

Places Proustian

Since we have subscribers using all the editions below, here, as elsewhere I will give references to quoted passages from Proust's novel in this order:

The first reference is to the Modern Library edition.

F = Folio

RH = Random House

P = Penguin

NP = French (N)ew (P)léiade) Gallimard edition, 1989

The main locales of the novel are five, two of which are real—Paris and Venice. Combray is to some degree an invention of Proust's but also contains transposed reminiscences of his childhood stays in Illiers, where his father was born, and Auteuil, a fashionable Paris suburb where Proust was born on July 10, 1871. It was Proust's mother's family who had a summer home in Auteuil. One hears echoes of that name in the main character of Proust's first, unfinished novel, *Jean Santeuil*, and in one of the main characters of *In Search of Lost Time*, the composer Vinteuil, who lives in obscurity in the little town of Combray. The manuscript of *Jean Santeuil* was not discovered until several decades after Proust's death. Its hero, Jean (John), is obviously named after Proust's mother, Jeanne Weil. And the sound *-teuil*, from her family's home in Auteuil, completes the name Santeuil. In *Jean Santeuil*, there are a number of passages in which Proust uses the names Illiers and Auteuil, which are proof of the genesis of Combray. Louis's property was sold during Proust's lifetime and replaced by modern apartment buildings. There is a plaque at 96, rue La Fontaine commemorating Proust's birth, but nothing of the original building remains. The goodnight kiss scene is thought to be autobiographical in origin and most likely took place at Auteuil.

Here is a passage from *Jean Santeuil*, in which Jean laments the disappearance of the Auteuil property and is alarmed when he notices the effects of advancing old age on his parents: "Monsieur and Madame Santeuil had greatly changed since the day when we first made their acquaintance in the little garden at Auteuil, on the site of which three or four six-storied houses had now been built. . . ." (*Jean Santeuil*, translated by Gerard Hopkins, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956, 723.) *In Search of Lost Time* contains an echo of this text, and therefore of Auteuil, when Marcel remembers his childhood and the

scene of the goodnight kiss: “Many years have passed since that night. The wall of the staircase up which I had watched the light of his (my father’s) candle gradually climb was long ago demolished.” *Swann’s Way* 1: 49. F = 34-35; RH = 39; P = 39; NP = 36. (For more details about Auteuil, see my biography.)

In 1971, to mark the centennial of Proust’s birth, the little town of Illiers, in a brilliant marketing move, officially changed its name to Illiers-Combray. This may be a unique example of a real town taking its name from a work of fiction. One can still visit the house that belonged to Proust’s uncle and aunt, Jules and Élisabeth Amiot (née Proust). This property is now known as the Maison Tante Léonie, after the character from the novel who inhabits the house. Proust uses a number of names from Illiers and its surroundings either with no modification or only slight modification. One that he did not change at all is the country estate Tansonville, which provides the name of Swann’s home near Combray. (There are photographs of Illiers-Combray, Tansonville, and Cabourg in our photo gallery at Proust-Ink.com. The first photo there shows the sign marking the city limits. It reads Illiers-Combray. For a very recent filmed tour of Proust’s Paris, see Radio Proust. You will find the link on our website: Proust-Ink.com.)

Balbec, the fictional seaside resort in Normandy, was inspired largely by Cabourg and its waterfront Grand-Hôtel, where Proust vacationed every summer from 1907 to 1914. His stays there ended with World War 1.

Doncières is a fictional garrison town, inspired in part by Orléans, where Proust completed his year of voluntary military service in 1889-1890. See the links on our website to learn more about Cabourg and Illiers-Combray.

Passages from In Search of Lost Time

The great aunt at Combray teases Swann for not living in a better neighborhood of Paris, one more suited to someone as wealthy as he:

. . . Swann now lived and amassed his collections in an old house which my grandmother longed to visit but which stood on the Quai d’Orleans, a neighborhood in which my great-aunt thought it most degrading to be quartered.

[Of course, today, this spot on the Ile Saint-Louis is one of the most fashionable in Paris.

She also doubts his credentials as an expert on art.]

“Are you really a connoisseur at least?” she would say to him; “I ask for your own sake, as you are likely to have fakes palmed off on you by the dealers,” for she did not, in fact, endow him with any critical faculty, and had no great opinion of the intelligence of a man who, in conversation, would avoid serious topics and showed a very dull preciseness, not only when he gave us kitchen recipes, going into the most minute details, but even when my grandmother’s sisters were talking to him about art.

[We see that Swann has acquired from his high society circle the bad habit of avoiding serious subjects.]

When challenged by them [the great aunts] to give an opinion, or to express his admiration for some picture, he would remain almost disobligingly silent, and would then make amends by furnishing (if he could) some fact or other about the gallery in which the picture was hung, or the date at which it had been painted. —*Swann’s Way* 1: 20. F = 14; RH = 17-18; P = 20; NP = 16-17.

As she [my great aunt] was the only member of our family who could be described as a trifle “common,” she would always take care to remark to strangers, when Swann was mentioned, that he could easily, had he so wished, have lived in the Boulevard Haussmann or the Avenue de l’Opera, and that he was the son of old M. Swann who must have left four or five million francs, but that it was a fad of his. A fad which, moreover, she thought was bound to amuse other people so much that in Paris, when M. Swann called on New Year’s Day bringing her a little packet of marrons glacés, she never failed, if there were strangers in the room, to say to him: “Well, M. Swann, and do you still live next door to the bonded warehouse, so as to be sure of not missing your train when you go to Lyons?” and she would peep out of the corner of her eye, over her glasses, at the other visitors. —*Swann’s Way* 1: 21. F = 15; RH = 18; P = 21; NP = 17.