

Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

Volume 39

Issue 2 *Testimonies of Environmental Injustice
in the Global South*

Article 13

2015

Edward J. Hughes. *Proust, Class, & Nation*. Oxford, New York:
Oxford UP, 2011. xiii + 287 pp.

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Recommended Citation

Soldin, Adeline (2015) "Edward J. Hughes. *Proust, Class, & Nation*. Oxford, New York: Oxford UP, 2011. xiii + 287 pp.," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 39: Iss. 2, Article 13. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1856>

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Abstract

Review of Edward J. Hughes. *Proust, Class, & Nation*. Oxford, New York: Oxford UP, 2011. xiii + 287 pp.

Keywords

Marcel Proust, A la recherche du temps perdu, In Search of Lost Time, social class, nation

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Edward J. Hughes's *Proust, Class, & Nation* offers a detailed and nuanced examination of Marcel Proust's views on class identity and national politics as well as his portrayal of such issues in his literary work. His close readings of *A la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*) and astute analyses illuminate the priority given to topics ranging from national debates and contemporary politics to social change and class antagonism. Although the reader must wait patiently until the end to discover his central argument, Hughes ultimately claims that, having written and revised *la Recherche* over two decades of war, social upheaval, and political reformation, Proust produced a "hybrid text" (263): one in which criticism and admiration for a single class identity or national viewpoint juxtapose one another in the same passage.

Before delving into the rich web of perspectives and scenarios illustrated in Proust's oeuvre, Hughes surveys the political landscape in France during the transformative years of the Third Republic. Chapter one's inquiry, "On the Nation and its Culture," includes an exploration of Proust's attitudes on important socio-political matters of his day and how they compare to those of other public figures. Hughes acknowledges that he is not the first critic to suggest that the author of *la Recherche* eschews espousing specific political parties or expressing partisan opinions on many issues, save the Dreyfus affair and the effort to separate Church and State. However, in his explanation of why Proust refused to put any particular movement's agenda before his own personal ambitions, Hughes appeals not only to ideological reasoning, but aesthetic as well, claiming that Proust "recoiled from the highly rhetorical posturing inherent in the very genre of the manifesto" (23). Drawing on his correspondence as well as his critical and fictional writings, Hughes observes such subtleties throughout his study.

In chapter 2, "Contexts for Class," Hughes situates the author alongside key contemporary writers, namely Paul Bourget, Daniel Halévy, and John Ruskin, in terms of their social and political activism. Demonstrating the author's reticence to endorse particular social movements unequivocally in his work, Hughes lays the foundation to show that Proust's literature nevertheless exposes the reader to the intricacies of the social caste system of *Belle Époque* France. Chapter 3, "Taste in *Un amour de Swann*," formally orients his study to focus more deliberately on *la Recherche*. In a comprehensive evaluation of the diverging outlooks on taste and style as representative of characters' social milieu, he makes several innovative assertions concerning the Narrator's seemingly objective point of view in this section and how it relates to the forthcoming disruptions in the text's social hierarchy. Next, Hughes considers the social mingling and confusion that take place at the seaside resort in Balbec where

traditional indicators and divisions of class malfunction. If the complexity of class identity is not already evident, chapter 4, “Balbec: A new sociality,” exposes the multifaceted and polyvalent relations that occur, not only between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, but also among these groups and the working class. In fact, *Proust, Class, & Nation* brings much needed attention to the significance of the proletariat in *la Recherche* to the corpus of Proustian criticism. For instance, the simple reflection that the Narrator often introduces the subaltern into the conversation with a *même* ‘even’ hints at the upper-class position from which he speaks (145).

The fifth chapter, “Frames, Languages, Judgements,” compiles episodes in which the Narrator objectifies, stereotypes (based on speech), or otherwise deems members of different classes to be representative of the whole. Studying examples from the third, fourth, and fifth volumes of *la Recherche*, Hughes is attentive to intersections of gender and class in both the Narrator’s and Marcel’s fetishization of the Other, (he rightfully distinguishes between the two characters throughout his work, differentiating both from the author as well). He develops further this assessment of power dynamics in chapter 6, “Masters, Laws, and Servants,” through the lens of Albertine’s departure and the ensuing investigation of her whereabouts and past. Hughes asserts convincingly that the Narrator’s depiction of these events reveals the impotence of Marcel’s cultural and financial authority in the face of social economies of exchange, which eventually isolate the hero from erotic encounters between members of the lower class. Though not his strongest chapter, “Hierarchies in *Le Temps retrouvé*,” resists the hackneyed approach of focusing on social transformations presented at the Princesse de Guermante’s *matinée*. Rather, Hughes proposes here that, alongside the art-as-redemption treatise, the Narrator’s interest in the general social fabric of his community represents a counter-discourse: one that draws the solipsistic artist’s attention away from the self, toward a “broader sociality, the Other, and mortality” (234). Although the lack of signposts has the reader speculating about links between subchapters at times, and even searching for an overarching argument, Hughes manages to tie most of the loose threads together in an impressive synthesis of extensive research.

In his final chapter, “Claims and Complaints,” Hughes brings the author’s contemporaries back into the discussion, starting with a look at French philosopher and novelist Julien Benda’s admiration of Proust for his circumvention of partisan identities and groups. While conceding the latter’s attempt to distance himself and his Narrator from politically charged viewpoints, Hughes claims that Proust’s espousal of a bourgeois perspective nonetheless permeates the range of political attitudes, remarks, and criticism that abound in *la Recherche*. Indeed, throughout his study, he documents both subtle and conspicuous indications of identity and politics that endure, metamorphose, and

contradict from one passage to the next. What is more, his analysis incorporates a genetic methodology throughout, drawing frequently on Allison Winton's *Proust's Additions* to elucidate the increased attention given not just to matters of class and nation, but specifically to tensions surrounding the social order (124). For all of its success in elucidating the preponderance of class issues in Proust's work, Hughes's monograph fails to give equal treatment to concerns of the nation.

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