

### **Warning Concerning Copyright Restrictions**

The Copyright Law of the United States (**Title 17, United States Code**) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted materials. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research. If electronic transmission of reserve material is used for purposes in excess of what constitutes "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

SIGNATURE SERIES

Literature  
and Evil

*by*  
*Georges Bataille*

Translated by  
Alastair Hamilton

CALDER & BOYARS

First published in Great Britain in 1973  
by Calder & Boyars Ltd  
18 Brewer Street London W1

Originally published in France in 1957  
as La littérature et le mal by  
Editions Gallimard, Paris

- © Editions Gallimard 1957
- © This translation, Calder & Boyars Ltd 1973

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

ISBN 0 7145 0345 2 cloth edition

Any paperback edition of this book whether published simultaneously with, or subsequent to, the hard bound edition is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise disposed of, without the publishers' consent, in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photo-copying, recording or otherwise, except brief extracts for the purposes of review, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner and the publisher.

Printed in Great Britain by  
Biddles Ltd, Guildford, Surrey

*Proust*

The love of truth and justice and Marcel Proust's socialism

The passion for truth and justice often gives those who experience it a start. Those who experience it? But surely to desire truth and justice is the same things as to be a man, to be human. However unequally distributed such a passion may be, it marks the extent to which each man is human - to which human dignity is due to him. Marcel Proust wrote in Jean Santeuil:

It is always with a joyful and positive emotion that we hear those bold statements made by men of science who, for a mere question of professional honour, come to tell the truth - a truth which only interests them because it is true, and which they have to cherish in their art without hesitating to displease those who see it in a very different light and who regard it as part of a mass of considerations which interest them very little.<sup>1</sup>

The style and the content of this passage are very different from A la Recherche du Temps Perdu. Yet, in the same book, the style changes, but not the thought:

What moves us so much in Phaedo is that, as we follow Socrates' arguments, we suddenly have the extraordinary feeling that we are listening to an argument whose purity is unaltered by any personal desire. We feel as if truth were superior to everything, because we realise that the conclusion that Socrates is going to draw is that he must die.<sup>2</sup>

Marcel Proust wrote about the Dreyfus case around 1900. His dreyfusard sympathies are known to us all, but after A la Recherche du temps perdu, written ten years later, he lost his ingenuous aggressiveness. We ourselves have also lost that simplicity. The same passion may occasionally arouse us, but, on the whole, we are too tired, too indifferent. A Dreyfus case in our day would probably cause little stir. . .

When we read Jean Santeuil we are amazed at the importance that politics had for Proust when he was thirty. Many readers will be astonished to see young Marcel boiling with rage because he was unable to applaud Jaurès' words in the Chamber of Deputies. In Jean Santeuil Jaurès appears under the name of Couzon. His black hair is curly but there is no room for doubt: he is 'the leader of the socialist party in the Chamber. . . the only great orator of our time, the equal of the greatest in antiquity.' Proust referred to 'the feeling of justice which sometimes seized him like a kind of inspiration'.<sup>3</sup> He depicted 'the odious imbeciles', the deputies of the majority, 'a sarcastic bunch who used their numerical superiority and the strength of their stupidity to attempt to drown the voice of Justice, which was ready to burst into song.'<sup>4</sup> Such sentiments are all the more surprising, coming as they do from a man whom one imagines to have been fairly indifferent to politics. The indifference into which he lapsed had several causes. There were, of course, his sexual obsessions. Then there was the fact that the bourgeoisie to which he belonged was threatened by the agitation of the working classes. Yet lucidity also played a part in the exhaustion of his youthful and revolutionary fervour.

