
H-France Review Vol. 20 (November 2020), No. 204

Julia Caterina Hartley, *Reading Dante and Proust by Analogy*. Cambridge: Legenda, 2019. x + 143 pp. Bibliography and index. £75.00, \$99.00 (U.S.), €85.00. ISBN 978-1-78188-843-8 (hb); £9.99, \$12.50 (U.S.), €12.50. ISBN 978-1-781888-44-5 (pb); ISBN: 978-1-781888-45-2 (JSTOR eb).

Review by Alessandra Aloisi, Oxford University (Oriol College).

What does a medieval poem of the caliber of the *Divina commedia* have in common with a modern literary masterpiece as different in genre as it is in purpose, such as *À la recherche du temps perdu*? From Samuel Borton's 1958 article, "A Tentative Essay on Dante and Proust,"[1] to Karlheinz Stierle's book *Zeit und Werk: Prousts 'A la recherche du temps perdu' und Dantes 'Commedia'* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2008) or Jennifer Rushworth's monograph, *Discourses of Mourning in Dante, Petrarch, and Proust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), scholars have not failed to detect the profound parallels and analogies that bring the *Commedia* and the *Recherche* together, exceeding what a mere reception study or study of influence would be able to disclose.[2]

What is novel about *Reading Dante and Proust by Analogy* is, in the first place, the methodology adopted, which Julia Caterina Hartley names "reading by analogy". Common sense, which often organizes our fields of study no less than our habitual ways of looking at reality, would suggest that a scholar interested in two giants of Italian and French literature, such as Dante and Proust, devote her undivided attention to only one of these authors, who both have entire fields of research dedicated to their work. The aim of this book, on the contrary, is to approach Dante and Proust with equal and shared attention. It is precisely this more flexible and dynamic form of divided attention, which implies "the ability to hold simultaneously two different items and their respective contexts in one's mind" (p. 5), that characterizes Hartley's comparative study of the *Divina commedia* and *À la recherche du temps perdu* and is intended as a heuristic device allowing the author to cast aside prior categorizations so as to offer a different perspective on both authors.

In Hartley's book it is not a question of reading Dante from the standpoint of the Proustian scholar (possibly interested in knowing to what extent the *Recherche* contains themes which are ascribable to Dante), nor that of approaching Proust from the standpoint of the *dantista* (for whom the parallel with Proust is nothing but an opportunity to illuminate and reexamine certain motifs which are implicit in Dante's text). Although valuable and thought-provoking in their respective fields of research, both of these approaches bring about—as Julia Hartley rightly points out—a necessarily simplified and instrumental understanding of one of the two authors. This is why, by practicing a meticulous close reading of selected passages from both the *Commedia* and the *Recherche*, Hartley's intention is to read Dante in light of Proust and Proust in light of Dante, in a continuous change of perspective that keeps the interpreter's attention receptive enough to

uncover, in each author, thematic and stylistic aspects that would not otherwise have been noticed.

This is not a simple game of mirrors, but a reading practice linked to a specific methodology. Building on preexisting pioneering comparative studies, such as Manuele Gagnolati's "diffractive reading" (via Donna Haraway) of Dante and twentieth-century Italian writers Pier Paolo Pasolini and Elsa Morante,[3] and Jennifer Rushworth's methodological use of the concept of "interpolation" as a tool that enables us to read together the medieval and the modern, Hartley introduces a methodology centered around the notion of "analogy", which is used as an umbrella term for metaphor and simile. As she points out in her brief but thought-provoking introduction, "what I call reading by analogy is an approach to comparative literature which draws its force from this conflict between difference and similarity and which, rather than merely listing these differences and similarities, uses them to reach conclusions that could not have been reached had the two terms not been brought into relation" (p. 2). Just as colors interact with each other and reveal different tones and shades depending on how they are combined (for an optical effect called simultaneous contrast which is used in particular by Georges Seurat's pointillism and Abstract art), so it happens when we read together authors as distant in style, context, language, and intents as Dante and Proust: "our perspective is broadened: we are alerted to different characteristics than those that arrest us when we approach [each author] only in terms of his historical context" (p. 5).

This methodology, which Hartley derives from a dynamic and interactive understanding of metaphor, such as that proposed by Denis Donoghue ("we are engaging in a metaphor when we see, or think we see, or propose to see, one thing in the light of another; it is an instance of perspective, not necessarily resemblance"),[4] could essentially be linked to the conception of metaphor that Proust himself practiced and theorized. Scholars have not failed to emphasize that one of the most distinctive aspects of Proustian writing consists precisely in the use of metaphor, which can be seen as a proper knowledge device. As the *Recherche's* reader knows well, according to Proust the essence or truth of an object, individual, or situation can never be grasped in the ordinary image that we build under the guidance of habit and intelligence, but is only revealed, in unexpected and fleeting ways, when we see that same object, individual or situation in something else. It follows that the cognitive power of metaphor resides precisely in its capacity to make us recognize one thing in another, as Miguel de Beistegui convincingly argued in his *Jouissance de Proust: pour une esthétique de la métaphore*.^[5] This is what Julia Hartley herself acknowledges, although only briefly, when she comments on a passage from "Un amour de Swann" in which Proust's narrator calls Madame Verdurin's salon *une petite église* to whose Creed *les fidèles* must adhere: "when Proust calls Mme Verdurin's regulars 'les fidèles' he alters not only our understanding of the social rituals of the late nineteenth-century French bourgeoisie, but also our mental image of a church congregation" (p. 3), by revealing, in spite of (or maybe thanks to) their differences, an unforeseen and deeper similarity that points at an unexpressed truth.

