

Lecture 12

Characters and Themes

Characters:

Albertine

The following passage contains Albertine's explanation of why she rang the bell when Marcel tried to kiss her at the Grand-Hôtel and his reaction to that explanation:

"For all I knew, you might have meant mischief." This argument left me perplexed. Albertine was no doubt sincere in advancing it—so difficult is it for a woman to recognize in the movements of her limbs, in the sensation felt by her body, during a tête-à-tête with a male friend, the unknown sin into which she trembled to think that a stranger might be planning her fall! —*The Guermantes Way* 3: 500

Love and death: The transformation that takes place in Albertine's features when kissed recalls the rejuvenation of the grandmother's features following her death.

Obliterating every trace of Albertine's customary preoccupations and pretensions, the moment preceding pleasure, similar in this respect to the moment that follows death, had restored to her rejuvenated features what seemed like the innocence of earliest childhood. —*The Guermantes Way* 3: 501

Doctors

Here are additional satirical passages about doctors:

Inasmuch as a great part of what doctors know is taught them by the sick, they are easily led to believe that this knowledge which patients exhibit is common to them all, and they fondly imagine that they can impress the patient of the moment with some remark picked up at a previous bedside. Thus it was with the superior smile of a Parisian who, in conversation with a peasant, might hope to surprise him by using a word of the local dialect, that Dr. du Boulbon said to my grandmother: "Probably a windy night will help to put you to sleep when the strongest soporifics would have no effect."

"On the contrary, Sir, the wind always keeps me wide awake."

But doctors are touchy people.

“Ach!” muttered du Boulbon with a frown, as if someone had trodden on his toe, or as if my grandmother’s sleeplessness on stormy nights were a personal insult to himself. He had not, however, an undue opinion of himself, and since, in his character as a “superior” person, he felt himself bound not to put any faith in medicine, he quickly recovered his philosophic serenity. —*The Guermantes Way 3: 411-12*

The specialist X believes that all maladies stem from the nose:

At one of those moments when, as the saying goes, we did not know which way to turn, since my grandmother was coughing and sneezing a good deal, we took the advice of a relative who assured us that if we sent for the specialist X—the trouble would be over in a couple of days. Society people say that sort of thing about their own doctors, and their friends believe them just as Françoise always believed the advertisements in the newspapers. The specialist came with his bag packed with all the colds and coughs of his other patients, like Aeolus's goatskin. My grandmother refused point-blank to let herself be examined. And we, out of consideration for this doctor who had been put to trouble for nothing, deferred to the desire that he expressed to inspect each of our noses in turn, although there was nothing the matter with any of them. According to him, however, there was; everything, whether headache or colic, heart-disease or diabetes, was a disease of the nose that had been wrongly diagnosed. To each of us he said: “I should like to have another look at that little nozzle. Don’t put it off too long. I’ll soon clear it up for you with a hot needle.” Of course, we paid no attention whatsoever. And yet we asked ourselves: “Clear it of what?” In a word, every one of our noses was infected; his mistake lay only in his use of the present tense. For by the following day his examination and provisional treatment had taken effect. Each of us had his or her catarrh. And when in the street he ran into my father doubled up with a cough, he smiled to think that an ignorant layman might suppose the attack to be due to his intervention. He had examined us at a moment when we were already ill. —*The Guermantes Way 3: 441-42*

The duc de Guermantes

Here's a nice bit that I cut from the quote about the duke's colossal vanity when he comes to pay his condolences to the mother during the grandmother's agony:

But he was one of those men who are incapable of putting themselves in the place of others, who resemble in that respect undertakers and the majority of doctors, and who, after having composed their faces and said: "This is a very painful occasion," having embraced you at a pinch and advised you to rest, cease to regard a deathbed or a funeral as anything but a social gathering of a more or less restricted kind at which, with a joviality that has been checked for a moment only, they scan the room in search of the person whom they can talk to about their own little affairs, or ask to introduce them to someone else, or offer a lift in their carriage when it is time to go home. —*The Guermantes Way* 3: 460-62

Françoise

As we have seen, Proust often gives examples of Françoise's corruption of the French language. Here is one example from a passage quoted in the lecture:

This concern, characteristic of Combray, not to be found wanting in politeness was one which Françoise extended even to foreign policy. [The example given is the Russo-Japanese War.] Françoise was quite ashamed vis-à-vis the Tsar, that we had not gone to war to help the "poor Russians," since, she reminded us, "we're allied to them." —*The Guermantes Way* 3: 450

Jupien's Shop

The description of the layout of Jupien's shop and adjoining rooms in the courtyard of the Guermantes mansion prepares for a key scene at the beginning of *Sodom and Gomorrah*. —*The Guermantes Way* 3: 509-10

Robert de Saint-Loup

It is just after the comparison to the statues of Saint-André-des-Champs that a scene occurs in a restaurant where Saint-Loup, running to bring the Marcel a coat, is described as a figure on a frieze, with each successive position of the young cavalier's

body as he moves through space clearly depicted. This outing with Saint-Loup is called “the evening of friendship.” —*The Guermantes Way* 3: 565

On a very cold evening, the two friends are dining in a restaurant where a number of Saint-Loup’s friends are also present, among them the prince de Foix. Saint-Loup wants his noble companions to meet his brilliant, literary friend but leaves it up to Marcel to say whether or not he would like to meet them. The would-be author says that he prefers to dine alone with Saint-Loup. Suddenly Saint-Loup disappears and goes into the adjoining room, where the prince de Foix is having his meal, and returns with the Prince’s vicuna coat, which he has borrowed to warm his cold friend. Since the Marcel is blocked in at his table, Saint-Loup leaps up on the cushioned seat that rings the walls of the restaurant and runs toward his shivering friend. Electrical wires jut out of the wall and extend to the lamps on the tables, requiring Saint-Loup to leap over the wires as he runs. Where patrons are seated along the bench, he must surmount the back of it. At this point applause breaks out among those in the restaurant who admire the cavalier’s agility. Proust compares Saint-Loup’s body to that of a horse on an obstacle course and a rider on a frieze.