Such fervour, we should bear in mind, was based on sentiments completely alien to politics. It was 'hostility to his parents which aroused his unbounded enthusiasm for the actions of (Jaurès)'.<sup>5</sup> This, admittedly, is Jean Santeuil speaking, but his character is that of Proust. We now know things that we would never have known had it not been for the publication of Jean Santeuil. We know that, in his youth, Proust had socialist sympathies, though he did, of course, have certain reservations. 'Whenever Jean really thought about it, he

was amazed that (Jaurès) allowed his papers to print - indeed, that he himself was prepared to utter - such violent, almost slanderous, even cruel attacks against certain members of the majority.<sup>6</sup> Though it is not the major obstacles in current politics which obstruct the truth, these obstacles had been known for some time. Proust's words might even be banal were they not impregnated with such gaucherie:

Life, and above all politics, are surely a struggle, and since the wicked carry every weapon, it is the duty of the righteous to carry the same weapons, if only in order to rescue justice. We could almost say... that justice perishes because it is inadequately armed. But people will argue that if the great revolutionaries had looked at it too closely justice would never have triumphed.<sup>7</sup>

Proust was tormented by doubt from the start, and his preoccupations lacked consistency: he was no more than bothered by them. Yet, if he could forget them, it was only after he had fathomed their meaning and given his motives. In the fifth part of Jean Santeuil Jaurès, who would once 'have blushed at the mere idea of shaking a dishonest man by the hand',<sup>8</sup> who 'had constituted the very measure of justice for Jean' (the hero of the book), could not, when the time came, 'help crying when he thought of everything that he had sacrificed to his duty as party leader.'<sup>9</sup>

The plot of the book required Jaurès-Couzon to oppose a slanderous campaign against Jean's father. But, however great the author's affection for him, the politician could not 'alienate all those who had fought for him. He could not ruin his life's work and compromise the victory of his ideas in an attempt - a useless attempt because, were he to act alone, it was doomed to failure - to rehabilitate a moderate element who was wrongly suspected.' 'His passion for honesty, the difficulties he had encountered as he led it to victory, had forced him to identify his conduct with that of the strongest party to which he was obliged to sacrifice his personal preferences in exchange for the help which it

gave him. '10 Jean's voice, a voice from the past, from the time when the opposition still had some meaning, concludes with an ingenuousness which may now seem strange:

You sacrifice the good of all not to a particular friendship, but to a particular interest - to your political situation. Yes, the good of all. Because when they are unjust towards my father, the journalists are not only being unjust. They make their readers unjust. They make them wicked. They make them want to say that one of their neighbours, whom they thought was good, is wicked... I believe that they will triumph one day, and that this triumph will be the triumph of Injustice. As they await the day when the government becomes unjust and injustice will really exist, they make calumny and the love of scandal and cruelty reign in every heart.<sup>11</sup>

#### Morality in connection with transgression of the moral law

So ingenuous a tone is surprising in so disingenuous a writer. But can we let ourselves be taken in by what, for a moment, seems to have been his innermost conviction? All we are really left with is the admission of a first instinct. Nobody will be surprised to read these words in the third volume of Jean Santeuil:  
'...how often do we write that "There is only one truly base thing which dishonours the creature which God has created in His image - lying."? This means that what we really want to avoid is being lied to. It does not mean that we really believe it.' Proust then added:

Jean did not admit (to his mistress) that he had seen the letter through the envelope, and since he could not help telling her that a young man had come to visit her, he said that he had heard it from somebody who had seen her - a lie. But this did not prevent his eyes from filling with tears when he told her that the only truly atrocious thing was a lie.<sup>12</sup>



Carried away by jealousy, the man who had accused Jaurès became a cynic.

Nevertheless this youthful and ingenuous honesty is an interesting phenomenon. In A la Recherche du temps perdu the evidence of Marcel's cynicism accumulates when jealousy drives him to tortuous manoeuvres. But these very different forms of behaviour, which initially seem to exclude each other, merge. If we had no scruples, if we did not care to observe rigid taboos, we would not be human beings. But we are unable to observe these taboos for ever - if we did not occasionally have the courage to break them, we would find ourselves in a cul-de-sac. It is also true that we would not be human if we had never had, if we had not once had, the heart to be unjust. We ridicule the contradiction between war and the universal taboo which condemns murder, but war, like the taboo, is universal. Murder is always laden with horror, while acts of war are always considered valorous. The same applies to lies and injustice. In certain places taboos have indeed been rigorously observed, but the timid man, who never dares break the law, who turns away, is everywhere despised. The idea of virility always contains the image of the man who, within his limitations, can put himself above the law deliberately, fearlessly and thoughtlessly. Had Jaurès yielded to justice he would not only have injured his supporters: his supporters would have considered him hopelessly incompetent. Virility has a deaf side which commands us never to provide an answer or offer an explanation. We must be loyal, scrupulous and disinterested, but beyond these scruples, this loyalty and this disinterestedness, we must be sovereign.

