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Proust's Family at Home

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Perhaps one of the most surprising things about Proust at home is that, in fact, Proust's narrator rarely is. Titles even clue us in to the mobility of the long narrative, since the narrator often seeks shelter elsewhere, whether in the shadow of young girls or by way of the Guermantes. Even when he's home, in *Le Côté de Guermantes*, his family has just moved to this new home, which is both home and not home. While home, moreover, he expends much effort to cross the doormat of the Guermantes apartment, a mat which represents the threshold, he tells us, of the magic world of names.[1] So, too, the Combray childhood, which is also in the shadow of others, in this case, of his extended family far from his Parisian home. In both volumes, the narrator muses on the nature of the great aristocratic Guermantes family — whose name is also a place — from his own family's home, whether the apartment in Paris or the more ordinary house in an ordinary village.

Roger Shattuck was one of the first critics to have reflected on Proust's unusual penchant for the imperfect French tense to describe these childhood beginnings.[2] The imperfect captures the suggestion of events that happen so repeatedly as to form polished layers of the past, each one on top of the next, such that a single moment is difficult to remember. And yet, Proust's actual visits to the family house in Illiers were infrequent, and of short duration.[3] From the perspective of reading Proust at home, then, what emerges in stark relief is the way in which it's easy to misremember the narrative and forget that the narrator isn't at home at all. Perhaps it's easy to imagine him at home because it's so easy to superimpose Proust the writer over his fictional narrator, replacing a narrator so rarely at home with the writer, ensconced in his bedroom while writing the story that unfolds. This superimposition, coupled with the first volume's nostalgia for a childhood long past, can obfuscate the extent to which Combray is only a pseudo-home for the narrator, both not home and yet sort-of-home in the same way a child might go to a family "home" at a grandmother's.

While many readers these days might contrive ways not to be at home or to make our home seem less familiar, it's all the more apparent that the narrator's goal is exactly opposite our own: the

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[1] Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. by Jean-Yves Tadié, 4 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1987–89), II, 330. Subsequent references are given parenthetically in the text by volume and page number.
[2] Roger Shattuck, *Proust's Binoculars* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964), Chapter 3.
[3] Eric Unger, "The House of Aunt Léonie": https://www.amisdeproust.fr/index.php/en/the-house-of-aunt-leonie. (Accessed May 18, 2021.)

narrator's quest, if I may simplify for a moment, is often to feel at home even when he's not. The one exception is in *La Prisonnière* in which the narrator tries to keep Albertine prisoner at home; finally, truly "at home," however, the narrator's home suddenly feels less than home when Albertine is not there. This is perhaps the darkest volume, the one in which home takes on a most sinister aspect.

The narrator's homes away from home, by contrast, are disquieting in more familiar ways. In that beautiful seaside town of Balbec, the narrator has trouble sleeping in an unfamiliar hotel room, and the strange scent of vetiver assaults him so forcefully that he feels he wants to die. What saves him from such misery? The appearance of his grandmother — almost like a fairy godmother — whose concern and care will make him feel at home. What's more, she appears in her cotton tea-gown, "une robe de chambre de percale" (II, 28), a garment he recognizes from times she cared for him while he was sick at home. Her clothes comfort not just the narrator, for she claims she wears the tunic to make herself feel more at home. Feeling at home, then, is not always about place, but also about people, and even our clothes.

While staying at the hotel, and from the esplanade by the seaside, the narrator spies a band of young girls whom he admires. Why? For the way in which they seem so at home, belonging to their surroundings as naturally as a band of seagulls that appears on the beach amidst the bathers: "une bande de mouettes qui exécute à pas comptés sur la plage [...] une promenade dont le but semble aussi obscur aux baigneurs qu'elles ne paraissent pas voir, que clairement déterminé pour leur esprit d'oiseaux" (II, 146). They represent a special kind of connection, both to a group and to a place. We know the narrator finally feels at home when he has infiltrated their group and become a cherished friend. Likewise, his initial tentativeness towards Balbec's resident painter, Elstir, is transformed when he is finally welcomed into the painter's most intimate "home" — his studio.