Hartley implicitly recognizes her methodological debt towards the French novelist when she employs a Proustian image in order to encapsulate the sense of her work. As we read in the conclusion of her book, the bell tower of Saint-Hilaire, Combray's medieval church, "is an appropriate metaphor for the epistemological principle of this book" (p. 129). This tower, from which one can enjoy a panoramic view allowing the embrace, in a single glance, of things that are usually seen (and therefore considered) as separate and isolated, is the standpoint that would have enabled the young protagonist to understand a truth that he will only discover late in life.

A truth according to which, as Hartley summarizes, “what we had always thought of as separated worlds...were related all along” (p. 130). For the protagonist, these two worlds are “the bourgeois sphere of his family, focused on in the volume *Du côté de chez Swann* and embodied by the walk by Swann’s at Méséglise, and the sphere of high society, focused on in the volume *Le Côté de Guermantes* and embodied by the walk by the Guermantes’s estate” (p. 130). It is Gilberte Swann, spouse of his friend Saint-Loup, who will first reveal to the protagonist that one can actually combine both *côtés* within the same walk and “aller à Guermantes en prenant par Méséglise”.^[6] This discovery will bring a complete revolution in his understanding of the world that will be fully comprehended only at the end of the novel. The purpose of *Reading Dante and Proust by Analogy* is therefore effectively expressed: it consists of introducing “only a few of the many insights which can be gained by going to Proust ‘en prenant par Dante’ or to Dante ‘en prenant par Proust’” (p. 130)—that is to say, by adopting the aerial and panoramic change of perspective brought about by the joining of these two authors through the process of analogy.

This rigorously bilateral understanding of the analogy between Dante and Proust allows Julia Hartley to distinguish her work from that of previous scholars, in particular Gianfranco Contini, who, in one of the earliest scholarly comparisons between the *Commedia* and the *Recherche*, suggested that “Marcel Proust [...] serve di metafora per un discorso non del tutto elementare su Dante” [Marcel Proust acts as a metaphor for a not entirely elementary discourse on Dante].^[7] Contini used the analogy between Dante and Proust only unilaterally—that is, to illuminate the metapoetic dimension of the *Commedia* in its complex interplay between protagonist, narrator, and author. However, as Hartley argues in chapter one, a deeper engagement with Proust’s novel reveals that the *Recherche* resists the idea, assumed by Contini, that the protagonist is also the author of the novel. This also implies a more general reconsideration of the function of the first-person narration in both authors. Furthermore, the feature of the narrator-protagonist who has a literary vocation is only one of the possible analogies between Dante and Proust. Hartley also takes into account other thematic and stylistic parallels, namely the conceptualization of literary creation as a journey, which is discussed in chapter two, the use of guide figures and their gendered relationships to the protagonist, developed in chapter three, and, finally, the theme of artistic redemption, which is examined in chapter four and is particularly illuminating for the new light that it casts on the relation between art and individuality. Yet, as Hartley herself points out, these are only a few of the many insights which can be gained by adopting this methodology—a further confirmation of the usefulness of this approach, which offers a stimulating methodological contribution to the field of comparative literature.

NOTES

[1] Samuel Borton, “A Tentative Essay on Dante and Proust”, *Delaware Notes*, 31 (1958): 33-42.

[2] For a survey of existing studies comparing Dante and Proust, see Jennifer Rushworth’s Introduction to *Discourses of Mourning in Dante, Petrarch, and Proust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[3] See Manuele Gagnolati, *Amor che move: linguaggio del corpo e forma del desiderio in Dante, Pasolini e Morante* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2013).

[4] Denis Donoghue, *Metaphor* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 84.

[5] Miguel de Beistegui, *Jouissance de Proust: pour une esthétique de la métaphore* (Paris: Michalon, 2007).

[6] Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. by Jean-Yves Tadié, 4 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1987-89), vol. IV, p. 268.

[7] Gianfranco Contini, "Dante come personaggio-poeta della *Commedia*", in *Un'idea di Dante: saggi danteschi* (Turin: Einaudi, 1976), pp. 33-66.

Alessandra Aloisi
Oxford University
alessandra.aloisi@oriel.ox.ac.uk

Copyright © 2020 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172