domination in the form of colonial empires, and their greatest prosperity, comfort, and stability in the national domestic sphere. Not without reason has the period been dubbed the *belle époque*. Even as it served for many who survived it as an Edenic memory of a more stable and secure world, so it seemed to many who were living through it to hold out the promise of an eternally bright future that would reproduce the materially virtuous present.²

Not everyone held such sanguine views, of course, but to the extent that it makes sense to call this period “bourgeois,” it can be said that the dominant ideology of the hegemonic class was certainly optimistic. Even the dominated classes could share in this perspective. The period also saw the growth and consolidation of mass working-class organizations, including political parties which, in at least one incarnation (the Second International led by its largest member party, the German Social Democrats), reproduced bourgeois optimism. They believed that capitalism would evolve into socialism through sheer expansion of the productive forces.

Among those who did not entirely share in this rosy view of liberal capitalism’s present achievements and future promise were the titled nobility and landed gentry, those relics of the

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ancien régime that “persisted,” as Arno Mayer has eloquently argued, long beyond the formal demise of their political and social hegemony in Europe (and even, in a different way, in the United States, as Faulkner’s mature fiction amply illustrates).³ In the heyday of bourgeois supremacy, the European aristocracy waged a sometimes fierce, but more often quiet and subtle, rearguard action to stave off their ultimate demise, which they certainly felt to be (and perhaps we ought to recognize this too) far from inevitable. Like the history of all hitherto existing society, that of the *belle époque* was a history of class struggles. This is the history Proust came to chronicle and provisionally explain in his enormous, uncompleted masterpiece, *A la recherche du temps perdu*. My justification for treating this text, therefore, lies in its claim to historical insight and understanding. Proust’s novel remains significant precisely to the extent that it illuminates a decisive historical moment in the formation of the modern world.

I should confess at the outset that the present project did not begin from a desire to study any particular society for the purposes of historical explanation. Its origins lie elsewhere, in a certain dissatisfaction with contemporary literary analysis pursued under marxism’s aegis.⁴ Taking Marx at his word in the introduction to the *Grundrisse* (or Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky at theirs in various texts on literature and culture), one would have thought that the first task of any consequent materialist criticism would be to study the social conditions under which individual works of art have been produced, for these are, *ex hypothesi*, aesthetic production’s causal *prius*. Whatever the limitations and deficiencies in the writings of Lukács and the more orthodox communist critics of the 1930s, their insistence on the ideological character and function of literary texts, their holding to a view of history grounded in the analysis of class structures, and their attempt to demonstrate the ways in which literary texts reveal or expose the historical situations they present – these remain the necessary hallmarks of any marxist literary criticism worthy of the name. And yet all that fell into disrepute during the Cold War, was scarcely revived

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during the 1960s, and is today, for all intents and purposes, simply forgotten, save as an item of historical curiosity, rarely as a possible model upon which to base future work.

This is surely not the place to engage in a polemic on behalf of something called “vulgar marxism,” the vulgarity of which may at times seem almost refreshing in the hothouse climate of our current theoretical hyperspace. What is intended, rather, is to make a modest contribution to the marxist study of literature by considering the principal work of a writer who had no particular sympathy for marxism or socialism in any form, and whose writings, when they have been thought a fit subject for marxist analysis, have generally been denounced as decadent bourgeois aestheticism.⁵ And so they were, though one is immediately constrained to observe, as Sartre once famously remarked of Valéry, that if Proust was an aesthete, not every aesthete was Proust. This is an insight shared by Adorno, who observed of Proust’s social position and his art: “what Proust saw in Illiers must have happened elsewhere to many children of the same social stratum. But what it takes to form this universal, this authentic part of Proust’s presentation, is to be entranced in one place without squinting at the universal.”⁶ Moreover, it is by no means clear that the *Recherche* is entirely on the side of the bourgeoisie, a point that can only be demonstrated in an exhaustive exposition of the novel. I shall at best give a schematic projection of such a full-scale reading here.

The present study proposes, then, utilizing the classical categories of historical materialism to analyze *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Base and superstructure, class and class struggle, ideology, and revolution – these are the conceptual instruments I shall deploy to dissect the narrative structures of Proust’s great text, structures that while they undoubtedly possess a formal poetic dimension (authoritatively set forth by Gérard Genette, to whose work I shall have occasion to refer), are not ultimately determined by such considerations. Formal or aesthetic features are themselves a part of ideology, as well as its efficient cause in literary representation. In literature, ideology can only appear in the presentation of form, so that formal analysis is never a dispensable exercise for materialist criticism.