Eventually, peripheral characters like these become, however temporarily, a sort of family. While the narrator can feel at home (or perhaps better put, semi-home) in Balbec, however, bringing that home back never works, though it's not for want of trying. In the later volume, *La Prisonnière*, once he has brought Albertine home, he looks up at his window from below and sees the "lumineux grillage qui allait se refermer sur moi et dont j'avais forgé moi-même, pour une servitude éternelles, les inflexibles barreaux d'or" (III, 834). Albertine must sense this prison, too, especially when she learns that she can't open a window for fear of inducing the narrator's asthma. It becomes clear that she enjoys frequenting the theater and the salons, much as the narrator did in *Le Côté de Guermantes*. Meanwhile, entirely justified is the narrator's fear of the sound of her opening the window, both because of his asthma, and because it seems to act as a premonition of her eventual flight (III, 903). In the end, he realizes that the sound of the opening window had been one of the many "signes" by which he had:

> discerné la lassitude, l'horreur qu'elle avait de vivre ainsi en esclave et qu'ils traçaient à l'envers des prunelles tristes et soumises d'Albertine, sur ses joues brusquement enflammées par une inexplicable rougeur, dans le bruit de la fenêtre qui s'était brusquement ouverte. (IV, 7)

Of course, even Balbec offers this darker side long before the flight and subsequent death of Albertine. On their first visit, the narrator and the grandmother acclimate to their surroundings. They get to know the staff and other guests and the hotel becomes, for a short time, what we like to call a home away from home. When the narrator returns later without his grandmother, however, he finds himself alone in the hotel room without her comforting presence. He had thought he had known his grandmother was dead. But in that moment, he feels himself all too alone. He bends over his shoes and feels taken back to the precise moment in time long ago when he had performed a similar movement. It is as though time starts and unspools forward and yet, as the moment unfurls yet again, she is painfully absent — his grandmother will never again help him feel at home. David Ellison calls this "the return of the grandmother from death to a paradoxical and uncanny life."[4] He is "home" again, and yet not home, perhaps the most intense experience of the Freudian uncanny in the novel.

Another such experience occurs as the narrator, feeling himself finally at home in Venice, decides to stay only to find himself incomparably alone upon the departure of his mother. Suddenly, he feels entirely alone and wants to go home. This time, he feels at home and then, suddenly, not at home. It's easy to understand all that makes a new place unfamiliar in all its material strangeness. We know what it's like to suddenly feel oneself not at home because of an unfamiliar sound or smell. It's harder, however, to understand how people are linked to a place in a way that can make that place seem familiar by their very presence, like the young girls at Balbec.

Yet darker, perhaps, are the homes of the salons. Madame Verdurin establishes what today we might call the "family one chooses." She has her inner circle, and each character plays a role in the "family" structure. Madame Verdurin's home offers both the brighter side of inclusion — the inside jokes, the feeling of belonging — and the darker side of this kind of insularity: one member, Saniette, is always mocked. Moreover, a family member by "alliance" like Swann can be replaced by a rival. As in families, nicknames are ways to convey both familiarity and perhaps, too much familiarity. We do not recognize the inner circle's painter, nicknamed M. Biche, so different is his treatment here than when he becomes the renowned painter, Elstir. Family dynamics give one a sense of the permanence of character, even as we see the kaleidoscopic turn that rearranges identities.

Already disconcerting, Madame Verdurin's cruel behavior increases in lockstep with her ascent in social status. Later, we watch Charlus, once seemingly untouchable, reduced to misery through her actions. In or out, status can change as quickly as feeling at home or not. We see inklings of this darker side of home even in Combray, although it is coupled with the enchantment of childhood. Indeed, Combray provides the first theme of this refrain that will return many times. Balbec is not the first time the narrator has trouble falling asleep — it has happened already at Combray. Here, the difficulty of falling asleep is not brought on by the room itself but by the visit of Charles Swann — the only outsider who is let into the family circle.

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[4] David R. Ellison, *A Reader's Guide to Proust's* In Search of Lost Time (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 124.

Swann has upset the usual rituals of his mother's bedtime kiss before sleep. Here it is the mother, not the grandmother, whose comfort is needed to make the narrator feel at home.

The story within the story that the mother reads aloud to comfort him is about an orphan boy, François le champi, who also struggles to find himself at home. The narrator's mother skips the most alarming aspects of this George Sand novel, since the boy begins a relationship with a mother figure. And yet, even this unspoken narrative affords the glimpse of a pattern emerging: his mother stays in his room for the night, leaving the father to go to bed alone.

