Characters:

M. de Charlus

We remember the rumors at Combray about Mme Swann being Charlus’s mistress. But here we learn that the extremely jealous Swann is relieved to know that Odette is in his company. What is the truth about this relationship and why does Swann trust Odette when she is with Charlus? We will learn all this in due time.

“Swann was quite happy whenever M. de Charlus was with Odette. He knew that between M. de Charlus and her nothing untoward could ever happen, that when M. de Charlus went out with her, it was out of friendship for himself, and that he would make no difficulty about telling him everything that she had done. Sometimes she had declared so emphatically to Swann that it was impossible for him to see her on a particular evening, she seemed to be looking forward so keenly to some outing, that Swann felt it really important that M. de Charlus should be free to accompany her. Next day, without daring to put too many questions to M. de Charlus, he would force him, by appearing not quite to understand his first answers, to give him more, after each of which he would feel himself increasingly relieved, for he very soon learned that Odette had spent her evening in the most innocent of dissipations.” —Swann’s Way 1: 448-49; see also 458.

The Marquise de Gallardon

We have said that Proust’s excels at providing multiple motivations for his characters’ action. This is something we can watch for and enjoy as we go through the novel. In this passage, we find a number of possible reasons to explain why the Princesse des Laumes (later Guermantes) shuns her cousin:

“. . . the Marquise de Gallardon, absorbed in her favorite meditation, namely her kinship with the Guermantes family, from which she derived both publicly and in private a good deal of glory not unmingled with shame, the most brilliant ornaments of that house
remaining somewhat aloof from her, perhaps because she was boring, or because she was disagreeable, or because she came of an inferior branch of the family, or very possibly for no reason at all.’ —Swann’s Way 1: 467

The Guermantes Wit

We have commented on Oriane’s catty remarks about those present at the Marquise de Saint-Euverte’s musical soirée. The following passage is from the Penguin translation, The Way by Swann’s, by Lydia Davis. The Modern Library (479) omits the mention of Belloir’s, an establishment in the rue de la Victoire, in the 9th arrondissement, where one did rent supplies for parties and dances, but no guests, as far as we know. Maxine Arnold Vogely tells us in A Proust Dictionary that Belloir’s rented chairs that were usually gilded and used for “less important guests who sat behind the more distinguished persons seated in salon chairs on the front row.” This knowledge may have inspired Oriane’s witty remark.

“I don’t know if you’re intimate with the brilliant society here but I can’t put a name to any of these astonishing people. What do you think they spend their time doing when they’re not at Mme de Saint-Euverte’s evenings? She must have ordered them along with the musicians, the chairs and the refreshments. You must admit that these ‘guests from Belloir’s’ are magnificent. Does she really have the heart to rent the same ‘extras’ every week? It isn’t possible!” The Way by Swann’s 1: 339

Odette’s poor taste

Swann tries, in vain, to persuade Odette not to go with the Verdurins to see plays and operas that he considers inferior, such Victor Massé’s Nuit de Cléopâtre. His objective is to capture her through her own self-esteem:

“What I must know is whether you are indeed one of those creatures of the lowest grade of mentality and even of charm, one of those contemptible creatures who are incapable of forgoing a pleasure. And if you are such, how could anyone love you, for
you are not even a person, a clearly defined entity, imperfect but at least perfectible. You are a formless water that will trickle down any slope that offers itself, a fish devoid of memory, incapable of thought, which all its life long in its aquarium will continue to dash itself a hundred times a day against the glass wall, always mistaking it for water.”