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To say so is not to say anything terribly controversial, but is in a way to repeat what everyone has always known about the *Recherche*: that it is a novel about French society during the first half-century of the Third Republic. But having granted this much, most previous commentary has proceeded as if we know precisely what that means, what the Third Republic was, how the *Recherche* presented it, who were the historical originals of the novel's characters, and so forth. One ought not to belittle previous scholarship in these areas, the more so since without it one's own work would be infinitely more time-consuming and difficult. It should be observed, nonetheless, that the fundamental questions about the nature of society pursued so vigorously by social theory and empirical social science in this century are elided in virtually all literary criticism, be it marxist or not, claiming to study the social origins of literary texts. It's not so much wrong to note, for example, that Charlus seems to have been modelled on Proust's acquaintance, Count Robert de Montesquiou, as it is unhelpful in understanding who or what Charlus is in the novel, and how this character functions as the carrier of certain values and as the site for historically significant ideological conflicts. It is perhaps more useful to say of literary characters what Marx said of the human agents who "make history" but cannot do so "just as they please." Like actual historical individuals, literary characters are ultimately "bearers of structures." The purpose of this study is to examine some of the structures Proust's characters bear, the better to comprehend how the *Recherche* judges what it takes to be the ultimately determining instance of French history during Proust's lifetime: the ongoing class struggle between bourgeois and aristocrat.

Why the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy? Once again, only a full exposition can demonstrate what is proposed here as a preliminary hypothesis: that Proust's text advances a model of the Third Republic's class structure which for the most part ignores the still numerous peasantry (with the notable exception of Françoise), and has virtually nothing to say about the increasingly large and politically important urban proletariat. The *Recherche* presents French society through the lens of a

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two-class model. Nor are its principal classes engaged in struggle those (proletariat and bourgeoisie) that have been considered canonical for industrialized capitalist social formations since the *Communist Manifesto*. Nevertheless, I shall claim that Proust's novel, whatever the limitations of its own ideological position – which are real enough, if perhaps too much taken for granted, at the expense of recognizing the genuine historical and sociological insight that the *Recherche* achieves – perspicaciously maps the dominant site of class struggle under the pre-war Third Republic. The *Recherche* is, in this sense, to be understood as a theory of French society at a decisive moment in its history, an analytical instrument for comprehending the structural conditions that constrained the two major fractions among France's hegemonic classes from the fall of Sedan and the Commune's suppression to the Versailles Treaty.

This is not to suggest that the *Recherche* is entirely exogenous to the domain of ideology. Theories can be at once ideological, viz., products of distinctive socio-historical conditions, and scientific, viz., means for producing knowledge – a point I take in general from Althusser. Be it observed, however, that I differ from him and from Pierre Macherey in attributing a knowledge-producing function to works of art – or at least one highly elaborated work. The delicate relationship between scientific and ideological aspects of a theory cannot be determined in advance of reading; *vide* Althusser's own extraordinary labors over Marx's texts, in particular his contributions to *Reading "Capital"*. My own sense of the theoretical import that literary texts possess is close to the following formulation of the youthful Paul de Man: "if literature cannot be acknowledged as a scientific means of formation, it can still, from a sociological viewpoint, at the very least go together with theoretical research and, in many cases, open up horizons and offer possibilities which otherwise would never have been suspected."⁷ Whether my account of the *Recherche* adequately discriminates between the distinctive features of scientific knowledge and those of ideology is left for the reader to judge.

That Proust's novel also forecasts something of the future

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that lay beyond its historical horizon, as Walter Benjamin once observed in a much neglected *aperçu*, I hold out as a final possibility, implied but barely argued for here. Proust not only diagnosed the causes for the ultimate demise of the French aristocracy; he also discerned the contradictions in and the historical contingency of bourgeois hegemony. Such is my ultimate hypothesis.

A word about the methodological problems inherent in treating literary texts as windows on the history of social formations. No serious historian would take Proust's *Recherche* to be a wholly adequate account of the structures dominating the social and political world under the Third Republic. Nor would literary historians, on balance, regard the history of Proust's era as an unfailing guide to the poetic specificity of Proust's narrative. At the same time, one regularly encounters in historical writing references to novelists' telling depictions of certain social strata and their typical identities and activities. The question remains, however, about the degree to which fictional representations of social classes – or even historical individuals – are any more than poetically motivated, that is, governed by the constitutive structures of plot and character that the text's aesthetic norms have dictated.

To those in literature who have doubts about the pertinence of historical knowledge to comprehending literary artifacts, one can reply in two ways. First, in even the most astringently formalist accounts of literature, say those of the Russian Formalists or Greimas or Michael Riffaterre, there persists some dimension of historicity, either on the level of literary history itself (in the theory of genres, for example), or in the assignment of cultural values to particular characters or plots. One thinks of Barthes's insistence in *S/Z* on the importance of what he calls the referential or cultural code in *Sarrasine*. This code is grounded in the punctual facts of social life experienced by Balzac in the shifting circumstances of French history from the Empire's fall through the Restoration and into the July Monarchy. In all formalisms, while literary explanation is rarely in the first instance, and never finally, controlled by historical causes exogenous to the text, history invariably

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creeps in via some back door or other to assert its influence on a given work's specificity.

