

# Proust's Comparisons and Contrasts

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One of Proust's most successful literary devices throughout the seven volumes of *A la recherche du temps perdu* is undoubtedly his use of comparisons and contrasts. He is constantly drawing parallels to reinforce the fabric of his long narrative, whether by comparing and contrasting two aristocrats, or an aristocrat and a valet's son, or two wealthy bourgeois. A principal concern is to demonstrate how his frustrated Narrator avoids Swann's fate while observing the success of all those around him. Proust does this by means of recurring patterns that create a great resonance within the work and contribute enormously to the final impact of the novel upon the reader. Awareness of even some of those echoes can only increase the reader's pleasure in this inexhaustible masterpiece.

No two men would seem to be more dissimilar than the elegant Swann and the fatuous Verdurin, yet they share certain traits of character. They had both been art critics. Swann had abandoned his study of Vermeer many years before the Narrator's own story begins.<sup>1</sup> He then took it up again without much success. To distract himself from his obsession with Odette he decides to return to his work but to complete the research he would have to travel to The Hague, Dresden, and Brunswick. He is so much the prisoner of his own feelings, however, that he cannot bear to leave Paris whether Odette is there or not (I,353). Unlike Swann Verdurin had been a successful art critic and the author of an excellent study of Whistler before his marriage. He confesses to the Goncourts that he had renounced writing thereafter in part because of his domineering wife, in part because of his morphine habit, a renunciation that had as its effect the fact "that most of the habitués of his wife's salon did not even know that the husband had ever written" (III,709). Thus his creative activity ended with his marriage just as that of Swann did not progress after his infatuation with and marriage to Odette.

Swann and Verdurin resemble one another in an even more surprising way. The reader would naturally assume, given her reputation, that Odette de Crécy was just another of the "Grand Horizontals" of the period like Emilienne d'Alençon (III,1086) or Liane de Pougy.<sup>2</sup> The Narrator had known a Comte de Crécy at Balbec, "a gentleman without means but of an extreme distinction" (II,1082), something of an intelligent and amusing but importunate hanger-on. The Narrator and the reader are thus all the more surprised to learn that he was indeed Odette's first husband and lived on a small pension given him by Swann (III,301). The story of Saniette echoes that of the Comte de Crécy. He had been the scapegoat of the cruel jokes of the Verdurin clan and finally shown the door by Verdurin himself (III,266). He loses all his money and falls ill as a result of these two catastrophes. The Narrator and the reader are again surprised to learn belatedly that the Verdurins had, after some shabby haggling on her part, provided Saniette anonymously with an income for the

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<sup>1</sup>All references to the three volume edition of *A la recherche du temps perdu* by Pierre Clarac and André Ferré published by Gallimard in the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade in 1954 will be indicated by the volume and page number(s) within parentheses in the text. Here: (I,198). All translations are mine.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Cornelia Otis Skinner, *Elegant Wits and Grand Horizontals* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), pp. 218-44.

last years of his life (III,324-25). Thus the two characters are frustrated as art critics but in the end sensitive and generous as wealthy men.

The Guermantes represent the ultimate aristocrats. Proust chooses to reveal their strengths and weaknesses by comparing and contrasting various members of the family, primarily Robert de Saint-Loup and his infamous uncle the Baron de Charlus. When the Narrator has his first opportunity to take a close look at the Duchesse de Guermantes in the church at Combray he notices her "piercing blue eyes" (I,174). When he meets her nephew Robert at Balbec he notes his "penetrating eyes" which are "the color of the sea" (I,728-29). A little later when he encounters the Duchesse's cousin the Baron also at Balbec he has the uncomfortable "impression of being watched by someone" whose eyes are "dilated with attentiveness" (I,751) and eventually called sapphire blue (III,818). He has a great deal to say about their eyes which can best be summed up, perhaps, when he remarks that Saint-Loup's "eyes, in which shone not the faintest gleam of human sympathy, showed only in their insensitivity, in the inanity of their gaze an exaggeration for the lack of which there would have been nothing to distinguish them from lifeless mirrors" (I,731), while the uncle's eyes reveal only "the devout and sanctimonious look of certain hypocrites, the smug look of certain fools" (I,752).