—Swann’s Way 1: 412

Odette’s reaction and conclusion:

Although the meaning of this speech was beyond her, she grasped that it was to be included in the category of “harangues” and scenes of reproach or supplication, which her familiarity with the ways of men enabled her, without paying any heeds to the words that were uttered, to conclude that they would not make unless they were in love, and that since they were in love, it was unnecessary to obey them, as they would only be more in love later on. —Swann’s Way 1: 413

The tone and images in this passage are very similar to those used by Proust in a letter chastising a young man, Albert Nahmias, who was typing Swann’s Way. The letter is dated August 20, 1912. Had Proust already written this passage in the novel or would he later incorporate the language from the letter into the text? One occasionally finds such similarities between novel and Proust’s letters. See Marcel Proust: Selected Letters in English 3: 86

Swann in Love

Although, at times, Swann longs to die because his obsessive jealousy makes him miserable, he fears nothing more than a recovery from his love. This notion is part of Proust’s demonstration that we consist of many different selves; new ones come into
being as old ones disappear. Such change and evolution will take on tragic tones when it comes to those we love and lose, either through a growing indifference or because our memory is unable to sustain their presence and the vitality of the profound love we once felt for them. The following passage expresses this idea about “recovery” from love and is followed by another example of multiple motivations for Swann’s generosity towards Odette:

Examining his [jealous] complaint with as much scientific detachment as if he had inoculated himself with it in order to study its effects, he told himself that, when he was cured of it, what Odette might or might not do would be a matter of indifference to him. But the truth was that in his morbid condition, he feared death itself no more than such a recovery, which would in fact amount to the death of all that he then was.

After these quiet evenings, Swann's suspicions would be temporarily lulled; he would bless the name of Odette, and next day, in the morning would order the finest jewels to be sent to her, because her kindnesses to him overnight had excited either his gratitude, or the desire to see them repeated, or a paroxysm of love for her which had need of some such outlet. —*Swann’s Way* 1: 426

**Themes:**

**Music and Art**

Swann’s meditation on Vinteuil’s sonata is an important episode in *Swann’s Way*. Here is a longer version of my analysis than the one we filmed:

The party scene concludes with a beautiful meditation on music, which is one of the most important passages in *Swann’s Way*. Here are some things to watch for. As Swann listens to the little phrase of Vinteuil’s music, that he did not know was on the program, he analyzes the memories it evokes, its effect of him, and thoughts about art and
reality. An unstated but nonetheless present notion is that of “the true life” [495] and the reprisal of the theme of “dead forever?” [497-98]. We also find in this passage a restatement of Proust’s definition of the artist [499]. The words and images and themes and their orchestration are brilliantly set forth and build toward the conclusion. As is so often the case with Proust, his writing attains the quality of music—music that amazes and delights us even in translation.

Swann is eager to leave the party.

Meanwhile the concert had begun again, and Swann saw that he could not now go before the end of the number. He suffered greatly from being shut up among all these people whose stupidity and absurdities struck him all the more painfully since, being ignorant of his [489-90] love and incapable, had they known of it, of taking any interest or of doing more than smile at it as at some childish nonsense or deplore it as an act of folly . . . he suffered above all, to the point where even the sound of the instruments made him want to cry out, from having to prolong his exile in this place to which Odette would never come, in which no one, nothing was aware of her existence, [a place] from which she was entirely absent.

But suddenly it was as though she had entered, and this apparition was so agonizingly painful that his hand clutched at his heart. [We want to remember the use of the word “apparition” and related terms throughout this passage and especially at the conclusion.] The violin had risen to a series of high notes on which it rested as though awaiting something, holding on to them in a prolonged expectancy, in the exaltation of already seeing the object of its expectation approaching, and with a desperate effort to
last out until its arrival, to welcome it before itself expiring, to keep the way open for a moment longer, with all its remaining strength, so that the stranger might pass, as one holds a door open that would otherwise automatically close. And before Swann had had time to understand what was happening and to say to himself: “It’s the little phrase from Vinteuil’s sonata—I mustn’t listen!”, all his memories of the days when Odette had been in love with him, which he had succeeded until that moment in keeping invisible in the depths of his being, deceived by this sudden reflection of a season of love whose sun, they supposed, had dawned again, had awakened from their slumber, had taken wing and risen to sing maddeningly in his ears, without pity for his present desolation, the forgotten strains of happiness. [Note that this is similar to the involuntary memory experience in the madeleine episode.] The passage continues:

