JEAN SANTEUIL AND MARCEL PROUST: A REVALUATION

by

Daniel Charles Matuzewitz

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
of
Bachelor of Science
from the

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

May, 1953

Signature of Author: ____________________________

Signature of Thesis Advisor: ____________________________

Signature of Head of Department: ____________________________
Department of General Science and
General Engineering,
Massachusetts Institute of Technology,
Cambridge 39, Massachusetts.
May 25th, 1953

Professor Joseph S. Newell,
Secretary of the Faculty,
Massachusetts Institute of Technology,
Cambridge 39, Massachusetts.

Dear Sir,

The Thesis entitled "Jean Santeuil and Marcel
Proust; a revaluation" is hereby submitted in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor
of Science in General Science.

Respectfully submitted,

Daniel Matuzewitz
"Connaissez-vous X, ma chère, c'est-à-dire M.P.? Je vous avouerai pour moi qu'il me déplait un peu, avec ses grands élans perpétuels, son air affairé, ses grandes passions et ses adjectifs. Surtout il me paraît très fou ou très faux. Jugez-en..."

— Marcel Proust
Early in 1952, the novel Jean Santeuil was posthumously published by N.R.F. (Gallimard), and to date twenty printings of this recently discovered roman have been exhausted. If the past success of Proust's other works is any indication, then it is fairly certain that the popularity of Jean Santeuil will increase with its further dissemination in France and in countries such as the United States where the novels of Marcel Proust have been read and enjoyed by a large public. For Proust has been established as a truly international literary figure, and throughout the world the new dimensions he introduced to the novel have had their influence on literature and life. But the success of his works is a recent phenomenon, for Proust was not recognized as a master until near the end of his life, in the aftermath of the first World War. He conceived Jean Santeuil at about the age of twenty-five, at a period when his activities as a social chronicler for the "Figaro" and as a dilletante litterateur had begun to pall on him, and when he began to desire something more than the admiration of a devoted group of friends. This book was to have been his first serious bid for fame.

But the manuscript of Jean Santeuil was torn up by Proust and its pieces stored in an old trunk a few years after its completion, doubtless on the occasion of the death of Marcel's mother, for in spite of his grief he was then to realize that the last obstacle to a greater and broader work had been removed. To that date we can ascribe the inception of Du Côté de chez Swann, a novel of which his mother would have painfully disapproved.
Two years ago a search through the discarded manuscripts of Proust was undertaken at the instigation of André Maurois, who was then in the process of writing his *À la Recherche de Marcel Proust*. The torn pages of *Santeuil* were thus discovered in the hiding place where they had lain for two generations, and shortly afterwards the reconstituted bulk of this novel was presented to the world by the same publishers who, at the instance of André Gide, had rejected *Du Côté de chez Swann* forty years earlier.

Proust was an artist dedicated to reconstructing in his writings the world of nobility and high society of his day, and in keeping with the new philosophy of impressionism, he did not set down an objective history in the manner of a Flaubert or a Balzac. Rather, he described reality in terms dictated by his imagination. That is, he saw life as a series of situations and emotions more or less independent of the people involved, and it was these social and psychological situations that he analyzed in his books to the almost total exclusion of the characters in whose lives they occurred. And in so doing, he endowed the high-born society of late nineteenth century France with a degenerate pathology and an aura of vice that historians might not have attributed to it, for no evidence exists that this social stratum was then any less conventional or any less dull than it has ever been.

Above and beyond his role as a chronicler of things past, Proust was a major psychologist at a time when this science was new and largely ignored. He does not seem to have belonged to any of the schools of psychology current in his day, nor is it likely that
he was very much aware of Freud and the other pioneers in this field. For in contradistinction with the clinicians who only saw the science as a tool in the treatment of neuroses and psychoses, he realized that it could be used to explain the relationships among all people in their daily intercourse. And when he wrote that his interest lay in the 'essence' of a situation and not in its form, that he only wrote about events recalling forgotten memories such as "an odor, a view", or perhaps a madeleine, he was doubtless affirming in his own way his faith in psychological truths as opposed to objective fact. These truths he discovered in the manner of the early analysts, by basing his observations of social situations on a sure judgment and a lifetime of introspection.