The nephew's hair is as blond as the uncle's moustache is dark. Both are elegantly dressed but where the nephew is tall and thin the uncle is very tall and rather stout. Although both have the "natural hardness" and "glacial manners" of Saint-Loup (I,730-31), the Narrator soon becomes fast friends with the nephew while Charlus remains an enigma to be understood only slowly and eventually by the Narrator. The reader must take at face value remarks about both that later prove to be the key to a part of their personalities. Some people found Saint-Loup effeminate "but without reproaching him for it, for they knew how virile he was and that he loved women passionately" (I,729). When the Narrator asks Saint-Loup if Mme Swann had been his uncle's mistress the nephew exclaims that such was hardly the case, that "they have never said that he was the lover of [Swann's] wife. You'd cause a great deal of astonishment in society, if you gave the impression of believing that" (I,756). The reader frequently fails to grasp the full import of such remarks until much later thus providing Proust with the opportunity to supply him with additional surprises.

Unlike his uncle who had preserved "a large part of the admirable woodwork from the Guermantes townhouse," Saint-Loup would have exchanged it for "modern style furniture, for Lebourgs and Guillaumins" (I,757), that is, for landscapes by Albert Lebourg and seascapes by Armand Guillaumin, two painters almost forgotten today. He does in fact later sell "his precious 'Genealogical Tree,' ancient portraits of the Bouillons, letters of Louis XII, in order to buy some Carrières and modern style furniture" (II,551), that is, portraits by Eugène Carrière and art nouveau furniture. The differences and similarities between uncle and nephew are much more profound, however, than their taste in art.

At a certain point the reader finds the Narrator walking through Paris at night during an air raid. On what is one of Proust's flimsiest excuses the Narrator, because of his fatigue, his thirst, and his inability to find a taxi, decides to rest in a hotel he finds open. Just as he is approaching an officer comes out whose identity is hidden by the darkness but whose manner of effacing himself upon leaving reminds the Narrator of an officer who could be somewhat like Saint-Loup (III,810). The Narrator discovers that the hotel is a male brothel and in a scene that at first seems inconsistent with the Narrator's character he does not hesitate to listen at the door of someone else's room but even spies on its inhabitants through a window only to discover that it is the Baron who is the willing victim in a sado-masochistic scene

(III,815). The reader then remembers that the Narrator had much earlier spied on Charlus through an open window in the courtyard of the Hôtel de Guermantes when the Baron first encountered the tailor Jupien, the man who is now managing the brothel. He compares their actions first to those of male and female birds performing their mating dance and finally, when the Baron enters Jupien's shop on the pretext of wanting a light for the cigar he has forgotten to bring along, to the miraculous encounter wherein the rare bumble-bee brings to a captive flower the necessary pollen (II,602-07). When the Narrator gets home he finds that Saint-Loup had preceded him, looking for his lost *croix de guerre*, obviously the one that had been found in the male brothel, proving that the departing officer was Saint-Loup who shares with his uncle his taste in public houses (III,841).

Uncle and nephew are also similar and different in another way. Saint-Loup in his letters to the Narrator from the front gives every proof of "the liberal culture he had acquired" (III,752) and is a part of "that fraction of the aristocracy that put France before all else while M. de Charlus was at heart a defeatist" (III,761). The difference is illustrated by the contrasting levels of their Germanophilia. Although Saint-Loup is patriotic enough to give his life for his country he does not demonstrate it enthusiastically enough to satisfy the rabidly chauvinistic old servant Françoise and the butler when he comes to the Narrator's house to search for his *croix de guerre*. In his letters he does not hesitate, in spite of censorship, to refer to Hegel and Nietzsche, to quote a Schumann title in German, or to refer to Wagner's *Siegfried* (III,752,54) because they are an integral part of his education. Although all sorts of plausible reasons are given for the Baron's behavior, his blatant Germanophilia borders on treason (III,773-76), demonstrating again the nuance of similarity and difference between these two Guermantes.

Uncle and nephew both become involved with Morel, the brilliant young violinist the reader first encounters with Swann in Mme Verdurin's salon. Strangely enough it is the Narrator who introduces Morel to the Baron, but at the latter's request. Morel is a uniformed member of a regimental band whom the Baron notices standing on the other side of the railroad tracks. Because of his age he asks the Narrator to bring the musician to him since he is a relative. The Narrator does as bidden only to discover to his surprise that the musician is Morel, the son of his uncle's valet. Without even saying hello to the young man Charlus offers him 500 francs to play for him that evening. The Narrator realizes that he has been duped, that not only is Morel not related to the Baron but also that the Baron didn't even know him. Thus the Narrator is at least indirectly responsible for their tumultuous relationship that ensues (II,861-62).