In place of the abstract expressions “the time when I was happy,” “the time when I was loved,” which he had often used before then without suffering too much since his intelligence had not embodied in them anything of the past save fictitious extracts which preserved none of the reality, he now recovered everything that had fixed unalterably the specific, volatile essence of that lost happiness; he could see it all:

[Proust gives examples of Swann’s recollection of moments of his lost happiness, such as “the snowy curled petals of the chrysanthemum which she had tossed after him into his carriage, which he had kept pressed to his lips—the address “Maison Dorée” embossed on the note-paper on which he had read “My hand trembles so as I write to you”—the contraction of her eyebrows when she said pleadingly: “You won’t leave it too long before getting in touch with me?”]
At that time he had been satisfying a sensual curiosity in discovering the pleasures of those who live for love alone. He had supposed that he could stop there, that he would not be obliged to learn their sorrows also; yet how small a thing the actual charm of Odette was now in comparison with the fearsome terror which extended it like a cloudy halo all around her, the immense anguish of not knowing at every hour of the day and night what she was doing, of not possessing her wholly, always and everywhere! [Swann recalls those occasions when it was Odette who pursued him, who promised always to be free to see him. Her eagerness to see his study, her begging him to accompany her to the Verdurins’. Now the reverse of all this is true. He remembers the night when everything changed, when he fell in love with Odette, the night he found her on the boulevard des Italiens, the night they first made love. He compares himself then and now.] 492

493. . . Swann could distinguish, standing motionless before that scene of remembered happiness, a wretched figure who filled him with such pity, because he did not at first recognize who it was, that he had to lower his eyes lest anyone should observe that they were filled with tears. It was himself.

When he had realized this, his pity ceased; he was jealous, now, of that other self whom she had loved, he was jealous of those men of whom he had so often said, without suffering too much: “Perhaps she loves them,” now that he had exchanged the vague idea of loving, in which there was no love, for the petals of the chrysanthemums and the letterhead of the Maison Dorée, which were full of it. [Then Swann makes the familiar gesture that indicates his mental torpor has overcome him.]
[Up until this point his thoughts have been egotistical, vain, self-pitying.]

Then he hears the violin:

There are in the music of the violin—if one does not see the instrument itself—accents so closely akin to those of certain contralto voices that one <493-94> has the illusion that a singer has taken her place amid the orchestra. One raises one’s eyes, and sees only the wooden case, delicate as a Chinese box, but, at moments, one is still tricked by the siren’s deceiving call; at times, too, one thinks one is listening to a captive genie, struggling in the darkness of the sapient, quivering and enchanted box, liked a devil immersed in a stoup of holy water; sometimes again, it is in the air, at large, like a pure and supernatural being that unfolds its invisible message as it goes by.

[The violin itself—and we remember that it’s Vinteuil who composed this music—is recreating in art form the battle between the themes that are profane (the devil) and sacred (the pure, supernatural being). The invisible message that is unfolded by the supernatural being is a variation of Proust’s definition of the artist: a true artist is one who makes us see, who makes things visible to us = The phrase in French is succinct: rendre visible. Proust will continue in this passage to define art and the artist and what art does, what art means to us.]

As though the musicians were not nearly so much playing the phrase as performing the rites on which it insisted before it would consent to appear, and proceeding to utter the incantations necessary to procure, and to prolong for a few moments, the miracle of its apparition, Swann, who was no more able to see it than if it had belonged to a world of ultra-violet light, and who experienced something like the
refreshing sense of a metamorphosis in the momentary blindness with which he was struck as he approached it, Swann felt its presence like that of a protective goddess, a confidante of his love, who, in order to be able to come to him through the crowd and to draw him aside to speak to him, had disguised herself in this sweeping cloak of sound. Of those sorrows which the little phrase foreshadowed to him then, which, without being affected by them himself, he had seen it carry past him, smiling, on its sinuous and rapid course, of those sorrows which had now become his own, without his having any hope of being ever delivered from them, it seemed to say to him, as once it had said of his happiness: “What does it all matter? It means nothing.” And Swann’s thoughts were borne for the first time on a wave of pity and tenderness towards Vinteuil, toward that unknown, exalted brother who must have suffered so greatly. What could his life have been? From the depths of what well of sorrow could he had drawn that god-like strength, that unlimited power of creation? —Swann’s Way 1: 495