Jean Santeuil was written over a long span of time, but perhaps ten years elapsed between the date of its completion and the publication of Swann in 1914, and just as surely as this span of time marked the end of an historical era, so did it mark a great transition in Proust—a psychological, philosophical and stylistic evolution that will be apparent to those readers of Santeuil who are already familiar with his magnum opus, A la Recherche du Temps Perdu. Indeed the appearance of Proust's posthumous work will be highly gratifying to all the scholars and critics who worship in the great Proustian cathedral, for it contains details about his life, his affection for his mother, and even his prejudices that could hardly fail to interest them. But most of all, the publication of Jean Santeuil was justified by the insight such a book gives us in the process of artistic creation. For unlike the early published writings of Marcel Proust, the recent
discovery is a direct predecessor to *Un Amour de Swann* as well as
to many other passages scattered throughout the *Recherche*. We are
thus granted for the first time an important outlook upon the
remarkable construction of the Proustian universe by its skilled
architect.

* * *

"Can I call it a novel?" said Proust in referring to
Jean Santeuil. 1  "It is perhaps less than that, yet it is much
more—it is the essence of my life distilled at times when such
feelings flow. This book was never written, it was harvested."
As such, it tells a discontinuous story. Descriptions of nature
along with philosophical reflexions occupy as much of the three
volumes of the work as does the thread upon which the book is
hung, the simple tale of a young man growing up. In point of
style, it is evident that the hand which fashioned the *Recherche*
authored Santeuil; we are once more in the presence of the
unique metaphors, the sentences a hundred words long, the chain
of adjectives each one of which serves to bring a description
closer to the precise meaning which Proust endowed his every
expression. Typical is the following simile, "and like a hen
that is forced by her nature to hatch eggs, to give them life
without knowing whether they are those of a chicken or a serpent,
he was hatching his unknown future and doubtful expectations
with all the warmth of his untiring and hopeful soul..."

1) Jean Santeuil (I) p. 12.
Some of his metaphors are pages long. Two thoughts are compared, being brought up first the one, then the other in concurrent hyperboles which succeeding phrases bolster and extend, until at last the reader reaches an oasis where he is free from the buffeting of Proust's imagination and yet which he will leave without regret—a period. We can trace many influences on his style, some of which he had not felt when he wrote *Jean Santeuil* and which colored only his later novels. The outstanding example is Ruskin, to whom Proust owed his appreciation of classical paintings and his delight in nature and rustic architecture. Ruskin was translated into French by Proust, whose task was immeasurably difficult because he knew little English. The actual translation was done for him, and he spent long hours polishing the style that he was later partially to adopt. But even in the matter of style, Proust was to display the ambivalence characteristic of his life and of his works. He would exclaim his love for Ruskin in a letter to Léon Bélugou dated 1906, only to add that nothing dampened his enthusiasm so much as to reread him! Chateaubriand was also to leave his mark on him, dated as he was for the other young writers of Proust's generation who had forever left behind the morass of romanticism. But Proust reserved his warmest appreciation for the poets of the new school, Leconte de Lisle and Verlaine, whose vigorous struggles with the problems of style and content facing the post-romanticist gave fresh courage to a writer embarking on an uncharted course. "The vast poetry of Leconte de Lisle, who after juggling with Time would powerfully recount the dreams of life and the emptiness of things, was more nourishing to him than
than the classics where he did not feel such a spirit of unrest. 3

Such were the outstanding influences on the style of Proust that are most readily brought to mind. But so far little more has been done than to point up some of the origins of the form into which the author was to cast a content that was radically new and which, as in the case of his contemporary, Joyce, was to remain unique in its genre. But before passing to the question of the substance of his works and the related problem of his life, it should be added that unlike the Recherche, Jean Santeuil was cast into separate chapters. This small point again brings out the contrast between the homogeneity of the later work and unintegrated nature of the early manuscript.