The necessity of at one point violating the taboo, even if it be sacred, does not invalidate the principle. The man who lied and, as he lied, claimed that 'the only truly atrocious thing was a lie' loved truth until he died. Emmanuel Berl has given us a description of the effect Proust's integrity had on him:

One night, after I had left Proust's house at about three in the morning (it was during the war), I found myself alone in the boulevard Haussman,

bewildered and harassed by a conversation which had exhausted both my physical and intellectual resources. I felt that I was at the end of my tether. I was almost as bewildered as I had been when my shelter in Bois-le-Prêtre collapsed. I could no longer bear anything, starting with myself. I was exhausted and ashamed of my exhaustion. I thought about this man who hardly ate, who was stifled by asthma and was unable to sleep, but at the same time fought against lies as unhesitatingly as he fought against death. He did not stop before analysis or the difficulty of formulating the results of analysis. He was even prepared to make the additional effort to sort out the cowardly confusion of my own ideas. I was less disgusted by my confusion than by my listlessness in putting up with it. . .

Such avidity is by no means contrary to the transgression of a point within its own principle. It is too great for the principle to be threatened - even hesitation would be a weakness. At the basis of every virtue is our power to break its hold. Traditional education has neglected this secret resource of morality, and the idea of morality is enfeebled by it. If we place ourselves on the side of virtue moral life appears like a timorous conformism. If we stand on the other side, contempt for insipidity is considered immoral. Traditional education seeks in vain for a surface discipline composed of logical formalism: it turns its back on the spirit of discipline. When Nietzsche denounced traditional morality he thought he would never survive a crime he might have committed. If there is an authentic morality, its existence is always at stake. True hatred of lying acknowledges, after overcoming its disgust, the risk contained in telling a lie. Indifference to risk is due to its apparent lightness. It is the reverse of eroticism which acknowledges the condemnation without which it would be insipid. The concept of intangible laws removes some of its power from a moral truth to which we should adhere, but without tying ourselves down to it. In erotic excess we venerate the rule which we break. A series of rebounding oppositions lies at the basis of

an instinct composed alternately of fidelity and revolt, which is the essence of man. Outside this series we are stifled by the logic of laws.

### Pleasure based on the criminal sense of eroticism

By relating his experience of erotic life, Proust has provided us with an intelligible aspect of this fascinating series of oppositions. One scholar<sup>13</sup> has spotted, in a somewhat arbitrary manner, the symptoms of a pathological state in the association between murder and sacrilege and the absolutely holy image of the mother. 'While pleasure held me more and more firmly in its grip,' writes the narrator of A la Recherche du temps perdu, 'I felt infinite sadness and desolation aroused in the depths of my heart; I thought I made my mother's soul weep. . . ' Sensual pleasure depended on this feeling of horror. At one point in A la Recherche du temps perdu Marcel's mother disappears, though no mention is made of her death: only his grandmother's death is reported. As if his mother's death meant too much for him, Marcel writes of his grandmother: 'Comparing my grandmother's death to that of Albertine, I thought that my life was branded by a double murder.'

To the stigma of assassination was added another, still deeper stigma: that of profanation. Let us examine the passage in Sodome et Gomorrhe where 'the sons, not always resembling their father, fulfil the profanation of their mother in their faces'. The author concludes: 'Let us abandon at this point a topic which deserves a chapter to itself'. Indeed, the key to this particular tragedy is the episode when Vinteuil's daughter, whose father had died from grief at her behaviour, made love, in her mourning clothes, a few days after the funeral, with a Lesbian who spat on the dead man's photograph. Vinteuil's daughter personifies Marcel, and Vinteuil is Marcel's mother.<sup>14</sup> Mademoiselle Vinteuil's invitation to her lover to stay while her father was still alive is a parallel to the narrator's inviting Albertine (in real life the chauffeur Albert Agostinelli) to stay in his apartment. Nothing is said about the mother's reaction

to the guest. I imagine that no reader can fail to have noticed that in this the story is imperfect. Vinteuil's death, on the other hand, is recounted in detail. The blank spaces left by Proust are filled in by the passages concerning Vinteuil, which prove so distressing to read if we alter the names.

