

# The Subversion of History: The Dreyfus Affair in *A la recherche du temps perdu*

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In *Le temps retrouvé*, Proust's narrator discovers his vocation and sets forth the theory of art that will shape his novel. Rejecting realism ("une littérature de notations"),<sup>1</sup> the narrator declares that the value of a work is not determined by the significance of the events that inspired it: ". . . un chant d'oiseau dans le parc de Montboissier, ou une brise chargée de l'odeur de réséda, sont évidemment des événements de moindre conséquence que les plus grandes dates de la Révolution et l'Empire. Ils ont cependant inspiré à Chateaubriand . . . des pages d'une valeur infiniment plus grande" (III, 728). Coming near the end of a novel that sprang from a cup of tea, this explication of the relative insignificance of public history to the artist is by no means astonishing. What is more remarkable, given Proust's aesthetics, is that he does not propose that the novel neglect history. One has only to compare *A la recherche du temps perdu* with Hermann Hesse's *Siddharta* (1922), André Gide's *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* (1925), or Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), to sense the difference between Proust and those contemporaries of his whose novels portray a world isolated from wars and politics. In *A la recherche*, both the Dreyfus Affair and World War I have an important place. Well aware of what these events have cost his society, the narrator argues that two sorts of people reject public affairs: "Tout en bas, les purs sots . . . ne s'occupaient pas qu'il y eût la guerre. Mais tout en haut, ceux qui se sont fait une vie intérieure ambiante ont peu égard à l'importance des événements" (III, 728). One of the great themes of *A la recherche* is the narrator's creation of an "ambient interior life" in the midst of social change and political disaster. Rather than ignoring "les plus grandes dates," the novel subverts them: to trace the course of the Dreyfus Affair in *A la recherche* is to see the process that transforms a major political catastrophe into a phase in artistic development, that assimilates a public event to a consciousness that ends by rejecting such events.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), III, 894. Subsequent references to this edition are in the text.

<sup>2</sup>Marta Rivas, in *Un Mito Proustiano* (Santiago de Chile: Prensas de la Editorial Universitaria, S.A., 1968), argues that the Dreyfus Affair "differe del caracter de los hechos en la realidad" (p. 16) and becomes a Proustian myth, "una de las . . . quizás metáforas . . . que cruzan . . . *La Recherche*" (p. 29). Her monograph is the fullest and most sophisticated treatment of the Dreyfus material in *A la recherche*. In addition to the works cited below, there are numerous treatments of Proust's—or his characters'—views of the Affair, among them "The Dreyfus Case," in Richard Barker's *Marcel Proust: A Biography* (New York: Criterion Books, 1958), pp. 77-92, and "L'Affaire," in André Maurois, *A la recherche de Marcel Proust* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1949), pp. 85-92. "Social Contexts: Observations and Inventions," in Leo Bersani's *Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and Art* (New York: Oxford, 1965); pp. 139-98, is helpful, although Dreyfus is mentioned only on pp. 183, 184. For "Proust et la politique," see Jean-François Revel, *Sur Proust*, (Paris: René Julliard, 1960), pp. 103-28. Proust's relation to the Affair is treated briefly in Henri Peyre's "The Trial of Alfred Dreyfus," in *Six Trials*, ed. Robert A. Brumbaugh (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1969), pp. 60-91. Among studies of the intellectual history of the Dreyfus era, Micheline Tison-Braun, *La Crise de l'humanisme*, 2 vols. (Paris: Nizet, 1958, 1967) and H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society* (New York: Knopf, 1958), are indispensable.

For Proust and his narrator, the Dreyfus Affair was the major political issue of a lifetime. The sudden arrest of a high-ranking Army officer, the glimpses into the machinery of peacetime espionage, the talk of secret dossiers, the public degradation of the convicted man, his solitary imprisonment on Devil's Island, his vindication—these are the elements of popular fiction: writing to Madame Strauss of Dreyfus's rehabilitation, Proust remarked: "Il est curieux de penser que pour une fois la vie—qui l'est si peu—est romanesque."<sup>3</sup> This *cause célèbre* had an additional significance for Proust. Since he was also Catholic, an army veteran, and a friend of the anti-Semite Leon Daudet, it was not easy for him to identify with the Dreyfusists; Sidéry<sup>4</sup> and Brée<sup>5</sup> point to the painful confrontation with Proust's own Jewishness the Affair provoked. It is easy to agree with Brée that the Affair forced Proust to "affronter la question juive, absente ou à peu près de *Jean Santeuil*, et qui est centrale dans *La Recherche*" (Brée, p. 19).