*   *   *

"The life of Marcel Proust is, as we see in his book, that of a man who tenderly loved the magic world of his childhood, and who early felt the need to hold this world and the beauty of certain moments fixed, and who feeling sickly entertained the hope of never leaving the family paradise and having to fight among men or having to vanquish them by kindness. Who, having experienced the harshness of life and the bitter force of passion himself became severe and often cruel, and who lost his refuge when his mother died although he managed to extend his isolation through illness. His existence was consecrated to recreating this lost childhood and the disappointments that followed it, and he

3) J.B. (I) p. 124.
transformed **these** recaptured memories into one of the greatest novels of all time." His father, Adrien Achilles Proust, was descended from a long line of petty tradesmen established at Illiers. He studied medicine, and early in life rose to prominence in the field of public health as professor of hygiene at the Paris faculty and inspector-general of sanitation. His wife, Jeanne Weill, belonged to a wealthy Jewish family originally from Alsace-Lorraine. Little is known of her excepting the exorbitant love Marcel felt for her, and her own inordinate passion for the *Lettres* of Mme. de Sévigné and the novels of Georges Sand.

Proust tells us far more about his father in *Santeuil* than in the pages of the *Recherche*, when his rancor must already have been dimmed by the passage of many years. Adrien Proust strongly disapproved of his elder son's indolent habits and social contacts, and Marcel evidently disliked him in turn. For even when he was a young man at the *Lycée* he had preferred to the company of his school-mates that of their mothers, and was a frequent and feted guest at their *salons*. He was a self-avowed snob from his earliest days, and has presented us in *Jean Santeuil* with incisive discussions of this vice showing to what extent it had become involuntary and **irresistible**. It is readily understandable that bitter recriminations should have been exchanged between father and son, in view of the fact that the son's love for his mother was practically pathological in nature, and that the father was a

conservative in his thought, Catholic in his ethics, and a bourgeois by choice. In his allusions to his father, Proust in*Jean Santeuil* is bitter and uncharitable. It is only toward the end of the book, when he pictures him as an old man sustained by his angelical wife in the senility of his last days, that Marcel unbends and permits us to view the elder Proust in an unprejudiced light. But more important than his direct allusions to Adrien Proust, Marcel wrote an episode the counterpart of which is nowhere in the *Recherche*, and which tells us more about his filial sentiments—his Oedipus complex, if we may use the term—than any amount of autobiography. It is the Marie incident, which pictures the downfall of a great and respected statesman whose life is shattered by the public revelation of his shady activities. Just what these were, we are never told, but it is not difficult to see wish-fulfillment and fantasy through the failure of the barely disguised politician. For Marie is Adrien Proust in reality, and his admiration public which now turns from him with utter contempt is Jeanne Proust, who is then presumably free to tend to her son exclusively. Elsewhere, we are told about the relief of Marcel at his father's occasional departures, when his mother suddenly became his alone. At those times, the household was run in accordance with his schedule, and his tastes. The death of the real "Marie", however, was soon followed by that of his wife, so that in 1906 Proust was left without his mother, at the age of thirty-five. For him, this was a tragedy.

As a child, Marcel had been asked by a playmate to tell what event he most dreaded. He answered that it was to be separated
from his mother. An early scene in *Du Côté de chez Swann*, identical in content to the second chapter of *Jean Santeuil* but more poetically devised, concerns his greatest sorrow—to be denied his goodnight kiss from her. "Then, sadness alone reigned over his childhood."\(^5\) In the face of much similar evidence\(^6\) it becomes increasingly certain that here was a most characteristic and particular perversion, going far beyond the normal love for one's mother that is a basic human emotion, and which was encouraged, perhaps by a relationship that was to become very intimate during Marcel's long periods of illness when he was nursed by his mother. We cannot disregard the possibility first suggested by Briand that Marcel consummated his desires much as the Narrator did with Albertine, by snatching a bedside consent from the person who most wished for him to be happy and who lost no chance to satiate his appetites.

