

## Miscellaneous

### Lecture 13

#### The Conclusion of *The Guermantes Way*

In the original, the French equivalent of “You’re as sound as a bell,” is “Vous vous portez comme le Pont Neuf,” = “You’re as sound as the Pont Neuf.” The Pont Neuf (the New Bridge”) is actually the oldest bridge in Paris, constructed in the Middle Ages and hence considered the most solid, the most enduring.

#### This evening, a dinner party or a book?

In another meditation about names, about the real and the ideal, Proust makes this observation about boredom: “We are bored at the dinner-table because our imagination is absent, and, because it is keeping us company, we are interested in a book.”

—*The Guermantes Way* 3: 780

#### The Dreyfus Affair

We have seen that Swann never goes to the Jockey Club any more because it is filled with those who are anti-Dreyfusards. Anatole France, a member of the Académie française, and later Nobel Laureate of Literature, whom Proust recruited to sign the petition in support of Dreyfus, stopped attending sessions of the Académie française for the same reason. France is in some respects the model for Bergotte. He also provided the preface for Proust’s first book: *Les Plaisirs et les Jours* (Pleasures and Days).

#### Marcel destroys Charlus’s new top hat.

This episode in which Marcel becomes enraged and destroys Charlus’s new silk top hat has an autobiographical origin. Once Proust, in a context quite different from the one in the novel, became enraged and demolished the top hat of his friend Viscount Bertrand de Fénelon. We know this because Proust narrated the event himself in a letter to his mother. He and his parents were living in the same house, but since he slept all day and went out or worked at night, he communicated with her by notes and letters, which he usually slid under her door. To vouch for the authenticity of what he was telling her, he wrote at the end of his account: “In case you think I’m exaggerating, I enclose a piece of the lining, so you can see I’m telling the truth.” The following account is based on the

letter of December 6, 1902. See *Selected Letters in English* 1: 281. Proust was thirty years old.

This letter is a good example of the many that could be cited of Proust's using part of his own personality and an event from his own life in the creation of his fictional characters. I believe I mentioned early that he gave some of his own outlandish or awkward behavior to Bloch. And, of course, when Marcel speaks of art and esthetics and formulates his "laws," he is the spokesperson for Proust.

On the day that Proust learned that his translation of John Ruskin's *The Bible of Amiens* was to be published in its entirety, he awaited a visit from Bertrand de Fénelon. Proust had had a crush on Bertrand for some time, although his love was not reciprocated. Bertrand was calling to say goodbye, before leaving for his first diplomatic post in Constantinople. While Proust was eager to see Bertrand and tell him the news about his Ruskin translation, he was tired because an asthma attack had prevented him from getting enough sleep. On awakening and seeking assistance, he had experienced several unpleasant encounters with the servants who were forced to obey his mother's restrictions, intended to encourage him to adopt a more reasonable schedule. She had at last taken drastic measures, ordering the servants not to serve him a meal or make a fire in his room at odd hours. She had even removed the bedside table on which he kept his stock of medication and writing materials. He was in a terrible state of nerves when Fénelon arrived with Count Georges de Lauris, a twenty-four year-old law student. During the farewell visit, Fénelon—whether provoked or not is unknown—said something to Proust that was "very disagreeable." Proust flew at him and began to pummel him with his fists. And then he picked up the new hat Fénelon had bought for his trip to Constantinople, "stamped on it, tore it into shreds, and finally ripped out the lining."

In the scene from the novel, Charlus claims to have lost his affection for Marcel and says "I always feel myself to be a little like Victor Hugo's Boaz: 'I am widowed and alone, and darkness gathers over me.'" The poem about Boaz's marriage to Ruth is one of Victor Hugo's greatest, *Booz endormi*. The original of the line quoted is "Je suis veuf, je suis seul, et sur moi le soir tombe." —*The Guermantes Way* 3: 770

### **The Princesse de Parme's lady-in-waiting**

She is based on the Baroness de Galbois, the rather simple-minded reader to the Princesse Mathilde, whose salon Proust attended. The princesse had a favorite set of anecdotes about those in her entourage, especially the Baroness de Galbois. Proust, who savored good stories, remembered these examples of innocent imbecility when he created Mme de Varambon, who is the Princesse de Parme's lady-in-waiting. She repeats a number of naïve remarks that Proust collected from Mathilde's stories. One evening when snow had been forecast Mme de Varambon tells a departing guest that he has nothing to fear because "It can't snow again. It's a physical impossibility."

"But why?" the princesse asked.

"Because they have taken the necessary steps to prevent it; they've sprinkled salt in the streets!"

This is the version of the anecdote as Proust told it in the article he wrote on Princesse Mathilde's salon that was published in *Le Figaro* on February 25, 1903, four or five years before he began writing *À la recherche du temps perdu*. This article was the first in a series that Proust wrote on the "Salons parisiens." For the complete text, see *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, Paris: Gallimard (Pléiade), 1971: 447.

We see there's very little difference in the anecdote as Proust tells it in the novel:

In the hall where I asked a footman for my snow-boots, which I had brought, not realizing how unfashionable they were, as a precaution against the snow, a few flakes of which had already fallen, to be converted rapidly into slush, I felt, at the contemptuous smiles on all sides, a shame which rose to its highest pitch when I saw that Mme de Parme had not gone and was watching me put on my American "rubbers." The Princess came towards me. "Oh! What a good idea," she exclaimed, "it 's so practical! There's a sensible man for you. Madame, we shall have to get a pair of those," she went on to her lady-in-waiting, while the mockery of the footmen turned to respect and the other guests crowded round me to inquire where I had managed to find these marvels. "With those on, you will have nothing to fear even if it starts snowing again and you have a long way to go. You're independent of the weather," the Princess said to me.

"Oh! If it comes to that, your Royal Highness can rest assured," broke in the lady-

in-waiting with a knowing air, “it won’t snow again.”

“What do you know about it, Madame?” came witheringly from the excellent Princesse de Parme, whose temper only the stupidity of her lady in waiting could succeed in ruffling.

“I can assure your Royal Highness that it cannot snow again. It is a physical impossibility.”

“But why?”

“It cannot snow any more, because they have taken the necessary steps to prevent it: they have sprinkled salt in the streets!” —*The Guermantes Way* 3: 750