Another comfort to the narrator while he is visiting Combray, his extended family home away from home, is the enchantment of the magic lantern. This lantern, too, reveals a darker pattern on the underside of its weave. For this enchantment turns his familiar room into the unfamiliar, an experience both thrilling and terrifying. The magic lantern calms the young narrator with its fairy-tale story, always the same, as frame succeeds frame and Golo rides forever on his horse. And yet the unspoken part of this story, yet one more story within the narrator's story, is again of a mother–son relationship, of Geneviève de Brabant in hiding with her son. The more disturbing aspect of the story — the eventual beheading of Geneviève de Brabant — is left out of this magic lantern version. And yet its presence is felt as a ghost that haunts the description. For the solidity of the narrator's room is dematerialized by the magic lantern, almost as though it has already become part of the distant past of the story. The lit projections can swallow or absorb any kind of material reality, even a doorknob, transforming the solidity of the narrator's familiar world into nothing but beams of light. Much like the moment in which the narrator realizes his grandmother is truly gone, the magic lantern also reveals ways in which the material world can be deprived of its solid, corporeal nature. Home becomes not home.

These are odd stories indeed to offer a young boy as comfort, and they replicate this interplay between familiar and unfamiliar in their nested box structure. Also like a nested box is the extended family structure at Combray. Comprising the various boxes are a cast of extended family members, servants, and friends. Clearly outside are the so-named "barbarians" who don't know that Saturday lunch occurs early. Other characters function as go-betweens between the family and the world. Eulalie, for example, brings word of the outside world to the home's innermost sanctum — Léonie's bedroom. Many of these sort-of-family characters are themselves subject to the same pressures we saw at Mme. Verdurin's. Eulalie, for example, provokes exasperation if she arrives late or appears less grateful than usual for the coin she is handed. Charles Swann, like the child who has grown up but will always be seen as the child, is imagined as never-changing even as he "grows up" to become a member of the Jockey Club and a frequenter of the most exclusive salons.

The kind of aggression which Madame Verdurin takes out on her faithful is also first visible in Combray, albeit in diminutive form. Perhaps one of Proust's truths which should be universally acknowledged: people in close proximity, as much as they care for each other, are bound to get on each other's nerves. We see this over and over, and not just with Eulalie. Only imagined, but far more disturbing, is Léonie's fantasy that her own extended family is killed in a tragic house fire, a tragedy which only she survives. Of course, this fantasy demonstrates Léonie's narcissistic nature, always wishing to be the center of attention even in a tragedy, as long as the tragedy

doesn't touch her too closely. But it also gives us just a hint of the kind of momentary thought that might occur about houseguests who have overstayed their welcome.

Françoise, meanwhile, takes out her own irritation with the kitchen maid's pregnancy, and she tasks the kitchen maid almost daily with peeling asparagus knowing all the while that they exacerbate her nausea. Irritation runs, in diminuendo, even in the extended family's interactions. Wherever one looks in this early story of home one sees the ways family members make each other suffer: the father, who is annoyed that the narrator won't go to bed and leaves the mother to read him to sleep; the mother, who worries about the emotional fragility of the narrator; the grandmother, tormented by her husband's occasional liqueur as well as the family members who are sure to let her know when he indulges. In this complex social web, each person's actions often have consequences for others.

Swann's visit causes the narrator great suffering, since it prevents his mother from giving him his usual bedtime kiss. Françoise, burdened with bringing the young boy's note to the dinner table in front of guests, is annoyed that she must comply with a request she knows to be a lie and will in turn cause the mother annoyance. The novel is brilliant in so many ways, but one way that is rarely remarked upon is the way in which the narrator manages to convey the annoyance of close quarters while maintaining our belief in the rose-colored glow.

Much of the work of the women family members seems to be of the worrying sort, what today we would call "emotional labor." The grandmother worries about her husband's drink, the mother worries about the narrator in a multitude of ways, and even the great-aunt, we are told, reads the story of the magic lantern to the narrator. These women in turn create additional physical labor for the female servants in the house. The grandmother creates added labor for her unnamed maid, tasked with cleaning the boots and dress because of an insistence on a walk around the garden, even in a thunderstorm. The visit of the narrator's family puts additional work on Françoise: not only must she cook for more people, but she is responsible, when the family visits, for looking after the narrator. Françoise in turn makes more work for the kitchen maid. In fact, she piles duties upon duties, even as the kitchen maid's belly grows.

While the kitchen-maid peels all those asparagus that Françoise serves up to an appreciative family, the grandmother's maid cleans up the mess from a walk in the mud. What makes this world of Combray possible? Women's work, it turns out — work that at times can seem unbelievably burdensome, almost like the expanding belly of the kitchen maid. Indeed, the kitchen maid's labor seems almost uninterrupted, since she pauses only briefly for the labor of her child. She is still there in the house during her period of confinement postpartum, and her cries are heard throughout the house as she experiences painful complications — quite literally a representation of the aftereffects of her labor.