To say this much already suggests the terms of the second riposte to those who doubt that historical explanation can play a decisive role in literary understanding. For it is clear, even to the most intransigent defenders of literature's aesthetic autonomy, that texts arise from and take their place in history. No one before Jane Austen had written a text like *Emma*, and while others since have perhaps imitated her fictional practice in certain ways (one thinks of *Howard's End* or of Meredith's country house novels, notably *The Egoist*), no one to my knowledge has reproduced the particular brand of social comedy dependent upon a comparatively secure set of socio-moral conventions embraced by a broad spectrum of the propertied and professional classes that is so distinctive a feature of her fiction. Jane Austen is not the sole English novelist to have written primarily about the rural gentry, but the confidence and equipoise with which this world is presented in her novels – the only notable exception being *Mansfield Park*, although even there the ordered society of the well-managed country estate is restored in the end – are scarcely available in English fiction prior to the last decades of the eighteenth century. They survive, if at all, only in some of Trollope's Barchester novels.⁸ The point here is not only that the material social facts appearing in Jane Austen's texts are historical – characters who ride on horseback or in coaches, dress and furnishings that evidence a specific period style, modes of speech now archaic or at least stilted to the modern ear – but that the historical situation of the classes about which she writes determines the very form of her fiction. To present the rural gentry in this way after 1832 was all but impossible – as, for instance, George Eliot's major novels from *Adam Bede* to *Middlemarch* amply attest. One could therefore hazard the opinion that there have never been any but historical novels (and poems and plays), whether novelists themselves have always been aware of this fact or not. My strong suspicion is that they mostly are, even if certain modes of literary criticism and scholarship have tried to strip them of just this self-awareness about their craft.

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The objections of the historian are, in my view, more consequent, although they are precisely the ones professional students of literature characteristically ignore or finesse. Is it at all licit, one might ask, to read off the historical reality of a given society from one or more of its familiar cultural productions? The easy negative answer, which one ought to retain as a control mechanism over one's research, may, however, conceal certain methodological problems in the human sciences that have recently been much discussed in several disciplines (ethnography most prominently). To some degree in what follows, it will appear that I have simply deployed information and hypotheses drawn from political, economic, and social histories of the Third Republic to explain some of Proust's novel's salient features. But in other respects, I have tried to utilize the fictional text to illuminate more fully those aspects of social life during the *belle époque* and just before that have remained underdeveloped in standard historical writings on the period, ideology in particular. On this level of the social formation, Proust offers perhaps a more reliable, and certainly a more detailed and nuanced, guide than the historians. But this is at best a plausible hypothesis. It is, in any event, testable. Others can compare the work of social and cultural historians with the *Recherche* to determine whether the latter's account of ideological conflicts is both warrantable on the evidence and superior in conception and explanatory power to other explanations of the same phenomena.

No one has ever doubted that Proust observed his society acutely. I am proposing that he cogently and powerfully theorized its fundamental structures as well. On this account, it would not be wrong to draw the analogy between Proust's fictional project and its object that Zola did for his own: the "experiment" performed by each was, in the first instance, an empirical scientific one.⁹ In both cases the distant objective of changing the world was made to hinge on the prior and necessary (if insufficient) condition of interpreting and thereby understanding it.

Such a view moves in exactly the opposite direction to standard accounts of Proust's work. J. M. Cocking's summary

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observations concerning Proust's relation to contemporary politics are characteristic in this regard:

Apart from [Proust's] comments on class reactions to the Affair, where the interest is sociological in very general terms but not specifically political, there is not much historical reference in the novel; nor is there much to be found in the letters in this selection. He sometimes comments on day-to-day events as any intelligent reader of *Le Figaro* might do. But there is no sign of awareness of the major political changes in the Third Republic: the definitive political victory of the bourgeoisie, the increased influence of the financiers and the industrialists, the establishment of Radicalism as the majority political attitude, with lip-service to the Revolution and the Nation, hostility to aristocracy, Church, and Army, and real interest in wealth and material prosperity. Unlike Balzac, Proust is not much interested in the economic mechanisms of social change, only in the repercussions of such change on social groupings, conventions, and rituals.¹⁰

That Proust was "aware" of these epochal changes and that the *Recherche* does indeed present "signs" of this fact, I shall endeavor to show in what follows. But Cocking's instinct is nonetheless sure in marking the distinction between the overt representational figures in Proust's text and those in Balzac.

Are we then to infer, as most readers of the novel have done, that the *Recherche* is not about society at all, save in the most superficial and general sense? All texts manifest silences for which one must account. The *Recherche* is no exception. If it never stops talking about society in terms of snobbery, homosexuality, and manners, it is yet remarkably reticent about the underlying mechanisms that produce the material abundance signified by the leisured classes' salons, dinners, travel, and holidays. We cannot brusquely ignore this massive silence, but neither ought we to dismiss it as simple lack of interest or even ignorance. No text knows everything, but like Marcel, who characteristically conceals the full extent of his knowledge from other characters, the *Recherche* often knows more than it lets on.

One way to get beyond the novel's presentational surface is to think through its principal ideological coordinates, which derive from what Marx identified as "the fetishism of commodities," or what we might term the ordinary mystifications