Proust sees with the eye of a painter or sculptor who, after having studied Etienne-Jules Marey’s chronophotographs (as did Marcel Duchamp before creating his stop-action paintings), wants to represent the human body in each of its successive positions as it moves through space. Proust is not interested in depicting a static figure as seen in a painting or statue, but the multiple, dashing figures that a handsome individual embodies as he moves forward in space and time:

. . . I felt that this pleasure lay in my recognizing that each of the movements which he had executed on the bench, along the wall, had its meaning, its cause, in Saint-Loup’s own personal nature perhaps, but even more in that which by birth and upbringing he had inherited from his race. —*The Guermantes Way* 3: 566

Unlike a historical, genealogical chart, it is the mature version of the various stages of embryonic development that repeat the evolution of the species. Here it is the racial history of one individual who is representative of his genus. Saint-Loup, who wants to inspire true friendship based on the value of the individual, would not be pleased to know

that Marcel sees him, in spite of Saint-Loup's liberal ideas, as a product of race and breeding. We will see that in a later volume, Saint-Loup's velocity in moving through space is a result of shame and fear, but here it is a sign of nobility:

. . . a noble liberality which. . . had led him to trample them underfoot, just as he had actually and symbolically trodden upon those crimson benches, suggestive of some ceremonial way which pleased my friend only because it enabled him more gracefully and swiftly to arrive at my side: such were quintessentially aristocratic qualities that shone through the husk of his body—not opaque and dim as mine would have been, but limpid and revealing—as, through a work of art, the industrious, energetic force which has created it, and rendered the movement of that light-footed course which Robert had pursued along the wall as intelligible and charming as those of horsemen on a marble frieze. —*The Guermantes Way* 3: 566-67

Marcel is even tempted to find an esthetic pleasure in the sight of his friend in motion, but he realizes that this is only the result of his delight in seeing “this young man unfolding along the wall the frieze of his flying course.” He now recognizes the intelligence and the sovereign freedom of Saint-Loup's movements that together form “the image and the symbol” in which “perfect friendship is enshrined.” —*The Guermantes Way* 3: 568-69

Themes:

Art: Is there progress in art as compared to science?

And I was led to wonder whether there was any truth in the distinction which we are always making between art, which is no more advanced now than in Homer's day, and science with its continuous progress. Perhaps, on the contrary, art was in this respect like science; each new original writer seemed to me to have advanced beyond the stage of his immediate predecessor; and who was to say whether in twenty year's time, when I should be able to accompany without strain or effort the newcomer of today, another might not emerge in the face of whom the present one would go the way of Bergotte? —*The Guermantes Way* 3: 446

Marcel will have more to say about art and science.

Fame

In the lecture, I read the following comment about fame and the fatigue it can cause. In *Time Regained*, when Marcel is certain that he has at last discovered his vocation, he will use a similar image to describe himself:

A dead writer can at least be illustrious without any strain on himself. The effulgence of his name stops short at his gravestone. In the deafness of eternal sleep he is not importuned by Glory. But for Bergotte the antithesis was still incomplete. He existed still sufficiently to suffer from the tumult. He still moved about, though with difficulty, while his books, cavorting like daughters whom one loves but whose impetuous youthfulness and noisy pleasure tire one, brought day after day to his very bedside a crowd of fresh admirers. —*The Guermantes Way 3*: 443-44

Jealousy

Saint-Loup's breach with Rachel had very soon become less painful to him, thanks to the soothing pleasure that was given him by her incessant demands for money. Jealousy, which prolongs the course of love, is not capable of containing many more ingredients than the other products of the imagination. If one takes with one, when one starts on a journey, three or four images which incidentally one is sure to lose on the way . . . one's trunk is already pretty full. When one leaves a mistress, one would be just as glad, until one has begun to forget her, that she should not become the property of three or four potential protectors whom one pictures in one's mind's eye, of whom, that is to say, one is jealous: all those whom one does not so picture count for nothing. —*The Guermantes Way 3*: 476

The Individual as microcosm of the Nation

The following passage provides another example—of which we have seen several—of how nations behave as do individuals, which leads Marcel to state that

studying a single individual may be the best key to understanding human behavior in general:

This concern, characteristic of Combray, not to be found wanting in politeness was one which Françoise extended even to foreign policy. People foolishly imagine that the broad generalities of social phenomena afford an excellent opportunity to penetrate further into the human soul; they ought, on the contrary, to realize that it is by plumbing the depths of a single personality that they might have a chance of understanding those phenomena.

—*The Guermantes Way* 3: 450

This idea is part of a pattern that will emerge more distinctly in *Time Regained* when the notion of unity becomes more explicit. One hint that we have seen already is that Bergotte's books were said to be the creation of the "universal spirit."