[The shift now is from the egotistical to the altruistic. We know the answer to the question: From the depths of what well of sorrow could he had drawn that god-like strength, that unlimited power of creation? It is Vinteuil’s unconditional love for his daughter and his anxiety about her health and happiness and her future.

[We have seen that Swann’s obsession with Odette weakened him, indeed, nearly destroyed him and made him long for death. Vinteuil serves as the example of the artist who transforms life into art, making it accessible and universal. Until now, Swann has only been able to transform art into life, trivializing it by identifying Odette with Botticelli and with Vinteuil’s music. Now he is able at last to probe and comprehend its mysteries. He is also connected to Vinteuil and to art, as we all are, through the
revelations brought to him by this music. This is why he calls Vinteuil his exalted
brother. Now Swann sees the proper use of pain and suffering and how the artist
transposes his egotism into altruism by creating art. This comprehension of Swann’s
foreshadows to a large degree, with important differences and variations, the discoveries
that Marcel will make at the end of his quest.]

[The passage continues with thoughts about the consolation we find in art.]

When it was the little phrase that spoke to him of the vanity of his sufferings,
Swann found a solace in that very wisdom which, but a little while back, had seemed to
him intolerable when he fancied he could read it on the faces of indifferent strangers who
regarded his love as an insignificant aberration. For the little phrase, unlike them,
whatever opinion it might hold on the transience of these states of the soul, saw in them
something not, as all these people did, less serious than the events of every life, but, on
the contrary, so far superior to it as to be alone worth while expressing. It was the charms
of an intimate sadness that it sought to imitate, to re-create, and their <495-96> very
essence, for all that it consists in being incommunicable and in appearing trivial to
everyone except him who experiences them, [their very essence] had been captured and
made visible by the little phrase. So much so that it caused their value to be
acknowledged, their divine sweetness savored, by all those same onlookers, if they were
at all musical—who then would fail to recognize them in real life, in every individual
love that came into being beneath their eyes.

[We often fail to see the connections between art and our own lives; how art speaks not
only to us but also for us.]
Doubtless the form in which it had codified those charms could not be resolved into rational discourse. But ever since, more than a year before, discovering to him many of the riches of his own soul, the love of music had, for a time at least, been born in him, Swann had regarded musical motifs as actual ideas, of another world, of another order, ideas veiled in shadow, unknown, impenetrable to the human mind, but nonetheless perfectly distinct from one another, unequal among themselves in value and significance.

[There follows a brief musical analysis of the time when he heard the little phrase played for him on the piano alone that first evening at the Verdurins’.]

When, after that first evening at the Verdurins’, he had had the little phrase played over to him again, and had sought to disentangle from his confused impressions how it was that, like a perfume or a caress, it swept over and enveloped him, he had observed that it was to the closeness of the intervals between the five notes which composed it and to the constant repetition of two of them that was due that impression of a frigid and withdrawn sweetness; but in reality he knew that he was basing this conclusion not upon the phrase itself, but merely upon certain equivalents, substituted (for his mind’s convenience) for the mysterious entity of which he had become aware, before he ever knew the Verdurins, at that earlier party when for the first time he had heard the sonata played.

He knew that the very memory of the piano falsified still further the perspective in which he saw the elements of music, that 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 it, 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. Vinteuil had been one of those musicians. 496-97

In his little phrase, although it might present a clouded surface to the eye of reason, one sensed a content so solid, so consistent, so explicit, to which it gave so new, so original a force, that those who had once heard it preserved the memory of it on an equal footing with the ideas of the intellect. Swann referred back to it as to a conception of love and happiness whose distinctive character he recognized at once.