* * *

Through his mother's family, Proust became well acquainted with the French Jewish bourgeoisie. He himself had been brought up in the Roman Catholic faith, but he did not consider himself more Catholic than Jewish. His sympathies, however, clearly lay with the religion of the society by which he strove so hard to be adopted. But in keeping with the incongruency of his nature, he was to stress to his friends that the one thing he never wished, was to be considered non-Jewish. In his books, he strikes first one attitude, and then

\(^5\) J.S. (I) p. 73.
\(^6\) Briand, op. cit.
by a sudden reversal changes his opinion.

The one burning issue of the day was l'Affaire, the notorious Dreyfus case. The clash was general between the clericals and the liberals, the conservative Catholic world having aligned itself on the one side versus the Jews and their sympathizers on the other. Here was an issue on which everyone had to take a stand, and Proust did; in fact, he took two stands. Both Jean Santeuil and the Narrator of the Recherche allowed their patent militarism to outweigh their sympathies for the unjustly accused Dreyfus at a time when his cause had not yet been vindicated by history and a Parliamentary disculpation. The compulsory military service had remolded Proust into an admirer of the uniform and the traditions of the army, the prestige of which was directly at stake. But on the other hand we have the almost pathetic figure of Swann who was torn between two cultures, between his friends and his race. Swann was a Dreyfusard, and stood by his convictions even when it was clear that they were no longer tolerated by the people of his world, and we are often made to feel that these were the feelings of Proust himself. Was he Dr. Jeckill or Mr. Hyde? Aside from the affaire Dreyfus, there is nothing to show that when Proust wrote Santeuil he had ever considered the question of anti-semitism. Such caricatures of Jewish traits as are found in the Recherche, the figures of Bloch and his grotesque family are inventions for which he apparently had no taste as a young writer. But there is to be found nothing either of the fine psychological studies he was to make of the phenomenon of race hatred, as in the case of the utterly demented and degenerate Basin de Charlus.
Nor had he thought of comparing the Jews, as in *Sodome et Gommhore*,
to the "race" of homosexuals, each cast out by the rest of society,
the members of each race recognizing their brothers through signs
invisible to outsiders.

* * *

One of the principal themes of the *Recherche* is love and
its result, jealousy. The concern with jealousy is only rarely
present in *Santeuil*, where we enjoy but a foretaste of the thorough
and knowledgeable manner in which Proust was later to discuss its
ravaging effects. Instead of the complete picture of the degeneration
of all moral values that this poison induced, first in the stable
character of Swann, and later in the emotional and neurotic
personality of the Narrator, there is in *Santeuil* only a brief
example of this passion, which serves to terminate a desultory
affair. And so far as concerns the monument that Proust was later
to erect to sexual perversion, particularly in *Sodome et Gommhore*
but also throughout the body of the *Recherche*, look as we may, there
is nothing to be found in *Santeuil* that intimates his concern with
this subject. This accords perfectly with the premise that Marcel
did not think of revealing his personal life until after the death
of his mother, and indeed the spiritual catharsis that the *Recherche*
represents was not possible in a young man not yet disgusted with
this world and all the things in it. The idea represented in
*Le Temps Retrouvé* that all the failings of one's life can be
compensated for by artistic expression is not that of a person
with most of his life still left ahead of him.

*Jean Santeuil* tells us that in love, as in all things,
it is not abstract thoughts that can hurt us. It remains for the
concrete details of a quarrel, or for the certain knowledge that we are being duped, to rankle in our memory forever where anger and resentment quickly fade away. That is, only concrete situations can pain us, and however much our imagination makes us miserable by suggesting to us all the possible situations in which we would be made unhappy, we cannot actually feel this unhappiness until the very event we dreaded, or some totally unexpected blow, happens and leaves us crushed in its wake. Take for example the love of Marcel for Albertine. In thoughts similar to those occurring to the hero of Jean Santeuil, the Narrator imagines that his jealousy would be diminished if he knew that Albertine had left for Touraine ("at her aunt's where, after all, she would be watched and chaperoned") instead of for Paris or Amsterdam. And yet, "when Albertine's concierge stated she was in Touraine, this place where I had wished her to be suddenly seemed the worst of all now that she was actually there..."