As the whole family hears the cries of the kitchen maid, we are reminded that everyone is in close quarters indeed. How large is this house, and how does the narrator's family manage to stay so long without annoying their hostess? What for Proust's narrator is a defining moment — the *drame du coucher* during which he begs for his mother's kiss before bedtime — makes more sense when understood from the perspective of parents who are themselves houseguests. How to

keep an anxious and sleepless child from annoying the hostess? Also laid bare are the fragility of family rituals. The bedtime kiss, easily indulged as part of a routine at home, is also something that the parents might secretly hope disappears while visiting others who might criticize the indulgence. One has to imagine, then, a house in which sound travels, and in which these events might be seen as elements of home life that parents might wish to play down when not-quite-at-home with family.

And yet, all of these events are recounted with so much love and affection that one has to read closely to see all the stratagems by which family members maintain distance even at home. We know the narrator retreats to the water closet. But it is not just the narrator who seems needful of finding some space to himself with an entire family at home. We see, also, the locations that belong to each character — the little sitting-room of uncle Adolphe, for example, or Françoise's "lair" which resembles, through the rose-colored panes of a child's retrospective vision, a "temple of Venus." Even the grandmother, it seems, needs to find some space for herself, insisting — to the consternation of other family members — on taking her walk through the garden. Foolishness to the other family members, perhaps, but entirely reasonable from the perspective of someone who prefers a bit of solitude and nature — however inclement the weather — after a prolonged meal with family.

Of course, the obvious question here concerns the narrator's solution. For where does any adolescent usually find privacy? Why not that same bedroom, site of the *drame du coucher*, one wonders? We know, of course, that Combray is fictional, as is aunt Léonie. One can speculate as to why certain aspects of Proust's life are transformed while others are not, and perhaps the oddest transformation is the absence of any sibling. The narrator, as we know, is an only child, unlike Proust, who had a younger brother. And yet, the ghost of his brother haunts this narrative in a number of ways, not least in the narrator's solution of the water closet for privacy when, if he were an only child, the bedroom would certainly do.

Proust theorizes extensively about what makes a novel endure and resonate in an unknown future that must be quite different from the time at which it is written. Although he can't have predicted it, this particular choice to make the narrator an only child resonates quite well in today's world of intensive parenting. The rearrangement of family sleeping patterns to accommodate a young child afraid to sleep alone sounds all too familiar. Also, the worry of the mother that the child spends too much time alone and inside. Finally, the way the child becomes immersed for hours in his own virtual world — all these might be quite familiar to many today. True, it seems positively quaint to imagine a mother worrying that her child reads too much. The narrator is sent out to the garden, presumably for fresh air and movement, only to ensconce himself in a shaded chair and lose himself in a book. The book and the fresh air may evoke bygone times, but the concern of the mother — that the child is immersed in a virtual world, both there and not there, home and not home, as the hours drift by — is very much at home in today's world. Although we see his world through the narrator's point of view, Proust does well to convey this emotional labor of a mother who worries about a boy who seeks out private spaces to cocoon himself even when outside.

The mother's concern in Combray will be replaced in Paris by the stern disapproval of Françoise, who now lives in exile from her beloved Combray in the family's apartment. It is from Françoise that the narrator first learns the truth via the backchannels of the staff: Mme de Guermantes is not happy about the narrator's frequent attempts to encounter her in the streets. We see the beginnings of this kind of social network communication in Combray with Léonie, who augments her own view of the streets outside her window with others' information. She depends on both her friend's visits and, when that doesn't suffice, a reconnaissance put into motion by Françoise, to stay abreast of the events of the town. While her concerns are with the village as a social network, the narrator's are with this other world of the salons, its own network that seems so utterly different from his own.

Mme de Guermantes also represents both home and not home, since her hotel is in fact also the site of the narrator's family apartment, even as her own home seems entirely otherworldly to him. The narrator has an intense desire to enter this other home just across the courtyard and the doormat of the Guermantes offers that unique combination, both real and ideal, the threshold of the faubourg Saint-Germain: "le paillasson des Guermantes étendu de l'autre côté de cet Équateur" (II, 330). Only many pages later does the narrator realize that crossing that doormat — a doormat his mother had thought rather scruffy — has taken him to the end, not the beginning, of this enchanted world of names: "en somme j'avais atterri au paillasson du vestibule, non pas comme au seuil, ainsi que je l'avais cru, mais au terme du monde enchanté des noms" (II, 831). Now entirely at home in these worldly salons and having seen their unique kind of cruelty, the narrator is able to valorize retrospectively all that seems right with the world of Combray.

