

PROUST ONLINE FOLDER

Lecture 21

Miscellaneous

The lesbian love scene, the cathedral novel, etc.

Louis de Robert was an author and friend in whom Proust confided as he was preparing to publish *Swann's Way*. Proust sent Robert the proof sheets of the first volume and shared some of his concerns about the length of the volume, its title, etc. Here are some of the exchanges between the two writers:

Louis de Robert had received from Proust a clean set of second proofs for the first forty-five galleys. Robert read them in amazement as he watched this extraordinary novel expand and take shape. He wrote Proust: "I am still lost in admiration. And I urge you most strongly: make it two volumes of 350 pages each." As for shortening the text, he gave this advice: "Don't cut anything—it would be a crime. Everything must be kept; everything is rare, subtle, profound, true, right, precious, incomparable. But do not pour such a rare liquor into such a big glass." Robert was afraid most readers would skim a book of 700 pages and thus miss "untold beauties, untold original insights, untold observations of astonishing perceptiveness and truth." He had no doubt that "this work will rank you among our foremost writers, and I am deeply delighted." Robert did have one complaint; he hated the title *Swann's Way*, finding it "unbelievably commonplace! (Robert had had opposed the idea of using notes to explain the exact meaning of the title because notes would make the novel look scholarly.)

Soon Louis had another concern. He had apparently learned from Maurice Rostand about the homosexual scenes that occur later in the novel. The anticipation of those, added to Mlle Vinteuil's lesbian love ritual, a scene to which he had always objected, made him fear for the reception of Proust's novel. Proust explained his position of pure objectivity: (Francis Jammes, who would later express his profound admiration of *Swann's Way*, had also asked for suppressing of the Montjouvain scene.) Proust answered Robert: ". . . I obey a general truth which forbids me to appeal to sympathetic souls any more than to antipathetic ones; the approval of sadists will distress me as a man

when my book appears, but it cannot alter the terms in which I probe the truth and which are not determined by my personal whim.” He denied a “gift for minute details, for the imperceptible,” attributed to him by Louis and others, claiming that he omitted “every detail, every fact, and fasten on whatever seems to me . . . to reveal some general law.” He gave the example of “that taste of tea which I don’t recognize at first and in which I rediscover the gardens of Combray. But it’s in no sense a minutely observed detail, it’s a whole theory of memory and perception.” He attempted to explain his title *Swann’s Way*: “the point of the title was because of the two ways in the neighborhood of Combray. You know how people say in the country: ‘Are you going round by M. Rostand’s?’ ” It still bothered him that Louis did not like the title and, in the postscript, Proust suggested alternative titles. Here are some of them: *Avant que le jour soit levé* (Before dawn), *Le Passé intermittent*, *L’Adoration perpétuelle*, *Le Septième Ciel* (Seventh Heaven), *À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*. We see that only the last one had any real merit and was used for the second volume. (Marcel Proust: *Selected Letters in English* 3: 190-92.)

In this and subsequent letters Proust defended his title. Louis failed to appreciate how perfectly *Swann’s Way* suited the author’s needs both thematically (the explorations of bourgeois society (*Swann’s Way*) and that of the nobility (*The Guermantes Way*), while opening windows on French history and contemporary society. The structural function of the two ways (*côtés*) is vital. As a child the Narrator thinks the two ways, the walk past Swann’s place and the more distant excursions by the Guermantes castle, lie in opposite directions and are distinct geographical unities. In the concluding volume, Gilberte Swann shows him that the two ways are linked geographically and form a circle, just as her marriage to Saint-Loup, a Guermantes, represents the symbolic and biological union of the two ways.

Proust and Robert continued to exchange letters regarding homosexuality in the novel. Although Robert’s comments revealed him to be somewhat prudish, he was also motivated by a genuine concern that Proust’s novel might be shunned because it treated subjects normally considered taboo. Proust tried again to allay Robert’s fears about his treatment of sadism and homosexuality:

If, without the slightest mention of pederasty, I portrayed vigorous adolescents, if I portrayed tender fervent friendships without ever suggesting that there might be

more to them, I should then have all the pederasts on my side, because I should be offering them what they like to hear! Precisely because I dissect their vice (I use the word vice without any suggestion of blame) I demonstrate their sickness, I say precisely what they most abhor, namely that this dream of masculine beauty is the result of a neurotic defect. (Marcel Proust: *Selected Letters in English* 3: 194.)