There exist, moreover, two strikingly similar episodes, one in Jean Santeuil (III) p. 129, the other in Swann (II) p. 77, that point up what as easy prey Marcel became to the passion of jealousy, and with what masochistic determination he exploited this feeling to the last drop of pain. In the Santeuil story, he leaves the woman who was later to become his mistress, only to return to her building hours later with the suspicion that she had made him leave in order to receive someone else. He sees a light through the shades of her window, and the sound of a conversation inside serves to heighten his suspicion. For a long time he is torn by indecision, until he finally decides to knock on the blinds
in order to tell her that he was not duped and that he had found her out. The two episodes diverge at this point. Swann insists, knocks again until the shades are drawn, and he is certain "that his life will lose all its sense". Santeuil is satisfied with calling out that she need not bother, he was passing by and seeing her light on "merely wished to know whether she might not be ill." It turns out in both cases that his fears were groundless, he was knocking at the wrong window.

The later episode is a refinement of the earlier one. Here, as in other passages where there exists a correspondence between Santeuil and the Recherche, the characters are less brutal and destructive in the first version, but they are also less sharply defined and rarely do we feel in the presence of real human beings. There is where the essential contrast between the two works lies. The motivations for the characters of the first draft are vague and unimportant. The motivations in the Recherche are extreme and elemental, on the other hand, and give us practically the only clues to otherwise ill-sketched personalities. In short, the feeling which grips a reader of all the Recherche, with the possible exception of Swann, that he is in the presence of a world of fantasy and make-believe constructed about psychological and emotional situations, not people, this feeling is not present in the reading of Santeuil. Proust was too direct and naive in his approach when he wrote this book, and overly precious and sophisticated when he composed his masterpiece. The sincerity with which his first novel was conceived makes up for its other short-comings.
It is not possible to read Jean Santeuil without stopping, perhaps every few pages, struck by the beauty of some remark interjected sometimes à propos the most banal of situations. In this respect we can compare Proust with Shakespeare, for the frivolity of the latter's comedies, for instance, did not prevent them from being an inexhaustible source of maxims many of which are now in the living language. But this sort of popularity we could not quite expect for Proust, because his works are highly esoteric and require much patience on the part of the reader before offering him an occasional reward. But his sayings do not suffer from being rare and of uncommon coinage, and in Santeuil these gems of literary expression have the additional charm of being spontaneous and fresh, happily untouched by grammatical or syntactical revisions destructive of their pith.

"The kindness, the admiration, and the love of others, so badly needed by his tender nature, these things he only knew through the sadness of never having experienced them..." This phrase was found in a joyful context, when Jean is deliriously happy because the Duke of Reveillon has just left his calling card at the Santeuil's for Jean! This kind of juxtaposition serves to bring out what Proust stressed time and again—that all emotions are universal and are likely to touch any one of us without regard to the particular details of our life. And by this phenomenon he seeks to explain why we are sometimes inexplicably gay, or why sometimes a particularly unhappy feeling haunts us, even during our most pleasant occupations.
The friendship of Marcel Proust has always been the object of much debate. Léon Daudet has stated that in his opinion Marcel was the incarnation of this noble feeling, and Henri Bordeaux is not the only one to agree with him. But how was one to reconcile the testimony of Proust's friends with what we read in his books and in his letters? There are, for example, two letters of his that seem the very epitome of coldness and calculation, such as one would not believe could co-exist with the selflessness of friendship. The first of these was written when Marcel was a very young man, and the other when he was eking his life out in the cork-lined room of the rue Hamelin. They are almost identical, and we quote the early one, addressed to Antoine Bibesco and quoted in Au bal avec Marcel Proust.

"Never bring your brother to see me," it read in part, "for then I could not allow him in my room to see me in my bedclothes, and I should have to dress and receive you in the living-room.... You would then belong to the category of friends I see rarely. We would meet less, and consequently our friendship would diminish."