Even when he was not thinking of the little phrase, it existed latent in his mind on the same footing as certain other notions without material equivalent, such as our notions of light, of sound, of perspective, of physical pleasure, the rich possessions wherewith our inner temple is diversified and adorned. [Proust is analogizing here the generous, beneficial effects that great art has on us: the rich possessions wherewith our inner temple is diversified and adorned. Then he examines the question of Dead forever?] Perhaps we shall lose them, perhaps they will be obliterated, if we return to nothingness. But so long as we are alive, we can no more bring ourselves to a state in which we shall not have known them than we can with regard to any material object, than we can, for example, doubt the luminosity of a lamp that has just been lit, in view of the changed aspect of everything in the room, from which even the memory of the darkness has vanished. In
that way Vinteuil’s phrase, like some theme, say, in *Tristan*, which represents to us also a
certain emotional accretion, had espoused our mortal state, had endued a vesture of
humanity that was peculiarly affecting. Its destiny was linked to the future, to the reality
of the human soul, of which it was one of the most special and distinctive ornaments.
[And again the Dead forever? theme.] Perhaps it is not-being that is the true state, and all
our dream of life is inexistent; but, if so, we feel that these phrases of music, these
conceptions which exist in relation to our dream, must be nothing either. We shall perish,
but we have as hostages these divine captives who will follow and share our fate. And
death in their company is somehow less bitter, less inglorious, perhaps even less
probable.

[Dead forever? Even if the answer is “yes,” we find consolation in art, in its beauty
created by these explorers of the invisible who manage to make it visible. So far as
Proust’s religious beliefs are concerned, he comes across often as an agnostic, but he does
express, as is the case here, what his great contemporary Albert Einstein called the
“cosmic religious sentiment.” We will see Proust return again to the question of Dead
forever?]  

So Swann was not mistaken in believing that the phrase of the sonata really did
exist. Human as it was from this point of view, it yet belonged to an order of supernatural
beings whom we have never seen, but whom, in spite of that, we recognize and acclaim
with rapture when some explorer of the unseen contrives to coax one forth, to bring it
down, from that divine world to which he has access, to shine for a brief moment in the
firmament of ours. This was what Vinteuil had done with the little phrase. Swann felt that
the composer had been content (with the musical instruments at his disposal) to unveil it,
to make it visible, following and respecting its outlines with a hand so loving, so prudent,
so delicate and so sure that the sound altered at every moment, softening and
blurring to indicate a shadow, springing back into life when it must follow the curve of
some bolder projection. And one proof that Swann was not mistaken when he believed in
the real existence of this phrase, was that anyone with the least discernment would at
once have detected the imposture had Vinteuil, endowed with less power to see and to
render its forms, sought to dissemble, by adding a counterfeit touch here and there, the
flaws in his vision or the deficiencies of his hand.

[The artist must be able not only to see but he must also master his craft in order to render
visible to others the mysteries he has discovered. This is—here and elsewhere in this
meditation—the implicit answer to what constitutes the true life.]

The phrase had disappeared. Swann knew that it would come again at the end of
the last movement. . . Swann listened to all the scattered themes which would enter into
the composition of the phrase, as its premises enter into the inevitable conclusion of a
syllogism; he was assisting at the mystery of its birth. “An audacity,” he exclaimed to
himself, “as inspired, perhaps, as that of a Lavoisier or an Ampère—the audacity of a
Vinteuil experimenting, discovering the secret laws that govern an unknown force,
driving, across a region unexplored, towards the one possible goal, the invisible team in
which he has placed his trust and which he may never discern!” How beautiful the
dialogue which Swann now heard between piano and violin, at the beginning of the last
passage! The suppression of human speech, so far from letting fancy reign there
uncontrolled (as one might have thought), had eliminated <499-500> it [fancy]
altogether; never was spoken language so inexorably determined, never had it known
questions so pertinent, such irrefutable replies. [Style: We see how Proust’s vocabulary, his orchestrating of the themes, like the little phrase itself, builds and prepares us for the conclusion. Proust is writing his own music here.] And his personality was now so divided that the strain of waiting for the imminent moment when he would find himself face to face with it again shook him with one of those sobs which a beautiful line of poetry or a sad piece of news will wring from us, not when we are alone, but when we impart them to friends in whom we see ourselves reflected like a third person whose probable emotion affects them too.