Proust's prophecy was accurate; André Gide would later reproach him for his depiction of homosexuality for precisely these reasons.

Proust was delighted when Count Jean de Gaigneron compared his *Swann's Way* to a cathedral. Thanking the count, Proust said that it was impossible "not to be moved by an intuition which permits you to guess what I have never told anyone and that I am writing here for the first time: I have wanted to give to each part of my book the title: Portal I Stained Glass Windows of the Apse etc., to answer in advance the stupid criticism . . . over the lack of construction in a book where I will show that the only merit is in the solidity of the most minor parts." Proust abandoned the idea of "architectural titles" because he found them "too pretentious." (Marcel Proust, *Correspondance* 18: 359.)

The cathedral analogy occurs again in a letter to François Mauriac, a fervent Catholic, who was destined to become a distinguished novelist and Nobel laureate for literature. Proust, perhaps apprehensive about Mauriac's reaction to forthcoming publication of *Sodom and Gomorrah*, recalled that Francis Jammes had asked him to cut the scene between Mlle Vinteuil and her friend. Proust would have liked to grant Jammes's request: "But I had constructed this work so carefully that this episode in the first volume explains the jealousy of my young man in the fourth and fifth volumes, so that by ripping out [and here's the cathedral architecture analogy] the column with the obscene capital, I would have brought down the arch. That's what critics like to call works without composition and written according to random memories." (Marcel Proust, *Correspondance* 18: 404-05.)

The origin of Morel's lock of hair, plus information about how Proust collected some of the street cries of Paris:

Proust had written *Swann in Love* years before he paid musicians to give a series of private concerts in his home at 102, boulevard Haussmann. In *Swann in Love*, when Swann hears the Vinteuil sonata again, he meditates on music and creativity:

the field open to the musician is not a miserable stave of seven notes, but an immeasurable keyboard (still almost entirely unknown) on which, here and there only, separated by the thick darkness of its unexplored tracts, some few among the millions of keys of tenderness, of passion, of courage, of serenity, which compose, each one differing from all the rest as one universe differs from another, have been discovered by a few great artists who do us the service, when they awaken in us the emotion corresponding to the theme they have discovered, of showing us what richness, what variety lies hidden, unknown to us, in that vast, unfathomed and forbidding night of our soul which we take to be an impenetrable void. (*Swann's Way* 1: 497)

This passage bolsters Proust's argument, frequently made in the coming years, for the highly structured nature of his novel. Swann, who in many ways functions as a father figure to the Narrator, lacks the ability to fathom his own soul. In a note to himself in *Cahier 57*, Proust indicated that Swann's failure to distinguish between Eros (Odette) and art (Vinteuil's music, which is trivialized as Swann and Odette's song, "their national anthem") and to follow the path of art is perhaps the most important point in the entire novel—"capitalissime, issime, issime."¹ [Important, very, very.] When the Narrator discovers his vocation as an artist, he undertakes to find the riches that lie undiscovered within himself and their transformation into a work of art. At one point during a failed meditation on music the Narrator compares Swann to Moses, who never made it to the promised land.² The Narrator will, after years of wandering in the desert of high society, make his way there, guided largely by the inspiration he finds in music.

On April 14, Proust attended the Festival Gabriel Fauré at the Odéon, featuring the composer himself at the piano, Lucien Capet, André Hekking, and a young violinist Raymond Pétain.³ After the performance, Proust asked Gabriel Fauré to introduce him to

¹This passage is quoted in Jean Milly's edition of *La Prisonnière*, 41.

²In *Cahier 57*, quoted in Jean Milly, *La Prisonnière*, 41.

³Philip Kolb described Pétain as a "young violinist," but Proust refers to him only as a viola player. See Marcel Proust: *Correspondance* 15: vi, 77; *Correspondance* 17: 393.

the musicians. Proust intended to hire the Poulet Quartet for another private performance, but was faced with the problem of finding a piano tuner to tune his pianos, both of which were seriously out of tune. He had already made one failed attempt to find a tuner; he would have to try again. And he would have to find a pianist, since a work he most wanted to hear again was one he had heard at the Odéon: Fauré's *Quartet for Piano, Violin, Viola and Cello No. 1 in C minor*, Op. 15. Proust was collecting impressions and thoughts for the key scene towards the end of the novel when the Narrator hears Vinteuil's septet.