For those who, like ourselves, saw [Marcel's mother] avoiding [her] acquaintances, turning away when [she] saw them, aged in a few months, consumed by misery, becoming incapable of any effort which was not aimed directly at [her son's] happiness, spending entire days before [her husband's] tomb, it would be hard not to realise that [she] was dying of misery and to suppose that [she] was unaware of the rumours in circulation. [She] knew about them; [she] may even have confirmed them. There is surely not one person, however virtuous, whom the complexity of circumstances cannot one day oblige to live in familiarity with the vice he condemns most outrightly, without his recognising it fully beneath the disguise of the particular facts which it dons in order to enter into contact with him and make him suffer: bizarre words, inexplicable attitudes, on a certain evening, of a certain person whom he has so many reasons to love. But [a woman] like [Marcel's mother] suffered more than most people when she resigned herself to one of those situations which we mistakenly regard as the exclusive prerogatives of the Bohemian world: they occur every time a vice, nurtured by nature herself in a child, requires the place and security necessary for its indulgence. . . . But the fact that [Marcel's mother] may have known about [her son's] behaviour by no means diminished [her] adoration of [him]. Facts do not penetrate the world of our beliefs; they do not give birth to them, any more than they destroy them. . . .

We can also attribute to Marcel that which is attributed, in A la Recherche du temps perdu, to Mademoiselle Vinteuil:

In [Marcel's] heart evil, to start with, at least, was not undiluted. A sadist like [Marcel] is the artist of evil in a way that an entirely evil creature could never be, for evil would never be outside him; it would seem quite natural to him; it would never even be clear to him; and since [he] would have no part in virtue, respect for the dead, or filial affection, [he] would have no sacrilegious pleasure in desecrating them. Sadists of [Marcel's] kind are purely sentimental beings, so naturally virtuous that even sensual pleasure seems bad to them - the privilege of the wicked. And when they allow themselves to yield to it for an instant, they try to enter the wicked man's skin and drag their accomplice into it, so as, in one moment, to have the illusion of having escaped from their scrupulous and tender soul into the inhuman world of pleasure.

Proust also added in *Le Temps retrouvé*: 'In the sadist - however good he may be, indeed, the better he is the more it exists - there is a thirst for evil which the wicked, acting for other ends (if they are wicked for some admissible reason), can never satisfy.' Just as disgust is the measure of love, thirst for Evil is the measure of Good.

The clarity of this picture is fascinating. What is disturbing in it is the possibility of grasping one aspect without its complementary aspect. Evil seems to be understandable, but only to the extent in which Good is the key to it. If the luminous intensity of Good did not give the night of Evil its blackness, Evil would lose its appeal. This is a difficult point to understand. Something flinches in him who faces up to it. And yet we know that the strongest effects on the senses are caused by contrasts. The movement of sensual life is based on the fear which the male inspires in the female, and on the brutal agony of copulation - it is less a harmony than a violence which may lead to harmony, but through excess. In the first place it is necessary to effect a break - union comes at the end of a tournament at which death is the stake. An agonising aspect of love emerges from its multiple experiences. If love is sometimes pink, pink

goes well with black, without which it would be a sign of insipidity. Without black, pink would surely lose that quality which affects the senses. Without misfortune, bound to it as shade is to light, indifference would correspond to happiness. Novels describe suffering, hardly ever satisfaction. The virtue of happiness is ultimately its rarity. Were it easily accessible it would be despised and associated with boredom. The transgression of the rule alone has that irresistible attraction which lasting happiness lacks.

The most powerful scene in A la Recherche du temps perdu (which puts it on a level with the blackest tragedy) would not have the profound significance we attribute to it if this first aspect were not counterbalanced. If pink has to be contrasted with black in order to suggest desire, would this black be black enough had we never thirsted for purity? had it not tarnished our dream in spite of ourselves? Impurity is only known by contrast by those who thought they could not do without its opposite, purity. The absolute desire for impurity, artificially conceived by Sade, led him to that sated state in which every blunted sensation, even the possibility of pleasure, ultimately escaped him. Not even the infinite resource offered him by literature (the imaginary scenes of his novels) could satisfy him. He never knew the particular delight of the moral feeling that gives our sins that criminal flavour without which they seem natural, without which they are natural.