Brée has written a sensitive analysis of the Affair in *Jean Santeuil*. She argues that the Affair should not be seen simply as a "réactif moral de la belle époque" but in terms of "l'effort d'intégrer à son roman une réalité . . . irréductible au thème social du monde tel qu'il l'avait esquissé" that profoundly modified "non seulement son optique sur son temps, mais l'idée même qu'il se faisait de la relation entre l'oeuvre littéraire et la réalité" (p. 19). In this early novel the Dreyfus Affair is, along with the Panama Affair and the Armenian massacres, one of three public events that occupy the narrator's attention. Despite the interest in psychological analysis, the chapters treating the Affair seem isolated, distant from Jean's concerns. Pointing out that Jean is less engaged in the pro-Dreyfus movement than Proust was, and that he chose "d'éliminer la polarisation 'romanesque,' optant pour la vision esthétique, en artiste et non en partisan" (p. 14), Brée shows that the problem of assimilating public reality to the artistic consciousness is recognized even in *Jean Santeuil*.

However "irreducible" the Affair may have seemed to Proust when he wrote his first novel, he did not choose to exclude it from his second; indeed, there are more than sixty references to the Affair in *A la recherche*. Although most of them are in *Le Côté de Guermantes* and *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, every volume except *Du Côté de chez Swann* has at least two. Nearly two dozen men who figured in the various trials and movements are mentioned by name, though they are never on stage as they were in *Jean Santeuil*, and consequently, there is never the concentrated attention to the Affair which was displayed in the early novel, with its descriptions of Boisdeffre and Picquart at the Zola trial. Instead, one learns about the Affair in fragments, from conversations, and from the narrator's reflections. Our immediate attention, then, is focused on the meaning of the Affair for the characters; any more general significance must be reflected through them.

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<sup>3</sup>Paul Brach et Suzy Proust-Mante, eds., *Correspondance générale de Marcel Proust* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1936), VI, p. 48. Cited in English translation by Harry Levin, *The Gates of Horn* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 420.

<sup>4</sup>Sherban Sidéry, "Israel's Way," in *Marcel Proust: A Centenary Volume*, ed. Peter Quennell (London: George Wiedenfeld and Nicolson Limited, 1971), pp. 79-102.

<sup>5</sup>Germaine Brée, "Proust et l'Affaire Dreyfus, à la lumière de *Jean Santeuil*," in *Marcel Proust: A Critical Panorama*, ed. Larkin B. Price (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973), pp. 1-23. Subsequent references to this essay are in the text.

Proust, as Delhorbe says, has given an opinion about Dreyfus to almost every major character in his novel.<sup>6</sup> The party speeches sound much like those reported in Paléologue's *Journal de l'Affaire Dreyfus*.<sup>7</sup> Like Brunetière in the *Journal*, the Duc de Guermantes objects to the neologism "intellectual," while Norpois, exclaiming "La France dans son immense majorité désire le travail dans l'ordre" (II, 246), echoes Bourget quoting Goethe: "J'aime mieux une injustice qu'un désordre" (Paléologue, p. 187). Such conversations delineate character (e.g., the development of Oriane's witty cruelty). In an early incarnation, at Madame de Saint-Euverte's soirée in *Un Amour de Swann*, she makes uncharitable remarks about her hostess, formulates a scatological pun on Madame Cambremer's name, and wonders out loud what her fellow guests do when they're not attending Madame de Saint-Euverte's parties. Her preciosity seems little more than an example of "l'esprit des Guermantes" (I, 340), her unkindness to her poor relatives offset by her defense of Swann when Madame de Gallardon (I, 334) expresses horror at the presence of a Jew "chez la soeur et la belle-soeur de deux archevêques." In *Le Côté de Guermantes* her preciosity reveals her incomprehension of suffering: "En tous cas, si ce Dreyfus est innocent . . . il ne le prouve guère. Quelles lettres idiotes . . . il écrit de son île!" (II, 239). On the last pages of the same volume, in the famous scene, Swann comes to tell her that he is dying, but she, unsure of what the "codes des convenances" say about choosing between a party and a dying friend, turns his message into a joke: "'Vous voulez plaisanter?'" (II, 595). In the end, she is more upset at having neglected to change into her red shoes (II, 597) than by Swann's illness. The party for which she neglects him is given by Madame de Saint-Euverte; anti-Semitism now forbids Swann to visit the sister and sister-in-law of two archbishops. In effect, the *Affair* mediates between the two scenes. It is an integral part of the novel's psychological analysis; a character who jokes about the suffering of a public figure cannot respond differently to a friend.

