

# Forgotten Gestures, Perennial Meanings

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There is no sense of the sacred in Proust, his thought is strictly atheistic,” Antoine Compagnon comments (180), adding that “There is neither God, nor devil in Proust” (181). He thus reinforces a conclusion drawn by many critics, although the paths leading to this conclusion are variable. For instance, Jean-François Revel states that

Proust is the first, and until now the only great writer of all literatures who is absolutely a-religious. He does not try to fight religion by means of a metaphysics that imitates it while rejecting it. . . . He is from the start beyond any prejudice, he cannot be suspected of any transcendental or moral residue. . . . He does neither fight religion, nor desecrate it (Voltaire would fight, Sade would desecrate): he ignores it. (22)<sup>1</sup>

The overwhelming number of such comments leads Jean Mouton to conclude that “[t]his absence of God is an observation on which all

those who studied Proust's spiritual life seem to agree" (23). It also seems that having once so agreed, critics could freely dismiss the problem of religion in Proust and focus on topics such as the obvious and somewhat disturbing presence of evil, cruelty, perversity, and grotesque sexual anecdotes.

However, this almost unanimous consensus regarding Proust's a-religion does not completely eliminate the possibility of a discussion of religious dimensions in his work. A few critics have examined such issues and noticed in *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–27) various religious elements, from glimpses of mysticism to Buddhism and Hinduism. However, for Barbara J. Bucknall, these elements are actually superficial: "since they form the basis for an art work which offers the only kind of escape from time seriously contemplated by Proust, they appear to be neither Christian nor Buddhist, but primarily aesthetic" (192).

There is also an approach that attempts almost to "redeem" Proust – in a religious sense. Mouton, for example, reveals biblical themes in *A la recherche du temps perdu*; he explores various writings in search of references to the liturgy, to communion, to Easter, and tries to balance the influence of a Catholic father and a Jewish mother on Proust. The results of his research are abundant. Proust did read the Bible and Saint Augustine, he was interested in Thomas à Kempis's *Imitatio Christi*, he did—as many Frenchmen who declare themselves Catholics—attend mass every now and then, and, as is well known, he did admire the beauty of medieval and Renaissance religious art and architecture. Moreover, critics point out that although Proust's mother was Jewish, she was careful not to serve meat to their Catholic guests on Friday.

One must note that this type of research may seem pertinent from a rather simplistic perspective, aiming only at evaluating Proust's sins and chances of redemption. But precisely because of its nature, this kind of research can only lead to disappointment. Mouton comments that, while there are biblical themes and references to Catholic rituals in Proust, they may actually distance the writer from religion. The glorious shine of a golden embroidered chasuble is attributed not to something pertaining to Catholicism, but to a chicken, roasted to perfection, with

its juices religiously gathered in a chalice-like receptacle. The famous kiss that the narrator as a child receives from his mother is likened to a “viaticum,” and this image still finds some charm in critical eyes; the narrator also designates this maternal kiss as a “holy wafer,” a “kiss of peace,” which, of course, recalls the Christian “osculum pacis,” the kiss of peace that Saint Paul refers to several times in his Epistles and sometimes designates a “love kiss.” Saints Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux are but two of many other Christian writers who discuss the spiritual meaning of the spiritual kiss as an exchange or intermingling of souls. Saint Bernard insists upon the presence of the “spiritual breath” in the sacred kiss, on the union of two souls that this “osculum” must achieve, and opposes it to a carnal and, therefore, sinful kiss.<sup>2</sup>

However, Mouton is rather indignant at the description of other kisses that Proust’s narrator, as an adult, receives from his promiscuous mistress, Albertine. These erotic kisses are associated by Proust with the maternal kiss he used to cherish as a child:

late every night, before leaving me, she used to slide her tongue between my lips like a portion of daily bread, a nourishing food that had the almost sacred character of all flesh upon which the sufferings that we have endured on its account have come in time to confer a sort of spiritual grace. (*Captive 2*)

Mouton underscores that, if such an image appears shocking, Proust himself writes that the association is “almost sacrilegious” (*Captive 2*).

Besides Proust’s somewhat paradoxical intermingling of the sacred and the sacrilegious, there are still numerous questions that remain unanswered for those who have tried to understand his spiritual life and religious practices. For instance, did Proust really pray, did he believe in an afterlife, was there a reason why he refers so rarely to Christ in *Recherche*, when he was generous in his correspondence, was it out of charity or out of simple sentimentality, and which of his declara-

<sup>2</sup>On the origin, functions, and evolution of the spiritual kiss, see Nicolas

tions should be taken as true: those in which he states that he does not believe in God, or those in which he seems to imply that he does believe in transcendence?

