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The Grandmother's Visit to the Champs-Élysées: A Proustian *Tombeau*

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When I used to teach *À la recherche du temps perdu* in a one-term course, I omitted from the syllabus many pages of the novel to help my students get through it in a timely manner. A lot of those pages were in *Le Côté de Guermantes*. Among the pages that were never omitted, several are to be found at the end of the first part. Here is my reading of a passage that strikes me as crucial to understanding not only *Guermantes*, but also the whole novel. I begin with a short list of relevant passages that occur earlier and I will end with a few others that occur later. All page references are to the four-volume Pléiade edition of *La Recherche*.¹

Proust and this volume in particular are known for the descriptions of aristocrats, their dwellings and their salons. In this case, however, we are dealing with a *chalet d'aisances* where people go to relieve themselves. How fitting then that the grandmother's stroke happens in such a *chalet d'aisances* that in many ways outshines the most brilliant of salons. As we shall see, it is also entirely fitting that the *dame pipi* is always referred to as the Marquise. However brief her role, she is one of Proust's most memorable characters.

Pre-readings

I, 10–12 The grandmother, walking in the garden at Combray, is mocked by the grand-tante; full of shame for not defending his grandmother, Marcel takes refuge in the toilet.

I, 483–85 Marcel and Françoise visit the *chalet de nécessité* in the gardens of the Champs-Élysées.

II, 11–14 Marcel forces his grandmother to approve his drinking in the train to Balbec.

II, 432–34 On talking with his grandmother on the telephone, Marcel reflects: “Il me semblait que c'était déjà une ombre chérie que je venais de laisser se perdre parmi les ombres.”

II, 438–40 The return of Marcel to the Paris apartment and the sight of his grandmother as an old woman “rouge, lourde et vulgaire, malade, rêvassant.”

¹ Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. by Jean-Yves Tadié, 4 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1987–89).

II, 594–604 The grandmother has not been doing well. But one day, after speaking with her doctor, she is convinced to go for an outing with Marcel.

Reading: II, 605–08

Paragraph 1 The passage begins by the grandmother talking; she will speak again in paragraphs 18 and 21. The grandmother reproaches herself for not wearing something more elegant: “Mon Dieu, puisque tu vas voir des amis, j’aurais pu mettre un autre mantelet. J’ai l’air un peu malheureux avec cela.” As usual, the grandmother shows her selflessness, for she is thinking only of Marcel, wanting to avoid him being embarrassed by her appearance.

Para. 2 On reaching the Champs-Élysées, the grandmother immediately heads for “le petit pavillon ancien, grillagé de vert où un jour j’avais attendu Françoise.” This is an understatement. It is an allusion to that important scene in *A l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* when Marcel was turned on, first, by the “fraîche odeur de renfermé” of the *chalet de nécessité* that reminded him of Uncle Adolphe’s room at Combray (in other words a *moment bienheureux* like the *petite madeleine* episode), and then by wrestling nearby with Gilberte who wanted to continue their erotic play even after Marcel had come prematurely.

This time, the characters are Marcel, his maternal grandmother, the park-keeper, and the *dame pipi* known as the Marquise, according to Françoise’s ideas about her supposedly noble origins, to whom will be added two further characters.

The scene takes place in and near the *chalet d’aisances*, which is described as a “petit théâtre rustique édifié au milieu des jardins.” This is metonymy based on the nearby Théâtre Marigny, also in the Jardins des Champs-Élysées. The figure will prove to be productive in the rest of the passage, so much of which is made up of dialogue. It can also be viewed as a *mise en abyme*, this garden theater mirroring the larger stage in the same park, or the even larger stage of life, just as the Marquise’s salons mirror the other salons frequented by Marcel.

The Marquise is described as having a “museau énorme et irrégulier enduit de plâtre grossier.” Since Proust has just compared her to a clown already in makeup taking the tickets at the entrance of a circus tent, the carnivalesque note seems entirely appropriate, pre-determined even. There is something clownish too in the little bonnet that the Marquise is wearing, in contrast with her huge mug.