Indeed, Proust argues that public and private behavior are essentially the same because they are shaped by the same psychology. The argument is explicit in *Le Côté de Guermantes* when the narrator explains how public opinion was formed in prewar Germany and adds: "Les historiens, s'ils n'ont pas eu tort de renoncer à expliquer les actes des peuples par la volonté des rois, doivent la remplacer par la psychologie . . . de l'individu médiocre" (II, 406). However susceptible one's political opinions are of being defended logically, they are always conditioned by his needs, class, or race. Charlus's anti-Semitism is extreme enough for him to argue that a Jew cannot be French, but his discussion with the narrator is deflected from Dreyfus to personal obsession; he proposes that Bloch and his father stage a fight, "une lutte . . . où il le blesserait comme David Goliath" (II, 288). Yet this pathological reaction varies only in degree from Norpois's need to equivocate, or from Saint-Loup's need, as a young man, to defy his nationalistic parents—a need which will later be replaced by the desire to conform: "'Je suis soldat et avant tout pour l'armée'" (II, 698).

Proust insists on the contradiction between the altruistic "manifest content" of Dreyfusist beliefs and their unacknowledged sources. The Jewish characters

<sup>6</sup>Cécile Delhorbe, *L'Affaire Dreyfus et les écrivains français* (Neuchâtel et Paris: Victor Attinger, 1932), p. 224. This is the first study of Proust and the *Affair*, and although marred by a tendency to read the novel as autobiography ("Swann qui est, on le sait par Proust lui-même, un certain M. Haas"; p. 225) provides an excellent treatment of the relationship of each of the major characters to the *Affair*. Rivas, "Proust, Moralista Social," pp. 71-86, is a similar survey of the characters' views.

<sup>7</sup>Georges Maurice Paléologue, *Journal de l'Affaire Dreyfus* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1955). A subsequent reference is in the text.

deceive themselves if they believe that they have chosen their views: "Bloch croyait avoir logiquement choisi son dreyfusisme, et savait pourtant que son nez, sa peau et ses cheveux lui avaient été imposés par sa race. . . . la raison est plus libre; elle obéit pourtant à certaines lois qu'elle ne s'est pas données" (II, 297).<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Joseph Reinach, who saw the Affair as a "théorème irréfutable," actually swayed the masses by emotional appeals (II, 297). Proust concludes that the philosophical systems that contain the greatest truths are dictated to their authors by "une raison de sentiment" and asks how one could possibly suppose "dans une simple affaire politique comme l'affaire Dreyfus" that "raisons de ce genre" could not, "à l'insu du raisonneur, gouverner sa raison" (II, 297). Given such insights, the novel avoids taking a high moral tone about any political view; the narrator criticizes even Swann for thinking that all of Dreyfus's supporters are high-minded and his opponents bigots. Swann's "aveuglement" seems comic, distorting even his literary judgment; in his last years Swann finds Clemenceau a great man who "sait sa langue"; Barrès, however, has lost his talent (II, 582).

The narrator who makes these judgments ordinarily avoids politics. In a characteristic scene in *La Prisonnière*, several years after the Affair, the Duc and Duchesse de Guermantes revive it in a quarrel (III, 42) and the narrator says: "Je sentais que cela allait se gêter et je me remis précipitamment à parler robes." Nonetheless, he is not really neutral, indicating that he signed a petition demanding a new trial for Dreyfus (II, 152), that Swann had been given to see "une vérité" (II, 582) hidden from his anti-Dreyfus friends, that the "trois dames charmantes" who converted the Duc de Guermantes to Dreyfusism were "messagères de vérité" (II, 740). These scattered signs of pro-Dreyfus sentiment help us to assess the narrator's usual aloofness. Taking for granted the general correctness of Dreyfusism, the narrator is not so frivolous as one might suppose; if he would rather talk about dresses than rehash political arguments, it is because the interest of the case does not lie in details, but in the general laws about political behavior that it exposes.