[This is why Swann views Vinteuil as his exalted brother because he has been able to transpose and elevate into art, into his music, the emotions and sensations that unite us, bind us together, and even the ideas—ideas that Swann finds in the music and reveals to us through his meditation and analysis.] One of my favorite quotes about music is found in a later volume when Marcel wonders “whether music might not be the unique example of what might have been—if the invention of language, the formation of words, the analysis of ideas had not intervened—the means of communication between souls. It is like a possibility that has come to nothing; humanity has developed along other lines, those of spoken and written language.” —The Captive 5: 344

[This is what Proust is describing here: Vinteuil’s transposition of his sorrows into beautiful, music serves as the medium through which Swann’s soul can communicate with his. And as Swann has realized, so can anyone who actually listens to the music. As we are about to see, Swann fears that this will not be the crowd at the party who will doubtlessly break the spell and force his return to that world. Such is the transfixing power of the music that these fears will be, for the most part, unwarranted.]
Let’s return to the passage:

[The little phrase] reappeared, but this time to remain poised in the air, and to sport there for a moment only, as though immobile, and shortly to expire. And so Swann lost nothing of the precious time for which it lingered. It was still there, like an iridescent bubble that floats for a while unbroken. As a rainbow whose brightness is fading seems to subside, then soars again and, before it is extinguished, shines forth with greater splendor than it has ever shown; so—to the two colors which the little phrase had hitherto allowed to appear—it added others now, chords shot with every hue in the prism, and made them sing. Swann dared not move, and would have liked to compel all the other people in the room to remain still also, as if the slightest movement might imperil the magical presence, supernatural, delicious, frail, that was so soon to vanish. But no one, as it happened, dreamed of speaking. The ineffable utterance of one solitary man, absent, perhaps dead (Swann did not know whether Vinteuil was still alive), breathed out above the rites of those two hierophants, sufficed to arrest the attention of three hundred minds, and made of that platform on which a soul was thus called into being one of the noblest altars on which a supernatural ceremony could be performed.

[The two hierophant are, of course, the piano and violin. A hierophant is a priest and the word is derived from ancient Greek, meaning one who shows what is holy. We know how the music is related to Vinteuil’s sorrows over his daughter’s waywardness and how his music is at the center of profane and sacred themes of cruelty and art. Here is the conclusion of the passage.]
So that when the phrase had unraveled itself at last, and only its fragmentary echoes floated among the subsequent themes which had already taken its place, if Swann at first was irritated to see the Comtesse de Monteriender, famed for her naïveté, lean over towards him to confide her impressions to him before the sonata had even come to an end, he could not refrain from smiling, and perhaps also found an underlying sense, which she herself was incapable of perceiving, in the words that she used. Dazzled by the virtuosity of the performers, the Comtesse exclaimed to Swann: “It’s astonishing! I’ve never seen anything to beat it. . .” But a scrupulous regard for accuracy making her correct her first assertion, she added the reservation: “anything to beat it. . . since the table-turning!” —Swann’s Way 1: 499-501

Proust has found an amusing and appropriate answer to the “dead forever?” question, an answer supplied unwittingly by another of the listeners. As we’ve said, the words and imagery used throughout the passage build to this conclusion. Proust also needed to find a way to bring us back to the story, the unfolding of the narration. He does this, fittingly enough, as a musician might: in a humorous variation of one of his major themes: the countess’s comparison of the music to a séance with table-turnings sits us softly back down in the drawing-room, packed with its three hundred guests, in the world of vanity fair.