Lecture 8

Characters and Themes

Characters:

Bloch

The anti-Semite overheard on the beach, turns out to be Bloch, who is Jewish, and is something of a traitor to his race because he wants to be assimilated, as was Proust’s mother’s side of the family. Her maiden name was Weil. We will watch the evolution of Bloch over time. There is another passage, where he speaks of the Jewish side of his nature. See *Within a Budding Grove* 2: 445

In the following passage, Proust describes Bloch and uses a marvelous “layered” image to indicate the tremendous social pressures that Bloch must endure and why those have made him adopt a different tactic to improve his social standing. (It is thought that Proust used a lot of his own somewhat outlandish adolescent behavior to characterize Bloch).

Bloch was ill-bred, neurotic and snobbish, and since he belonged to a family of little repute, had to support, as on the floor of ocean, the incalculable pressure imposed on him not only by the Christians at the surface but by all the intervening layers of Jewish castes superior to his own, each of them crushing with its contempt the one that was immediately beneath it. To pierce his way through to the open air by raising himself from Jewish family to Jewish family would have taken Bloch many thousands of years. It was better to seek an outlet in another direction. —*Within a Budding Grove* 2: 442

I was myself taken in, and from the way in which M. Bloch (Bloch’s father) spoke of Bergotte I assumed that he too was an old friend. In fact, all the famous people M. Bloch claimed to know he knew only ‘without actually knowing them,’ from having seen them at a distance in the theater or in the street. He imagined, moreover, that his appearance, his name, his personality were not unknown to them, and that when they caught sight of him they had often to repress a furtive inclination to greet him. (Then, this remark which we can compare to Swann’s reaction to the hearing Vinteuil named as the
possible composer of the sonata and to Mme de Villeparisis’s assessment of the writers
her family knew.) People in society, because they know men of talent in the flesh,
because they have them to dinner in their houses, do not on that account understand them
any better.
—Within a Budding Grove 2: 477

Bloch boasts of his amorous exploits, but, given what we know about his and his
father’s practice of exaggerating by claiming to know people whom they only know by
sight, perhaps we should take his claim to have made love to Odette with a large grain of
salt. There is an untranslated wordplay in this passage. The zone railway that ran around
Paris was called the “ceinture,” which is the same word for belt or sash.

Bloch: “I picked her (Mme Swann) up a few days before that on the Zone
railway, where, speaking of zones, she was so kind as to undo hers for the benefit of your
humble servant; I’ve never had such a time in my life, and we were just going to make
arrangements to meet again when somebody she knew had the bad taste to get in at the
last station but one.”

My continued silence did not appear to please Bloch. “I was hoping,” he said,
“thanks to you, to learn her address, so as to go there several times a week to taste in her
arms the delights of Eros, dear to the gods; but I do not insist since you seem pledged to
discretion with respect to a professional who gave herself to me three times running, and
in the most refined manner, between Paris and the Point-du-Jour. I am bound to see her
again, some night.” —Within a Budding Grove 2: 489

Gilberte

Proust will continue to use sea imagery in his portrayal of Albertine. Gilberte,
who is seen for the first time at Tansonville, evokes the sea only once in an unflattering
way. When she and Marcel are at odds with each other: “Sa figure, devenue presque
laide, ressemblait alors à ces plages ennuyeuses où la mer, retirée très loin, vous fatigue
d’un reflet toujours pareil que cerne un horizon immuable et borné” À l’ombre des jeunes
filles en fleurs 1: 573
Her face, grown almost ugly, reminded me then of those dreary beaches where the sea, ebbing far out, wearies one with its faint shimmering, everywhere the same, encircled by an immutable low horizon. —*Within a Budding Grove* 2: 216

**Grandmother**

M. de Charlus extolled the true “nobility” of mind and heart which characterized these women, playing upon the word in a double sense by which he himself was taken in, and in which lay the falsehood of this bastard conception, of this medley of aristocracy, generosity and art, but also its seductiveness, dangerous to people like my grandmother, to whom the less refined but more innocent prejudice of a nobleman who cared only about quarterings and took no thought for anything besides would have appeared too silly for words, whereas she was defenseless as soon as a thing presented itself under the externals of an intellectual superiority, so much so, indeed, that she regarded princes as enviable above all other men because they were able to have a La Bruyère or a Fénelon as their tutors. —*Within a Budding Grove* 2: 461-62

**Robert de Saint-Loup**

Saint-Loup, as you know, is a member of the Guermantes family, most of whose members are extremely arrogant and fiercely proud of their titles and genealogy, which can be traced back to the era of the Crusades. He, however, prizes intelligence and more modern views. In the following wonderful image, Proust shows us Saint-Loup’s face as architecture that has evolved from a feudal castle to a modern library:

As for Robert, scarcely able to keep his seat at table, concealing beneath a courtier’s smile his warrior’s thirst for action—when I looked at him closely I could see to what extent the vigorous bone structure of his triangular face must have been modeled on that of his ancestors, a face designed rather for an ardent Bowman than for a sensitive man of letters. Beneath the delicate skin the bold construction, the feudal architecture were apparent. His head reminded one of those old castle keeps on which the disused battlements are still to be seen, although inside they have been converted into libraries. —*Within a Budding Grove* 2: 544
Proust often gives us defining details for his characters that go far beyond what other writers do. In a passage that I did not point out earlier, there is a detailed description of Gilberte’s handwriting, the basis for a scene that occurs later in The Fugitive. Here is Marcel on the letters he receives from Saint-Loup, who has returned to his regiment:

I could tell at once when it was from him that a letter came, for it had always that second face which a person assumes when he is absent, in the features of which (the characters of the handwriting) there is no reason why we should not suppose that we can detect an individual soul just as much as in the line of a nose or the inflexions of his voice. —*Within a Budding Grove* 2: 612

**Themes:**

**The “Aquarium”**

Here is another view of the poor standing outside the dining-room at the Grand-Hôtel. The season has advanced and now it is too cold for the windows to remain open and those outside have to huddle against the walls:

And then at the end of the season came the days when I could no longer go straight in from the front through the dining-room; its windows stood open no more, for it was night now outside and the swarm of poor folk and curious idlers, attracted by the blaze of light which was beyond their reach, hung in black clusters chilled by the north wind, on the luminous sliding walls of that buzzing hive of glass. —*Within a Budding Grove* 2: 527