PROUST ONLINE FOLDER

Lecture 27

Characters and Themes

Characters:

Charlus, saved by the Archangel Michael

A letter to Marcel found several years after Charlus’s death indicated that Charlus had intended to murder Morel: “One of us two had to disappear. I had decided to kill him. God counseled him prudence [Morel didn’t come] to preserve me from crime. I do not doubt that the intercession of the Archangel Michael, my patron saint, played a great part in this and I beseech him to pardon me for having so neglected him over many years and for having so ill responded to the innumerable favors which he has conferred upon me, especially in my struggle against evil. —Time Regained 6: 168

Charlus’s voice

His voice, according to Proust, is typical of a homosexuals in that it seems never to strike the right note. In the second quote, Charlus’s manner of speaking is based on Count Robert de Montesquiou’s. We know this from what Proust says in letters about Montesquiou’s voice:

He was speaking seriously now and for a brief instant, with the noble air of a Saint-Vallier or a Saint-Mégrin, erect and stiff and solemn, he was free of all those mannerisms by which men of his sort betray themselves. And yet, why is it that none of these men can ever have a voice which hits absolutely the right note? Even at this moment, when M. de Charlus’s voice was so very near to solemnity, its pitch was false, it still needed the tuning-fork to correct it. —Time Regained 6: 141

He had got into the habit of talking at the top of his voice, from excitability, from the need to find an outlet for impressions of which, never having cultivated any art, he needed to unburden himself—as an airman unloads his bombs, if necessary in open country—even where his words could impinge upon nobody, particularly in society, where they fell completely at random and where people listened to him out of
snobbishness, uncritically and (to such an extent did he tyrannize his audience) one may say under compulsion and even from fear. On the boulevards this loud harangue of his was also a mark of contempt for the passers-by, for whom he no more lowered his voice than he would have stepped aside to avoid them. But it struck a discordant note there and caused astonishment and, worse than that, rendered audible to the people who turned round to look at us remarks which might well made them take us for defeatists. I pointed this out to M. de Charlus but succeeded only in arousing his mirth. —*Time Regained* 6: 159

**Marcel or Proust?**

Proust comes extremely close to identifying himself with the Narrator when Marcel refers to having given Charlus a copy of his translation of John Ruskin’s *Sesame and Lilies*. —*Time Regained* 6: 206

**Jupien’s lack of discretion**

The Baron was slightly cross with Jupien for his lack of prudence, for he knew that in this house which he had instructed his factotum to purchase for him and to manage through a subordinate, everybody, thanks to the blunders of Mlle d’Oloron’s uncle, was more or less aware of his identity and his name (many, however, thought that the Baron de Charlus was not a title but a nickname, and mispronounced and distorted it, so that their own stupidity and not the discretion of Jupien had served to protect the Baron).

—*Time Regained* 6: 184

**Priest, a bad**

In his description of the priest who frequents Jupien’s brothel, we note the care taken by Proust to indicate the rarity of such behavior among the clergy. Perhaps Proust feared being criticized for having placed a priest in such a place. The French for “the expenses of the church” is more amusing in the original: “pour les frais du culte.” . . . there entered the room with a slow step, by the side of a soldier who had evidently emerged with her from a neighboring bedroom, what appeared to me to be an elderly lady in a black skirt. I soon realized my mistake: it was a priest—that thing so rare, and in France altogether exceptional, a bad priest. [...] Absent-mindedly the bad priest had forgotten to pay for his room. Jupien, who had always a ready wit, shook the collecting
box in which he placed the contribution of each client and said, as he made it clink: “For the expenses of the church, Monsieur l’Abbé!” The horrid creature apologized, put in his coin and disappeared. —*Time Regained* 6: 201

**Saint-Loup and speed**

When Marcel thinks it is Saint-Loup whom he sees leaving Jupien’s brothel, it is the latter’s rapid movement through space that serves to identify him:

Something, however, struck me: not his face, which I did not see, nor his uniform, which was disguised by a heavy greatcoat, but the extraordinary disproportion between the number of different points which his body successively occupied and the very small number of seconds within which he made good this departure which had almost the air of a sortie from a besieged town. —*Time Regained* 6: 174-75 [See Viscount Bertrand de Fénelon under “miscellaneous.”]

**Mme Verdurin and the biggest “bore” of all time**

Mme Verdurin’s reaction to the war’s effect on the little clan: . . . she did not want to let the faithful go off to the war, and looked upon it as a great “bore” that caused them to defect. —*Time Regained* 6: 114

**Themes:**

**Change, rapid adaptation to**

Generally, it is true, novelties which people find alarming pass off very well. The most prudent republicans thought that it was mad to separate the Church from the State. It was as easy as sending a letter through the post. Dreyfus was rehabilitated, Picquart was made Minister of War, and nobody uttered a murmur. —*Time Regained* 6: 156

**Fear**

The siren with its warning of bombs troubled Jupien’s visitors no more than an iceberg would have done. Indeed, the threat of physical danger delivered them from the fear which for long had morbidly harassed them. For it is wrong to suppose that the scale of our fears corresponds to that of the dangers by which they are inspired. A man may be
afraid of not sleeping and not in the least afraid of a serious duel, afraid of a rat and not of a lion. —*Time Regained* 6: 208

**Literature as a mirror of life**

This too was Charlus’s reaction at the time of the murder of Rasputin, an event which, happening as it did at a super-party *à la* Dostoievsky, caused a general surprise because people found in it so strong a Russian flavor (this impression would have been stronger still had the public not been unaware of aspects of the case there were perfectly well known to M. de Charlus), because life disappoints us so often that in the end we come to believe that literature bears no relation to it and we are therefore astounded when we see the precious ideas that literature has revealed to us display themselves, without fear of getting spoiled, gratuitously, naturally, in the midst of daily life, when we see, for instance, that a supper-party and a murder taking place in Russia actually have something Russian about them. —*Time Regained* 6: 127

**Truth and beauty**

Charlus: “I do not know whether the raised arm of St Firmin [statue of the porche of Amiens] is still intact today or whether it has been broken. If so, the loftiest affirmation of faith and energy ever made has disappeared from the world.”

“You meant its symbol, Monsieur,” I interrupted. Then after expressing his own admiration for the statue, Marcel says: “Do not sacrifice men to stones whose beauty comes precisely from their having for a moment given fixed form to human truths.”

This is certainly Proust’s goal as well: to give fixed form to human truths. —*Time Regained* 6: 154

Proust, as we see, like John Keats, equates truth with beauty.

**Wagner’s music and air raids**

It was the period when there were constant Gotha raids; the air was perpetually buzzing with the vibration, vigilant and sonorous, of French airplanes. But at intervals the siren rang out like the heart-rending scream of a Valkyrie—the only German music to have been heard since the war—until the moment when the fire-engines announced that
the alert was over, while beside them, like an invisible street-urchin, the all-clear at regular intervals commented on the good news and hurled its cry of joy into the air.

—*Time Regained* 6: 127