The Narrator adds to his many infirmities the utter incapacity to enjoy friendship, and he often wonders at St. Loup, who was so different in this respect. Should we be surprised if Marcel, whom we know to be an invert, a sadist, and a passionate "hidden observer", turned out to be lacking in this quality which is attributed to him in retrospect by people who might not have known him very well? Happily, there is to be found in Jean Santeuil

the contradiction of this supposition. Unlike his later counterpart, the Narrator, Jean Santeuil is a warm personage very similar to the Proust we find described in Robert Dreyfus' book (no relation to the Captain of the same name, who after his reinstatement gallantly distinguished himself in the World War, and was retired a Colonel.) In general, wherever there is disagreement about some aspect of Proust the man, or Proust the writer, it is his letters that are least to be trusted. He puts us on our guard in Santeuil, where he admits what many people have long suspected, their exaggerations and their hypocrisy, and he wonders at what a strange impression they would make if ever they were published. He could not have foreseen that this thing would happen, nor would he have allowed it during his lifetime. It is nice to know, that at least in this one case, Proust was not what he seemed. Rather, he was many personalities at once, and he expressed some of them in his works, and some in his life. Oscar Wilde once said that his own tragedy was that he had only put his talent in his works, having put his genius in his life. Proust, who in many other ways resembled Wilde, did just the opposite.
In an elaborate attempt to avoid using the first person in narrating what is so clearly autobiographical, Proust chose to introduce Jean Santeuil by means of a device. Two young men, vacationing at the seacoast in September 1895 are surprised to find that C., a famous author, stays at the same inn. They seek to make his acquaintance, and succeeding in this, find that he is a man of great culture and charm. As Maurois shows in the preface, there are many details to show that C. is none other than Proust himself. For example, his love of nature, his writing only of personal experiences, even the sadism that the two friends observe in him, all these traits we know to be characteristic of Marcel. Upon C.'s death, the young men publish the manuscript he had entrusted them, and we are launched into the body of the novel.

Jean Santeuil tells the story of Proust far differently from the Recherche. It is a straightforward tale that takes us past his childhood, his illness—which is less severe than he was later to make out—and his debuts in society. We are present at descriptions of the sea, of the woods, and of simple country churches that are the equal of any in the Recherche. We watch the fall of a grey eminence—Marie. And we see Santeuil sustained in his troubles by his friendship with Henri de Reveillon, who was later to be fused with Montesquiou into St. Loup. The barrack scenes where soldiers discuss details of historical battles remind us of Proust's love of the military. And in society, when he is accused of cheating at cards and emerges from the episode unscathed due only to his noble protectors, we are witnesses to the insecurity Marcel was always to feel among people who were not of his kind.
And finally, the placid ending of this tranquil story tells us that Proust was a happy young man, bitter and cynical as his later works show him to have become in his later years. His unhappy love affair that was to inspire much in the Recherche, the death of his mother, all the important events of his life still lay ahead of him when he was twenty-five. It has been shown that there were many changes in Proust and in his works since he discarded Santeuil. This is evident particularly upon rereading Swann where are to be found the same narratives as in Santeuil, but where the personages are all a little older, a little less happy and more bitter. They have learned that one cannot love and be loved in return, that one cannot expect help and kindness when he is in need of it, and that one cannot avoid it when it is superfluous.

It has been suggested that Un Amour de Swann was extraneous to the rest of the Recherche, and remained as part of a previous edifice which had been conceived when Swann was to be the hero of the entire novel. This is undoubtedly true, and Jean Santeuil would presumably have been the cornerstone of this abandoned edifice.

*   *   *   *

8) Maurois, op. cit.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Andre Maurois, *A la Recherche de Marcel Proust*, Paris 1949

*Les Cahiers Marcel Proust*, Paris, N.R.F. Various editors, appearing since 1928

Leon-Pierre Quint, *Comment Travaillait Proust*, Paris 1929

*Lettres a Robert de Montesquiou*, de M.P., Paris 1930


Henri Bonnet, *l'Eudemonisme esthetique de Proust*, Paris 1949


*