These questions remain open, possibly because a discussion of religion in Proust must begin with a more general, yet pertinent question: what religion? Or better, what was left of the traditional Catholic Church in France in Proust's time? The great division between France of the *Ancien Régime* and modern France contains the opposition between a Catholic France and an increasingly secular country. Although phenomena of secularization had begun long before the French Revolution, in 1791 and 1793 the *coup de grâce* was given to the Church: French priests were obliged to pledge loyalty to the civil constitution, thus submitting themselves not to the supreme authority of God but to that of the Republic, thereby becoming civil servants. The entire country was torn by this process, one that haunted, traumatized, and confused the Romantic generation which followed. Many historians consider this process a cultural revolution the sequel of which can be seen in all the subsequent issues that continue to divide France, such as the vote for integration into the European Union or the law banning religious symbols in public places. Back in 1793, some priests, called "les réfractaires," who refused to accept the civil contract, entered into a sort of "Résistance," accompanied by a part of the population who felt that ceremonies performed by the new "civil" priests had no legitimacy. For several years the government also pressured priests to marry, which was, of course, sacrilegious according to the tenets of the Catholic Church. Some priests abdicated, while others decided to continue following Catholic traditions secretly in spite of all the risks that such a decision presented. More than that, as Alfred de Musset deplores, France witnessed the desecration of all that had once had transcendent meaning: "[t]he communion, the holy wafer, this eternal symbol of sacred love, was used to seal letters; children would spit on the bread of God" (16).

The beautiful medieval churches that Proust would write about a century later were defaced, desecrated, closed, transformed into "Temples of Reason," and Catholicism was banned for about a decade. Some

churches were actually torn down, destroyed, as is the case of the church of Saint-Hilaire of Illiers, which Proust describes in detail and to which, though no longer existing, he grants a crucial place in the landscape of his childhood. At first, Proust exclaims, “How I loved our church, and how clearly I can see it still!” (*Swann’s Way* 68), referring to something that “can be seen” even though it is not there. Although the note in the Gallimard edition of *Du Côté de chez Swann* (1913) suggests that the narrator more than likely makes a mistake and actually describes a different church, one left undestroyed by the Revolution (478), the details of Proust’s description insist on the powerful presence of an absent church even when invisible, on its capacity to organize and regulate the entire life of nearby citizens, even when they cannot see it, to such an extent that the church becomes a metonymy for the whole town and its life; that is, Combray is the Church:

Combray at a distance, from a twenty-mile radius, as we used to see it from the railway when we arrived there in the week before Easter, was no more than a church epitomising the town, representing it, speaking of it and for it to the horizon, and as one drew near, gathering close about its long, dark cloak, sheltering from the wind, on the open plain, as a shepherdess gathers her sheep, the woolly grey backs of its huddled houses, which the remains of the medieval ramparts enclosed, here and there, in an outline scrupulously circular as that of a little town in a primitive painting. (*Swann’s Way* 56)

The narrator repeats in numerous instances the importance of the church in separating and organizing the space, in establishing significant time divisions. Such divisions of the temporal continuum anticipate some definitions of the sacred: both Roger Caillois and Mircea Eliade insist upon defining the sacred as a center, as something that attributes order and meaning to otherwise chaotic and heterogeneous time and space. Eliade opposes the perception of time and space from the perspective of the sacred (that is, as heterogeneous, meaningful, and organized around a center, a “*point fixe*”) and the “profane experi-

ence”: “On the contrary, for the profane existence, the space is homogeneous and neutral: there is no break that qualitatively distinguishes between the various parts of its mass” (26).

Proust’s depiction of the church and its steeple as well as the way time is constantly divided through religious events (such as Easter or the Sunday mass) underscore this heterogeneity of time and space and the organizing “presence of the church”:

It was the steeple of Saint-Hilaire that shaped and crowned and consecrated every occupation, every hour of the day, every view in the town. From my bedroom window I could discern no more than its base, which had been freshly covered with slates; but when, on a Sunday, I saw these blaze like a black sun in the hot light of a summer morning, I would say to myself: “Good heavens! Nine o’clock! I must get ready for mass at once if I am to have time to go in and kiss aunt Léonie first.” (*Swann’s Way* 75)

The church is a permanent visible presence, although even here, it cannot be seen in its entirety; moreover, Proust refers to it as a negative sign, “a black sun.” However, the narrator recollects that even when out of sight, this church still guides villagers and directs their lives:

Even when our errands lay in places behind the church, from which it could not be seen, the view seemed always to have been composed with reference to the steeple, which would loom up here and there among the houses, and was perhaps even more affecting when it appeared thus without the church. (76)<sup>3</sup>

In what seems a conclusion, Proust adds that, no matter what, one was ineluctably attracted to the church:

[I]t was always to the steeple that one must return, always the

<sup>3</sup>Interestingly, when talking about the ubiquitous presence of this religious symbol, Proust uses the word “revolution,” referring to the steeple as “a solid body surprised at some unknown point in its revolution” (*Swann’s Way* 77).