One such law proclaims the instability of all political "truths." Not only do people like the Duke keep changing their minds, not only do people like the Duchess refuse to draw logical conclusions, not only do bad people, such as Madame Verdurin, hold "correct" positions, but there is the whole problem of finding and analyzing "facts." Bloch was wrong when he questioned Norpois in the hope of finding new facts about the Affair, for even when documents figure in an issue, they seldom mean more than X-ray films to a physician; both are elements that must be judged in terms of many others. Henry's confession and suicide, "fut aussitôt interprété de façon opposée par des ministres dreyfusards et par Cavaignac et Cuignet qui avaient eux-mêmes fait la découverte du faux et conduit l'interrogatoire; bien plus, parmi les ministres dreyfusards eux-mêmes, et de même nuance, jugeant non seulement sur les mêmes pièces mais dans le même esprit, le rôle d'Henry fut expliqué de façon entièrement opposée, les uns voyant en lui un complice d'Esterhazy, les autres assignant au contraire ce rôle à du Paty de Clam, se ralliant ainsi à une thèse de leur adversaire Cuignet et étant en complète opposition avec leur partisan Reinach" (II, 242).

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<sup>8</sup>Racial theories of the Dreyfus period, which seem ominous to us, were in fact popular among Dreyfus's supporters. For a discussion of this issue see Michael Marrus, *The Politics of Assimilation: A Study of the French Jewish Community at the Time of the Dreyfus Affair* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971). The subject is also treated in the "Israel-sur-Seine" chapter of Seth Wolitz, *The Proustian Community* (New York: New York University Press, 1971), pp. 143-209.

Instability of opinion, unreliability of facts: no wonder that politics disrupt social order, that "les mondains qui ne veulent pas laisser la politique s'introduire dans le monde sont aussi prévoyants que les militaires qui ne veulent pas laisser la politique pénétrer dans l'armée" (III, 235). As Riva says, the Affair "is probably more important than time itself" in the "evolution of social attitude" in Proust's novel.<sup>9</sup> Overcoming her latent anti-Semitism (II, 252), Madame Verdurin emerges as the chief hostess of such supporters of Dreyfus as Labori, Reinach, Picquart, Clemenceau, and Zola.<sup>10</sup> Dreyfus vindicated, Madame Verdurin also triumphs: "L'affaire Dreyfus avait passé, Anatole France lui restait" (III, 236). The aristocracy, which has staked its prestige on the nationalists ("quand on s'appelle le marquis de Saint-Loup, on n'est pas dreyfusard"), fares less well (II, 235). After Mme de Villeparisis's *matinée*, Charlus lectures the narrator about the folly of receiving unknowns merely because they belong to the anti-Semitic Ligue de la Patrie Française, "comme si une opinion politique donnait droit à une qualification sociale" (II, 290). His views are ignored, and long after the Affair the mediocrities continue to be invited. The Dreyfus Affair, then, has two consequences for the narrator's view of society: it intensifies his disillusionment with the Guermantes and reveals the instability of a world that had appealed to his imagination because of its apparent continuity with the distant past. The links between Proust's aesthetic and this "apprenticeship" to society, which Deleuze<sup>11</sup> and Zima<sup>12</sup> analyze, owe a great deal to the Affair.

Since the Affair is one of many threads that lead to the affirmation of his vocation, the narrator is always aware of the language people use when they discuss it. Proust's ear for political clichés is revealed, for example, in Norpois's dialogue with Bloch, where there are "pêcheurs en eau trouble" (II, 246), liberals who want to "enfoncer une porte ouverte" (II, 245), where hell is paved with "bonnes intentions" (II, 245), and the socialist party demands Paty de Clam's head "à cor et à cri" (II, 245). Justice is "Dame Justice," France is "la douce France," and the matter of reviewing Dreyfus's sentence is "la bouteille à l'encre" (II, 245). The French people must avoid their unfortunate tendency to slander themselves; they must not "rester sourds" to their nation's "patriotic appel" (II, 245).

The narrator relates this stereotyped and debased language to the characters' inability to develop their political ideas independently. Certain usages, like certain diseases, spring up once and are never heard of again (II, 236); both Bloch and the Duke, at the time of the Affair, are addicted to the phrase, "quand on s'appelle." In spite of the Duke's scorn of Dreyfusist neologisms and his fondness for phrases that he thinks are "ancien régime" (II, 238), he unconsciously obeys a law of language that makes a person express himself according to his mental class rather than his "caste d'origine" (II, 236). Although the Duke changes his opinions, his language remains the same; he cannot talk about the Affair without the phrase "bel et bien": "Cinq ans

<sup>9</sup>Raymond T. Riva, *Marcel Proust: A Guide to the Main Recurrent Themes* (New York: Exposition Press, 1965), p. 206.

