Lecture 16

The Age of Speed

(Proust’s own characterization of his era.)

Many of Proust’s contemporaries feared the effects of speed, as we see in this quote:

People said that an age of speed required rapidity in art, precisely as they might have said that the next war could not last longer than a fortnight, or that the coming of railways would kill the little places beloved of the coaches, which the motor-car was none the less to restore to favor. Composers were warned not to strain the attention of their audience, as though we had not at our disposal different degrees of attention, among which it rests precisely with the artist himself to arouse the highest. —Sodom and Gomorrah 4: 290

Some even feared that cyclists would not be able tolerate the high speeds reached by racers or anyone capable of pedaling very fast. “The bicycle was about four times faster than walking and warnings were issued about getting ‘bicycle face’ by moving against the wind at such high speeds. . . .” Quoted by Stephen Kern, The Culture of Time and Space, 111.

Alfred de Vigny (1797-1863)

In the following passage, Marcel quotes a line of poetry to Albertine:

And, looking at Albertine’s mackintosh [raincoat] in which she seemed to have become another person, the tireless vagrant of rainy days, and which close-fitting, malleable and grey, seemed at that moment not so much intended to protect her clothes from the rain as to have been soaked by it and to be clinging to her body as though to take the imprint of her form for a sculptor, I tore off that tunic which jealousy enwrapped a longed for breast and, drawing Albertine towards me:

But won’t you, indolent traveler, rest your head
And dream your dreams upon my shoulder?

I said, taking her head in my hands, and showing her the wide meadows, flooded and silent, which extended in the gathering dusk to a horizon closed by the parallel chains of distant blue hills. —Sodom and Gomorrah 4: 357-58

The lines quoted by Marcel are from Alfred de Vigny’s famous poem, “La Maison du Berger.” We know from a letter that in October 1899, Proust quoted these verses in a similar setting to Marie de Chevilly. Here are the lines from the poem:

Mais toi, ne veux-tu pas, voyageuse indolente,
Rêver sur mon épaule en y posant ton front?

The Eulenburg Affair

Charlus is said to be “irresistibly drawn by his own tendencies to the Eulenburg affair.” —Sodom and Gomorrah 4: 471

Here is an excerpt about the scandal from my book Proust in Love:

The attitude of the public at large and the moral and legal issues relative to homosexuality occupied Proust’s thoughts throughout 1908. That was year when a sex scandal erupted in Germany that involved allegations of homosexuality at the highest levels of the Kaiser Wilhelm II’s court. Prince Philipp Eulenburg, the suave, cultivated former ambassador to Vienna, and the Kaiser’s closest friend, was accused by Maximilian Harden, the muckraking, nationalistic editor of the bellicose weekly newspaper Die Zukunft, of having peopled the Kaiser’s inner circle with homosexuals. A dismissed minister who had kept secret files of the private lives of his associates at court sought revenge by releasing the damaging documents to Harden. Harden and his colleagues believed that Eulenburg and his associates were pacifists and Francophiles whose influence on the Kaiser thwarted Harden’s own ambitions. Harden’s charges resulted in a series of libel trials that ended in Eulenburg’s disgrace and arrest. Not since the Wilde trial had there been such public awareness of homosexuality.

Proust followed the Eulenburg trials through the press and his contacts with French diplomats who knew the German court. In a letter of November 9, he asked his
friend the diplomat Robert de Billy what he thought about “this homosexuality trial? I think they’ve hit out rather at random, although it’s absolutely true about some of them, notably the Prince, but some of the details are very comic.” For Proust, whose thoughts often centered on sexual ambiguity and homosexuality, the plight of Eulenburg and others accused of acts considered perverse provided another occasion to ponder same-sex love and society’s persecution of such behavior. There is no doubt as to whose side Proust took. In a letter to Hahn, he criticized the German ambassador to France, Prince von Radolin, for having failed to show sufficient sympathy for Eulenburg’s plight.

From a diplomatic point of view, the French in their glee over the embarrassing scandal at the Kaiser’s court, failed to appreciate that the disgrace of Eulenburg and other “catamites” could only work to France’s disadvantage as Germany grew more bellicose. In Paris one heard references made to the “German vice” and Berlin was nicknamed Sodome-sur-Spree. In the places where French homosexuals gathered, “Parlez-vous allemand?”, “Do you speak German?” became the password for those seeking partners.

At some point in late 1907 or early 1908, perhaps inspired by the German trials, Proust began to consider writing an essay about homosexuality. He also began to relive the trials and downfall of the Irish poet, novelist, and playwright Oscar Wilde, whose visit to Paris in the late fall of 1891 had been the great event of that season’s literary salons. Wilde, who had published his first and only novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray, a year earlier, had yet to write Salome, or the sparkling, light comedies on which his literary fame rests today. But his reputation in France, where his novel was not yet known, derived from his poems and fairy tales as well as from his wit and eccentricities. Although Wilde’s hosts may have been at pains to explain the precise nature of his accomplishments, they did not doubt that his gifts were authentic and certain to lead him to greatness and renown. Wilde possessed qualities the French had always held in high esteem: those of a dazzling conversationalist and a sharp, brilliant wit. During his Paris visit, Wilde remarked to Enrique Gomez Carrillo, a young Guatemalan diplomat whom he met at the Café d’Harcourt: “I have put all my talent into my works. I have put all my genius into my life.” And, what’s more, this Irishman had mastered the language of Racine and Molière, acquiring a prodigious vocabulary and eloquent style; fluent French—even though badly pronounced—poured from his large, voluptuous lips. Wilde
relished being the new Paris sensation. Like Proust, whom he was soon to meet, Wilde thoroughly enjoyed society, finding “in it both the satisfaction of his vanity and an inexhaustible source of fatuity.”

**La Raspelière/Les Frémonts**

Proust took the name La Raspelière, as he did with a number of place names used in the novel, from names of locales around Illiers. The villa in the novel that is perched at the top of a very steep and high hill, with two commanding views, one of a valley and the other of the sea, is directly inspired by the villa known as Les Frémonts, where Proust stayed as a young man as the house guest of his friends the Arthur Baignères.

On October 1, 1891, before dinner, another guest at the villa, painter Jacques Emile-Blanche drew Marcel’s portrait in pencil, a likeness that would serve as the basis for the full-length oil portrait he would soon undertake.

It was Proust himself who had played the key role in the purchase of the villa by the Finalys. On September 29, 1892, Baron Horace de Landau purchased Les Frémonts, for the sum of 152,000 francs, as a gift for his niece Mme Hugo Finaly. This is the direct inspiration for the scene where the duchesse de Guermantes makes the pun “Teaser Augustus.”

In 2009, at Cabourg, I met Mike Le Bas at Les Frémonts. A descendent of the Finalys, M. Le Bas now owns the estate and hopes to raise the money to restore the villa to its former glory.