steeple that dominated everything else, summoning the houses from an unexpected pinnacle, raised before me like the finger of God, whose body might have been concealed below among the crowd of humans without fear of my confusing it with them, always the steeple that dominated everything. (77)

This insistence on the steeple as a meaningful spiritual center that organizes chaos and guides even when it cannot be seen, as a “*point fixe*” in the narrator’s wanderings, cannot but remind readers of a rather significant detail concerning French steeples: as several documents from 1793 demonstrate, Church steeples were an important symbolic target of dechristianization. Michel Vovelle gives one symptomatic example in the “steeples of Albitte”: seen as symbols of superstition, the steeples of all the churches in the area of Albitte as objects of an obstinate process of dechristianization were supposed to be torn down so that they no longer soared beyond the level of secular buildings (81).<sup>4</sup>

A detail that strikes in the Proustian description of the church of Illiers as a powerful center—even more powerful when absent—and as a principle that confers meaning to everything else is a comparison drawn from Romantic texts such as Gerard de Nerval’s prose and poetry and Musset’s prose. Earlier, Proust’s narrator sees the church in the morning light when its slates make it shine “flamboyantly like a black sun” (*Swann’s Way* 75). Scholars generally accept that the image of the black sun or of the sunless day, recurrent in Nerval, was inspired by Albrecht Dürer’s “Melancoly.” It appears in Nerval’s poem “El Desdichado” but also in *Aurélia* (1855), a strange, oneiric discourse that narrates Nerval’s delirium and crisis of madness and emerges in the context of a quasi-spiritual quest. As seen, the image of the “black sun” that Proust borrows from Nerval, whose writings he greatly admired, he associates with a church, that is, a center, even when it is an empty one.

This empty center is actually a fundamental image in many nineteenth-century texts: the narrator in Musset’s *La Confession d’un enfant du siècle* (1836) exclaims, “What to do, when the center of my life, my

<sup>4</sup>Less analyzed by literary critics, France’s painful secularization and its resistance to this process have been discussed mostly by historians such as Jean

very heart was ruined, killed, destroyed?" (83). For the Romantics, the loss of perennial values is clear, as Musset defines it: "All the illness of the present century comes from two causes; the people who lived through 1793 and 1814 bear two wounds in their hearts. Everything that was no longer is" (20). The restoration of the Church and of monarchy did not cure this illness: after being told "there is no God" (19), French Romantics experienced difficulty in filling the sacred center they felt had disappeared: "After Napoleon's death, the divine and human powers were reinstated, but the belief in them no longer existed," says Musset (9), who also talks about a dark sun, a sun in winter, covered in the blood of 1793 (15).

Is Proust affected by this nineteenth-century trauma? Not exactly, although, as Compagnon emphasizes, Proust belongs simultaneously to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and what characterizes his writing is precisely this straddling of two eras. Aware of France's religious crisis, of the displacement of the sacred around him, Proust lived, nevertheless, in the France of the definitive separation of church and state of 1905, the very secular Third Republic. Unlike Musset, Nerval, and Balzac in whose works the suffering of so many tragic characters is caused by their attachment to a center which has been annihilated but for which they still hope, Proust is aware of the definitive absence of the old church yet arranges all the building blocks of human existence around this presence that has become an absence, as if what matters most to Proust is the idea of order, of having a center, be it empty or not.

Eliade states that "To the religious man, space is not homogenous. . . . Moreover, for the religious man, this non-homogeneity is translated as an opposition between the sacred space, the only that is real, that really exists, and all the rest, the amorphous space that surrounds it" (25). But Eliade also contends that the sacred cannot be completely divorced from the secular life:

[P]ropane existence is never encountered in a pure state. No matter what may be the degree of desacralization of the World, the man who has chosen a profane life can not abolish religious

behavior completely. One can see that the most secular existence still preserves traces of a religious (valorisation) of the World. (27)

For the generations that were lost between the *Ancien Régime* and the post-Revolutionary era in France, their entire existence had been shaken, and they were hopelessly trying to retrieve a pre-Revolution order and value, especially a church that had been killed and now appeared as an incomprehensible, often scary ghost. Thus, confusion seems to reign in much of the writing of the time, as Musset declares: “This is the Chaos in which we had to make choices; this is what the children of Empire and grandchildren of the Revolution were facing” (7). Unlike Proust’s “osculum pacis,” in this chaos kisses become the very opposite. From Musset to Chateaubriand, Gautier, and Flaubert, instead of giving spiritual life, kisses often appear as vampire-like embraces, carry diseases, seem poisonous, or even prove fatal. The displacement of all spiritual content from these gestures in nineteenth-century literature results not in love but in lust, perishable flesh, disease, or death.