The comparisons between an aristocratic marquis and a valet's son are even more surprising, no matter how brilliant the latter is as a violinist. Not long after the Narrator is informed that Saint-Loup has come to resemble his uncle in a more profound way, that he is "like that" (III,662), he also learns that Morel is now Saint-Loup's lover (III,678). Morel and Saint-Loup share other proclivities. The Narrator had learned that Morel had succeeded in having the Verdurin's coach and coachman replaced by an automobile and a dishonest chauffeur in whom he was interested by having him steal the coachman's equipment thus causing him to be late. As a result of Morel's further machinations the coachman is fired (II,1028-31). Later the Narrator is so eager to see Saint-Loup he descends the stairs to greet him immediately upon his arrival but before he can do so he overhears his friend talking with one of the footmen of the Duchesse de Guermantes, advising him that the best way to get rid of a hated co-worker is to hide the things he needs when called upon by his employers, thus causing him to be late. After four or five repetitions he will be fired. The Narrator is stupefied by Saint-Loup's "cruel and Machiavellian words" since he had always considered him to be such a good man (III,470-71). Both

Saint-Loup and Morel redeem themselves, however, for both are awarded the *croix de guerre*, Saint-Loup quite simply for gallantry (III,841). The case of Morel is, as always, somewhat more complicated. He had been a deserter who, upon being arrested, is punished only by being sent back to the front because the general in charge had learned that he was the friend of the dead hero Saint-Loup. There to the surprise of all "he conducted himself bravely, escaped all danger, and returned, once the war was over, with the cross which M. de Charlus had earlier solicited for him in vain" (III,853). According to Proust, then, the good do indeed die young while the evil not only survive but can also redeem themselves at least in part and at the same time prosper and succeed in society.

The most important parallels are undoubtedly those between Swann and the Narrator which persist throughout the novel. Swann's infatuation with Odette renders him her prisoner as well as the prisoner of his own passion. The fifth volume of *A la recherche* is titled *La Prisonnière* and for much of it the Narrator is convinced that Albertine is his prisoner. He is realistic enough, however, to realize that upon returning home to her it is "with the feeling of being a prisoner, not at all that of finding a prisoner" in his house (III,347-48). Thus the Narrator is as much the prisoner of his passion as Swann and Verdurin before him. Odette has not yet, as we shall see, found her last prisoner but if the Narrator is to write he must be freed in one way or another from his obsession with Albertine.

Just as Odette urges Swann to take up his work on Vermeer again (I,298), so Albertine begs the Narrator to get back to his writing (III,80). Swann asks Odette to play, however badly, Vinteuil's music on the piano for him (I,236). She even plays it for the Narrator (II,519), who, of course, later asks Albertine to play the same music for him on the pianola (III,371). Just as the music of Vinteuil speaks to Swann as Odette (I,348), so the Narrator upon listening to Vinteuil's septet confesses that with music he had "almost never mingled the memory of but a single person, that of Albertine" (III,159). Vinteuil's music reveals to Swann that his past happiness is lost forever. In a reverse way music helps the Narrator avoid the same fate in the next to the last scene of the novel.

The Narrator is as frustrated in his attempts to write as Swann had been. Since his early introduction to Bergotte's works by his older friend Bloch he had held the great writer as an example to emulate (I,90). He agonizes over his lack of talent and in the meantime learns that Legrandin, whose snobbishness had alienated the Narrator's family during their visits to Combray, "had a certain reputation as a writer" so that the family was later "very astonished to see that a famous musician had composed a melody on some of his poetry" (I,67). The war furnishes Legrandin along with the devious Professor Brichtot, the wily Marquis de Norpois, and even Morel the occasion "to go into the service again" with their newspaper articles (III,776). As for Brichtot, in spite of his professorship at the Sorbonne and his membership in the Institute, "his reputation had not until the war extended beyond the limits of the Verdurin clan. But when he began to write almost daily articles decked out with that false brilliance one saw him expend so generously for the faithful, full, on the other hand, of a very real erudition . . . 'high society' was literally dazzled" (III,789-90). In the meantime the poor Narrator has not yet found his true vocation.