Proust was more able than Sade. Eager to have his pleasure, he left vice the odious colour of vice - the condemnation of virtue. But if he was virtuous, it was not in order to obtain pleasure, and if he obtained pleasure it was because he had first wanted to obtain virtue. The wicked only know the material benefits of Evil. If they seek other people's misfortune, this misfortune is ultimately their selfish fortune. We only escape the imbroglio where Evil lies concealed by perceiving the interdependence of opposites. To start with I showed that happiness alone is not desirable in itself and would result in boredom if the experience of misfortune, or of Evil, did not make us long for it. The opposite is also true: had we not, like Proust (and, maybe,

even Sade), longed for Good, Evil would provide us with a succession of indifferent sensations.

### Justice, Truth and Passion

What emerges from this is the rectification of the common view which inattentively sees Good in opposition to Evil. Though Good and Evil are complementary, there is no equivalence. We are right to distinguish between behaviour which has a humane sense and behaviour which has an odious sense. But the opposition between these forms of behaviour is not that which theoretically opposes Good to Evil.

The poverty of tradition is to rest on that feebleness which determines the care of the future. Care of the future is the exaltation of avarice; it condemns improvidence, which squanders. Provident weakness opposes the principle of enjoying the present moment. Traditional morality complies with avarice: it sees the roots of Evil in the preference for immediate pleasure. Avaricious morality is at the basis of justice and the police. If I like pleasure, I deplore repression. The paradox of justice is that avaricious morality ties it to the narrowness of repression, while generous morality sees it as the primary impulse of him who wants every man to have his due, who runs to the assistance of the victim of injustice. Could justice survive without this generosity? and who could say that it was 'ready to burst into song'?

Would truth be what it is if it did not assert itself generously against falsehood? The passion for truth and justice is often far removed from the political masses, for the masses, which are sometimes stimulated by generosity, are sometimes moved by the opposite tendency. In ourselves generosity is always contrasted with avarice, just as passion is contrasted with calculation. We cannot yield blindly to a passion which also involves avarice; but generosity transcends reason and is always passionate. There is something passionate, generous and sacred in us which exceeds the representations of the mind: it is this excess which makes

us human. It would be fruitless to talk of justice and truth in a world of intelligent automats.

It was only because he expected something sacred from it that truth aroused the sort of anger in Marcel Proust which terrified Emmanuel Berl. Berl has left us a description of the scene when Proust threw him out of his house, shouting: 'Get out! Get out!' Berl had planned to marry and Proust decided that he was lost to his truth. Was this folly? Perhaps, but would truth confer itself on someone who did not love it to the point of folly? I repeat Berl's words:

His pale face turned still paler. His eyes sparkled with rage. He got to his feet and went into his dressing room to change. He had to go out. I was aware of his energy. Hitherto I had paid little attention to it. His hair was darker and thicker than mine, his teeth healthier, and his heavy jaw seemed exceptionally mobile. His chest, swollen with asthma no doubt, emphasised the breadth of his shoulders.<sup>15</sup> If we were to come to blows, as I thought for a second we might, I was not sure of being able to hold my own.

Truth - and justice - require calm, and yet they only belong to the violent.

Though our moments of passion remove us from the coarser requisites of political combat, it is as well to keep in mind that the masses can sometimes be moved by a generous wrath. This is surprising but significant: Proust himself emphasised the irreconcilable element which exists between the police and the generosity of the masses. Proust, who worshipped truth, described the passion for justice which once seized him. He imagined himself, under its impact, 'furiously returning the blows which the weaker man was receiving. Similarly, on the day he heard that a thief had been denounced, surrounded and then, after a desperate resistance, garrotted by the police, he had wished that he had been strong enough to murder the policemen.'<sup>16</sup>

I was moved by this rebellious instinct, so unexpected in Proust. I see it as the association between anger, stifled by prolonged reflection, and wisdom, without



which anger is pointless. If the obscurity of wrath and the lucidity of wisdom do not ultimately coincide, how can we recognise ourselves in this world? But the fragments are to be found on the peak - it is there that we grasp the truth, which is composed of opposites, Good and Evil.