But Proust, conscious of displacement of the sacred, invests new spaces, new gestures, with old spiritual meanings. Thus, he places the sacredness of the “osculum pacis” deliberately in gestures that, theologically speaking, are not sacred at all but become a sort of mnemonic device of the sacred. The spiritual breath, or “spiritus,” absent or rather inverted in the vampire-like embraces of nineteenth-century romantic literature seems to regain its positive power through love kisses in Proust. Swann feels that kisses make him and Odette share one soul, and the narrator thinks that he possesses Albertine only when feeling her breath, her soul: “I had her breath upon my cheek, between my lips which I laid half-open upon hers, through which her life flowed against my tongue” (*Captive* 76). In her sleep Albertine loses her human imperfections and becomes a spiritual breath: “Her life was submitted to me, exhaled towards me its gentle breath. I listened to this murmuring, mysterious emanation, soft as a sea breeze, magical as a gleam of moonlight, that was her sleep” (72). This spiritual, life-giving breath is not attributed to human beings only. In the pantheistic vision of Proust’s narrator, the wind it-

self acts as a form of spiritual breath, a universal kiss. Thinking of Gilberte, the narrator perceives something spiritual in her which transcends his understanding of the material world, but the presence of which he acknowledges through a sort of ritual kiss:

I knew that Mlle Swann used often to go and spend a few days in Laon; for all that it was many miles away, the distance was counter-balanced by the absence of any intervening obstacle, and when, on hot afternoons, I saw a breath of wind emerge from the furthest horizon, bowing the heads of the corn in distant fields, pouring like a flood over all that vast expanse, and finally come to rest, warm and rustling, among the clover and sainfoin at my feet, that plain which was common to us both seemed then to draw us together, to unite us; I would imagine that the same breath of wind had passed close to her, that it was some message from her that it was whispering to me, without my being able to understand it, and I would kiss it as it passed. (*Swann's Way* 174)

For Proust, endowing spiritual character to something as personal as a love kiss can actually become an act of redemption. That is, what may have appeared sacrilegious to some critics (for instance, the erotic kiss equated with the Eucharist) can in reality be conceived as reinvesting long lost sacred values in a gesture since become banal.

If so, however, how can one explain Proust's references to such gestures as both "almost sacred" and "almost sacrilegious"? First, the notion in the context of defining the sacred as what is not profane constitutes a paradox, if not sheer nonsense: something cannot be "almost sacred"; it is either sacred or profane.<sup>5</sup> But here Proust's path again crosses that of some nineteenth-century writers such as Balzac who uses quite similar expressions, that is, "almost religious," or "almost virgin."<sup>6</sup> These expressions—"almost sacred," "almost sacrilegious," "almost religious," speak to the

<sup>5</sup>Indeed, Caillois avers that "the only thing that one can say about the sacred in general is contained in its very definition: that is, it is the opposite of the profane" (11).

<sup>6</sup>On the asymptotic and impossible quest for the *Ancien Régime* in Balzac's novels, see Scott Sprenger's discussion of the "almost religious."

displacement of values. But in most nineteenth-century texts, many characters remain tragically fixated on the loss of values, on the agonizing impossibility of a return of the past. In Proust's case, however, the "almost" can acquire a positive value, since for him the displaced sacred is not lost; the absent church can still function as a religious center; and spiritual breath is insufflated by what would once have been simply a carnal if not a sinful kiss.

Of course, this displacement of the sacred from its traditional forms also affects writing and its relationship to religion. Some critics believe that writing was for Proust, as for other modern writers, a creed in itself that fulfilled the function of religion in a world that could no longer believe in any traditional religious institution. Fifty years after the appearance of *Recherche*, one finds a declaration strikingly reminiscent of Proust:

They taught me the Saint History, the Gospel, the catechism, without giving me the means to believe: the result was a confusion that became my particular/private order. There was a considerable displacement; taken away from Catholicism, the Sacred landed in literature and the writer appeared, surrogate of the Christian I could not be. (Sartre 209)

Seemingly, this could have been written by Proust, but in fact it was written by an atheistic existentialist, a great nephew of a Catholic missionary, and later in his life a student of Judaism, Jean-Paul Sartre.<sup>7</sup> However, as Proust distinguishes himself from nineteenth-century writers, he also diverges from Sartre.<sup>8</sup> That is, although, like Sartre, Proust is aware of the displacement of the sacred, he presents a vivid image of a France that was, neither purely religious nor purely secular, a country that lives its religion somewhat secularly where secular life—as contemporary debates on religion and secularization have shown—is still haunted by remembrances of things past.

<sup>7</sup>On Sartre and "la question juive" see Lévy (728–33).

<sup>8</sup>Bucknall sees in Proust's work the religion of art at work, "still claim[ing] autonomy and await[ing] worshippers" (201), while she maintains that in Sartre the religion of art is "deservedly dead" (202).

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