The Narrator speaks of a pseudonym with reference to Bloch because he had discovered earlier that Bloch had become a playwright of sufficient renown to be encouraged to visit the salon of Mme de Villeparisis even if the marquise had ulterior motives in inviting him (II,189-90). Bloch had also been, according to his own admission, "a bit of a poet, 'when he felt like it'" (III,219). Later he publishes works filled with an "absurd sophistry, works without originality but which gave young

people and a lot of society women the impression of a rare intellectual loftiness, of a sort of genius" (III,958-59). The Narrator finds his consolation in the fact that Bloch copies many of his ideas in his essays (III,1034).

Even the nefarious little Charlie Morel who influences and poisons so many lives throughout the novel enjoys "his brilliant reputation as a violinist [and] his budding fame as composer and journalist" (III,218). His ability to write is somewhat tarnished when the reader learns that it is actually the Baron de Charlus who dictates Morel's "vilely slanderous little notices levelled at the Comtesse Molé" which cause the young woman's death (III,220). Charlus even intercedes with the Narrator to help him influence Bergotte to get Morel's "half humorous chronicles on music" published in the newspaper (III,221). The Narrator is thus well aware of the scurrilous aspect of Morel's reputation as a journalist but he is also aware that Morel appears in print and will soon enjoy a still greater reputation.

The Narrator is even more astonished to learn that Octave, the rich young nephew of the Verdurins encountered at Balbec who had showed himself then to be nothing more than a hell-raising dandy suffering from tuberculosis, has reformed and in so doing created some sketches with decors and costumes "which brought about in contemporary art a revolution at least the equal of that realized by the Ballets Russes" (III,605). Married to their friend Andrée, also of Balbec days, he becomes one of the stars of Mme Verdurin's salon during the war and even the Narrator sees him as "the author of an admirable work" about which he thought constantly (III,730). Although the Narrator finds the work of Octave infinitely superior to that of Bloch and Morel he must have felt that almost everyone else had become a successful writer before he himself was able to realize his ambition.

One final comparison between Swann and the Narrator reveals how and why the one failed and the other succeeds. In the scene in which Swann climbs the great staircase of the Saint-Euverte house to attend the fatal musicale he is almost overwhelmed, as is the reader, by the flood of comparisons which fills his mind (I,322-26). He finds the entrance as monumental as that of the "Stairway of the Giants" created by Antonio Rizzo for the Doges' Palace in Venice. Here the colossal footmen at the head of the stairs recall the immense statues of Mars and Neptune by Jacopo Sansovino. Later when the Narrator himself, making his social rounds, climbs the stairway to the house of Mme de Montmorency he finds, instead of a race of giants, "Under the archway, a statuette, said to be by [Etienne] Falconet, [which] represented a Spring from which, however, oozed a perpetual humidity" (II,750). Instead of bringing to his mind fanciful and futile comparisons the small statue makes him think of "a little gardener in plaster in a garden in Combray," thus taking him back to the spring, the source of his inspiration from which ooze so slowly the memories that will become *A la recherche*.

Swann had been about to leave Mme de Saint-Euverte's drawingroom when the music started up before he could depart. Thus he hears again Vinteuil's music which reveals to him the tragedy of his unrequited love for Odette (I,348). Unlike Odette the Narrator's love Albertine has been killed in an accident, thus freeing him of his obsession. When he arrives at the Prince de Guermantes's party he cannot enter the drawingroom until the music stops, giving him the time and opportunity to experience the successive phenomena of involuntary memory which will permit him, when he finally does enter the room, to realize that his whole life has been a "vocation" dedicated to creation (III,899), the writing of the novel the reader is reading. Thus he will succeed where Swann had failed but not before discovering that Odette had trapped her final prisoner, the Duc de Guermantes himself, to whom she is as unfaithful as she had been with Swann, a repetition that adds to the high comedy of the book's final scene.

Such are only some of the comparisons and contrasts Proust has used in his long novel. He realized, as one critic put it, "how much the repetition of identical situations constitutes a persuasive force."<sup>3</sup> As their echoes resound in the reader's mind they reinforce the myriad sensations he experiences in reading this novel whose first word is found seven volumes later in the last.

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<sup>3</sup>Anne Henry, *Marcel Proust: Théories pour une esthétique* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1981), p. 162.