Shortly after the Odéon concert, Proust wrote Pétain, telling him about a recent a private concert and his intention to bring the Poulet Quartet back again. He hoped Pétain would join the group for the next concert and made him a generous offer. Proust seemed particularly taken with Raymond. He had given 250 francs to each musician on an earlier occasion, but Pétain could name his fee, without divulging the amount to the other musicians. Proust wanted Pétain to play the viola part in the Fauré piece, while Massis listened. During the Franck quartet Pétain would listen with Proust. He wondered if Pétain might be willing to come over now and then and read certain scores with him, an arrangement that would avoid the complications of dealing with a quartet. He preferred very young men for such tasks, he said, because their age made them "indulgent."⁴

The novelist quickly developed an interest in Raymond that went beyond music. He wanted to watch the young man play because Pétain, without knowing it, was posing for a character Proust would introduce in *Sodom and Gomorrah*. When Pétain came to boulevard Haussmann Proust told him that during his performance of Fauré's *Quartet* at the Odéon, a ray of sunlight had struck the performer's forehead at the very moment a lock of his hair had fallen loose.⁵ While relating this to the violinist, Proust cried out "and then, suddenly . . . the Lock!" A few weeks later Pétain joined the 22nd Artillery Regiment in Versailles. When the violinist came back to see Proust he was in uniform and his beautiful locks had been shaved. Proust, assuming, as he sometimes did, the role of Charlus, told Pétain: "Ah, I miss the lock . . . how I miss the lock!"

⁴She recalled that Massis visited Proust several times in the middle of the night at boulevard Haussmann to discuss music. On those occasions Proust asked her to make French fries, which Massis washed down with champagne or cider. Albaret, *M. Proust*, p. 328. There is no mention of Raymond Pétain in her memoirs.

⁵This incident is related by Kolb in his foreword to *Correspondance* 15: vi.

Pétain may have lost his marvelous lock to army barbers, but it is preserved on the head of the violinist Charles Morel, a character inspired in large measure by pianist Léon Delafosse, whom Count Robert de Montesquiou had adopted as his protégé. Morel, like Delafosse, is a young man of humble origins, who through his remarkable talent, becomes a virtuoso performer. By making Morel the object of Charlus's infatuation, Proust examines the aspects of an obsessively jealous homosexual passion as he had in the heterosexual couples of Swann and Odette, Saint-Loup and Rachel, the Narrator and Albertine. After the concert Charlus organized to present Morel to the beau monde, the baron is in a fit of ecstasy over his protégé's triumph:

“Do admit, Brichot, that they played like gods, Morel especially. Did you notice the moment when that lock of hair came loose? Ah, my dear fellow, then you saw nothing at all. There was an F sharp which was enough to make Enesco, Capet and Thibaud die of jealousy. Calm though I am, I don't mind telling you that at the sound of it I had such a lump in the throat that I could scarcely control my tears. The whole room sat breathless. Brichot, my dear fellow,” cried the Baron, gripping the other's arm and shaking it violently, “it was sublime.”⁶

Proust consulted Pétain about the instruments used by street merchants, such as the porcelain mender, the chair-bottomer, and the goatherd.⁷ Pétain told him the chair-bottomer used a trumpet and the goatherd a flute. No more is known about the relationship between Pétain and Proust, except that during the war years the musician continued to visit the novelist.⁸ Proust wanted the information about the street cries for his own Paris symphony composed of bits taken from the street cries of ambulatory peddlers who hawked their wares, sounds that would rapidly become extinct in post-war Paris.

⁶*The Captive* 5: 382-83. Enesco, Capet and Thibaud were three of the era's most accomplished violinists.

⁷Proust, *Correspondance* 15: v-vi.

⁸Writing to Jacques-Émile Blanche in mid-October 1918, Proust mentioned “young Pétain” and described him as “a very nice viola player” whom “I see sometimes.” *Correspondance* 17: 393.