Still, while familiar to a modern reader, those of us old enough to remember a time when children played in the streets may well wonder where, in this fictional Combray, are all the other children? Was Illiers really like this, or has Proust banished the other children from his fictional tale as summarily as he has banished his brother? Proust's hothouse narrator looks so familiar in today's world, hiding out even from his family. There is, of course, the sighting of Gilberte, also alone, in her garden. It would be easy to see this early moment, already tinged like that story of François le champi with sexual overtones, as a preview of a theme that will return later when the narrator falls in love with her. But there's a stranger context to the provocative sign that she makes to him. Only years later does Gilberte explain that it was, indeed, an invitation. But it was an invitation she made while thinking of the place where the local children gathered to engage in games that were less than innocent.

Where are the children of Combray? Gilberte explains that they gathered in the ruins of the keep at Roussainville-le-Pin. Her signal — so impenetrable to the narrator — has as its context this site to which she wished to invite him. She also adds that Théodore, who appears often in the first volume to help out in various ways, was a regular with many of the young girls. The other children are there, hiding themselves from the sight of the adults. But adding yet another strange layer to this story is the fact that the view from the window of the only room where the narrator finds privacy to indulge in his own sensual pleasure looks out onto this very site where the other children found theirs together.

With all the strangeness of Combray and the ways that home and not-home intermingle, it might be surprising that the entire first section is painted with such retrospective love and care. This is not, really, a nostalgia for a childhood home, but the first of a series of ventures out into the world that will soon include many more attempts to find oneself at home elsewhere and in other places. So why, in spite of all the nascent darkness even in this prelude, is Combray bathed in the glow of happiness?

Perhaps because so much of what transpires on these visits to Combray shows us what we now recognize as the science of happiness. Long leisurely meals brimming with the freshest and most seasonal foods from Françoise's larder. Leisurely walks after meals amidst nature. Family, friends, and a sense of community. And perhaps most importantly for the narrator, periods of doing nothing, that wasted time or "temps perdu" that so fascinated him. In spite of the annoyances and the lack of privacy, the minor cruelties and misunderstandings, this world of Combray is filled with the habits that make people happy.

A philosopher might tell us that all we need to do, then, is to read Proust at home to know how to be happy at home. But it's not quite so simple, and not only because the narrator is not really at home. At Combray, the family is treated to the ephemeral and fleeting nature of asparagus in season. Those asparagus reappear later in Proust, this time in Elstir's painting, and we can't help but think of his painting framed by this story at Combray. Both beauty and happiness depend on all this labor of women.

We may be lucky enough to have provisions like those found in Françoise's pantry. We may also be able to send a child out for some fresh air. Harder, perhaps, is finding each our own private space in our modern American floor plans. Harder still, for mothers, is playing all these roles with all the necessary labor that sustains not just the beauty of Combray, but the happiness. Can mothers really do all that cooking, cleaning, and emotional labor by themselves?

How does the family manage the walks after meals, the trip to church on Sunday, or even the time doing nothing? Because there are others laboring tirelessly to make it all possible. No doubt, if we were to put down our electronics, we might find a bit more time to make of our days such beauty and happiness. But it's also the case that this kind of life, for Proust's bourgeois world, relies on the labor of many. While the narrator's family makes their way to church, Françoise is on her way to market. After the grandmother walks in the mud, the maid cleans up the mess. One is struck by the extent to which the family's habits for a good life are made possible by the labor of others. It is to Proust's credit that he represents the labor that sustains this enchanted world. What is more, we never see these habits of happiness again, though Balbec recreates elements of it with food, friends, fresh air, and leisure.

Reading Proust at home, then, one is struck by the labor involved to create such a beautiful world for a child, to be so many people, so many roles, all at once. Of course, there is one significant element missing from this childhood vision of a happy family: purpose, or meaning. This is not to say it doesn't exist in Proust's own family. In fact, his father, we can infer, found great purpose in his profession as a doctor, as did his brother later. Yet one more reason, perhaps, that there is no brother in this tale, and that the father rarely appears. But just as it's easy to forget

that the young narrator is rarely at home, so too, do we superimpose the purpose and meaning that infuses even Combray. For while it will take the narrator till the end of many volumes to find it, we know the author writing the words before us already has.

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