<sup>10</sup>Delhorbe regards this reference to Mme. Verdurin's anti-Semitism as a lapsus. Given the instability of the other characters' views, this seems unnecessary.

<sup>11</sup>Gilles Deleuze, *Proust et les signes*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1971).

<sup>12</sup>Pierre V. Zima, *Le Désir du mythe: Une lecture sociologique de Marcel Proust* (Paris: Nizet, 1973). Zima's work, a Goldmannesque attempt to derive Proust's aesthetic from the social vision of the snob, who longs for the "prestige factice, irréel d'une noblesse déchue, inexistante sur le plan économique et politique," argues that the Affair has no importance in *A la recherche* apart from its relationship to the narrator's *snobisme* (p. 22). A subsequent reference to this work is in the text.

pouvaient passer sans qu'on entendit 'bel et bien,' si pendant ce temps on ne parlait pas de l'affaire Dreyfus, mais si, les cinq ans passés, le nom de Dreyfus revenait, aussitôt 'bel et bien' arrivait automatiquement" (III, 40).

The narrator decries not only the ugliness of political language, but its imprecision, which suits it to the politician's lies. After commenting on the language of diplomacy, where "causer" means "offrir," he compares it to the language of kept women. Ordinary people cannot understand the need to seek out the motives for the most innocent-seeming words. But any man about to pay a woman knows that when she says, "Ne parlons pas d'argent," these words have to be taken as a "mesure pour rien" (II, 260). Whores, society women, Apaches, diplomats, and nations: in the narrator's view, they demonstrate a common need to ignore the real meaning of words as they are "des êtres d'égoïsme et de ruse" (II, 261). These reflections sharply distinguish the narrator from the Duchesse de Guermantes. Both are sensitive to language, but Oriane's sensitivity ("quelles lettres idiotes!") is empty of moral concern; the narrator's, on the other hand, is always directed at establishing the relationship between a person's language and his character.

The narrator's concern with political language, which Proust would have us distinguish from that of the Duchess, nonetheless demonstrates a willingness to judge life by the standards of art. The process by which the Affair is integrated into the novel deforms it, and often blurs distinctions between the real and fictional worlds. Without sharing Zima's conclusions that Proust reduces it to an "épiphénomène du snobisme" (Zima, p. 37), we can agree that we often lose sight of the colorful "procès réel" of *Jean Santeuil*. By leaving the Affair offstage and by emphasizing certain aspects, such as its effects on the society of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, to the detriment of others, Proust makes public life less vivid than the private lives of his characters. Anatole France and Emile Zola are faceless guests of Madame Verdurin, far less present to the reader's imagination than their fictional hostess. The highly disjunctive chronology imposed by the fragmentation and incompleteness of the narrative distorts our perception of time: only the most painstaking scholar could reconstruct the sequence of events in Dreyfus's life from a reading of *A la recherche*. Thus even scenes that are set in the 1890s suggest that the novel values the Affair more for its symbolic significance than for its dramatic value as an historical event.

One of the first indications of the symbolic role of the Affair is its ubiquity. Although Proust devotes most of his attention to the reactions of *le monde*, he demonstrates that these reactions are not unique. Significantly, the first group of people with whom the narrator discusses the Affair are Saint-Loup's fellow officers at Doncières, who, like the Guermantes, owe their ardent nationalism more to class loyalty than to a rational assessment of the evidence. Describing the officers, Proust makes the essential comparison obvious: ". . . mon voisin avait fait à Saint-Loup la politesse de lui dire—du ton dont une dame catholique annonce à une dame juive que son curé blâme les massacres de Juifs en Russie et admire la générosité de certains israélites—que le colonel n'était pas pour le dreyfusisme—pour un certain dreyfusisme au moins—l'adversaire fanatique . . . qu'on avait représenté (II, 108, 109). The quarrel between Françoise and the Guermantes' butler, in which the narrator discovers "la conversation qu'avaient échangée . . . Bloch et Monsieur de Norpois, mais sous une forme brève, invertie, et cruelle" (II, 296) points to the same conclusion, that at every level of society political opinions resemble each other.

