Lecture 7

Charles Baudelaire

Proust greatly admired *Les Fleurs du mal* (The Flowers of Evil), a collection of poems published in 1857 by Charles Baudelaire, 1821-67. The year 1857 was a stellar one for French letters and world literature, because that year also saw the publication of Gustave Flaubert’s novel *Madame Bovary*, which is usually on lists of the ten best novels ever written. Baudelaire and Flaubert were both prosecuted for obscenity; Flaubert won his case, but Baudelaire lost his. Baudelaire is considered by many to be the first and greatest modern French poet. The poem *Chant d’automne* contains the line “the sun’s rays shining upon the sea,” (le soleil rayonnant sur la mer), which becomes a motif for Proust. —*Within a Budding Grove* 2: 343

The mysterious message that the trees of Hudimesnil seem to have for Marcel is reminiscent of Baudelaire’s famous poem, *Correspondances*, considered by many to be the founding poem of the Symbolist movement.

Dives

When Proust went to Cabourg, the train station where he arrived was at Dives, on the Normandy coast. Although very modest in appearance today, it was from Dives that William the Conqueror (Guillaume le Conquérant) set sail in 1066 to go and conquer England. It was Guillaume who built the Romanesque church in Dives as a monument to the “miraculous Christ” found in the sea. It was this church and its legend that inspired Proust to create the window described by Marcel on arriving at Balbec: “It was, most certainly, in the sea that the fishermen had found, according to the legend, the miraculous Christ, of which a window in the church that stood a few yards from where I now was recorded the discovery.” —*Within a Budding Grove* 2: 322

On Reading

Here is another good quote about reading from a preface Proust wrote to one of his translations of works by John Ruskin:
... one of the great and marvelous features of beautiful books (and one which will make us understand the role at once essential and limited, that reading can play in our spiritual life) which for the author could be called “Conclusions” and for the reader “Incitements.” We feel quite truly that our wisdom begins where that of the author ends, and we would like to have him give us answers, when all he can do is give us desires. And these desires he can arouse in us only by making us contemplate the supreme beauty, which the last effort of his art has permitted him to reach. But by a singular and, moreover, providential law of mental optics (a law which perhaps signifies that we can receive the truth from nobody, and that we must create it ourselves), that which is the end of their wisdom appears to us as but the beginning of ours. Preface to Sésame et les Lys, On Reading Ruskin 114-15