The narrator's willingness to generalize extends beyond his attempt to link the Guermantes and their circle to military officers and servants. In the years after Dreyfus's rehabilitation, the Affair comes to stand for the whole question of political action, just as the story of Swann and Odette comes to symbolize romantic love. Concerned to show that the love story exists, as Lévi-Strauss says of myth, in "reversible time,"<sup>13</sup> the narrator multiplies allusions to it: his own love for his mother and for Albertine, Robert Saint-Loup's for Rachel, and Charlus's for Morel, are all characterized with some variant of the formula, "c'était comme Swann, quand il aimait Odette" (I, p. 30; II, p. 1121; II, p. 1123; II, p. 1058; II, p. 1059). Similar allusions to the Affair keep it alive: in *Le Temps retrouvé*, Gilberte's marriage to Saint-Loup, like the Dreyfus Affair, is no longer "shocking" (III, 727), but, like it has been "intégré dans une série de choses respectables et habituelles;" the word "bloche," like the words "dreyfusard" and "antidreyfusard," will eventually be a linguistic curiosity, like "sans-culotte," "chouan," and "bleu" (III, 728).

Indeed, when World War I breaks out, the emotions it generates are frequently compared to those of the Dreyfus period. The Duke reverses his opinion of Caillaux after meeting an English military attaché, just as he had changed his opinion of Dreyfus after meeting the "trois dames charmantes" (III, 782). The Guermantes' butler tortures Françoise about the imminent invasion of France as he had tortured her about the expulsion of nuns during the Dreyfus era; Charlus, for whom his seventeenth-century ancestors are more real than his contemporaries, finds both war and Affair "des modes vulgaires et fugitives" (III, 800). The narrator makes the comparison explicit, not only when he points to the transitory nature of wartime passions, but when he returns to the critique of political facts: "J'avais vu dans l'affaire Dreyfus, pendant la guerre, croire que la vérité est un certain fait, que les ministres possèdent . . . qui fait que les gens du pouvoir *savaient* si Dreyfus était coupable, *savaient* . . . si Sarraïl avait ou non les moyens de marcher en même temps que les Russes" (Proust's italics; III, 914, 915).

World War I, then, is assimilated to the Affair through the similarity of the language and emotions it generates; more importantly, the two events shape the narrator's convictions about the artist's social role. These convictions, implicit in the criticisms of political sentiment and in the avoidance of great political "moments," become explicit in the latter half of *Le Temps retrouvé*, in which the narrator repeatedly insists that people have forgotten the Affair and will forget the war.

Like the disillusionment with travel and love the disillusionment with politics reveals "l'impuissance que nous avons à nous réaliser . . . dans l'action effective" (III, 877). The famous privileged moments liberate the narrator from some of the literary theories that had once troubled him, "notamment celles que la critique avait développées au moment de l'affaire Dreyfus et avait reprises pendant la guerre" (III, 881). These theories, which urge the writer to abandon frivolous themes in favor of ideologically correct ones, which value life over style (III, 882), miss the point that reality resides, not in appearance, but at a depth where appearance matters little. The writer's task is to decipher "le livre intérieur des signes inconnus," and politics are only a distraction; "chaque événement, que ce fût l'affaire Dreyfus, que ce fût la

<sup>13</sup>Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobsen and Brooke Grundfest Schaepl (New York: Doubleday-Anchor, 1967), p. 205.

guerre, avait fourni d'autres excuses aux écrivains pour ne pas déchiffrer ce livre-là; ils voulaient assurer le triomphe du Droit, refaire l'unité morale de la nation, n'avaient pas le temps de penser à la littérature" (III, 879).

In the final pages of the novel the narrator turns from his devastated world to the timeless world of art. As the major public event in the novel, the Dreyfus Affair has been made to illustrate the ugliness of public discourse, the baseness of political motivation, and the futility of positive action; its chief significance for the narrator seems to be that it justifies his rejection of political commitment. Many novelists who reject engagement leave politics out of their novels, but Proust succeeded in a more difficult task: subverting history, he shapes the great political crisis of his own lifetime so that, within the novel, it testifies to its own insignificance. It is hardly necessary to note that outside the novel the Dreyfus affair did not end like a fairy tale, and that unlike most political crises, this one seems if anything more ominous to us than it did to the people who lived through it. As the result of one of those remarkable historical reversals that we almost automatically label "Proustian," the parts of the novel that chronicle the cynicism and moral insensitivity of the opposing factions have remained fresh, while the moving conclusion, with its solace that few contemporary readers can share, seems to belong to an irrecoverable past.