Roland Barthes underscored the comic dimension of this part of the passage.² I recommend Jean Montalbetti’s 1978 interviews with Barthes on France Culture, especially the last one, “Marcel Proust à Paris (3/3): à l’ombre des jardins et des bois,” available on YouTube and transcribed in Comment’s handsome edition.³

The colors are like an Impressionist painting in the making: red flowers, black lace, red wig, the green trellis on the building, and the traditional green uniform of the *garde-forestier*.

² Roland Barthes, *Marcel Proust: mélanges*, ed. by Bernard Comment (Paris: Seuil, 2020), p. 110.

³ See Barthes, *Marcel Proust*, pp. 100–19.

Para. 3 The park-keeper speaks to the Marquise about her possible retirement.

Para. 4 She replies by way of a question, asking him why she should retire; she enjoys what she calls her “petit Paris,” her customers, at least the ones she likes, such as the judge who just left. For eight years he has been coming by at 3:00 pm to read his newspapers and to do his “petits besoins,” namely, to defecate. We can now situate the passage in time since the judge has just left five minutes ago after his usual 30-minute stay in one of the cubicles, meaning it must be about 3:35 pm. One day the judge didn’t come by the *chalet d’aisances*, the Marquise wondered if he had died (“il est peut-être mort,” she said to herself), but it turned out it was his wife who had died. Like a substitute spouse, the *dame pipi* encouraged him to get back to his regular routine. “On sentait qu’il avait été tout dérangé dans ses petites habitudes. J’ai tâché de le remonter, je lui ai dit : ‘Il ne faut pas se laisser aller. Venez comme avant, dans votre chagrin ça vous fera une petite distraction.’” The last expression adds a 17th-century dimension to the Marquise, since it is reminiscent of Pascal’s *divertissement*.

Para. 5 The Marquise calms down on realizing that the park-keeper is not going to contradict her about her desire not to retire.

Para. 6 She goes on to say that she doesn’t receive just anyone in her “salons”: “Est-ce que ça n’a pas l’air d’un salon avec mes fleurs?” Her best clients bring flowers to the Marquise of the Champs-Élysées: “une petite branche de lilas,” which reminds us of Combray, jasmine, and her favorites, roses.

Para. 7 Marcel is embarrassed; he blushes at the idea that he and his grandmother have never brought the Marquise any flowers. He is fearful lest they be judged harshly; he tries to make a quick exit. “Mais ce ne sont pas toujours dans la vie les personnes qui apportent les belles roses pour qui on est le plus aimable, car la ‘marquise’, croyant que je m’ennuyais, s’adressa à moi.” We can attribute this paradoxical law to the narrator, who has had more experience than Marcel at this point. (One thinks for example of Odette the way she treated her lovers, including Swann.)

The narrator has a penchant for coming up with these general laws to describe human behavior, although most of them are not founded on that of a *dame pipi*.

Para. 8 The Marquise asks him if he would like “une petite cabine.” This has been translated as “little cabin,” but I would prefer *cubicle*, since the narrator described the stalls as “cubes de pierre” in the second part of *La Recherche*. The Marquise has always had a liking for Marcel; this is not the first time that she has offered him one of her coveted cubicles (cf. I, 484).

Paras. 9–10 As he did on the previous occasion, he refuses her invitation. “Non, vous ne voulez pas ?” She goes on to say: “je sais bien que ce sont des besoins qu’il ne suffit pas de ne pas payer pour les avoir.” The content is scatological; but the Marquise speaks perfect French; one could even characterize her French as *marquisé*, to use an old but appropriate word. We are reminded of Jupien who also speaks excellent French, unlike the Duc de Guermantes who mangles his native language (II, 604). Whether or not *the dame pipi* is a real marquise, as Françoise claims, she definitely speaks classy French.

Paras. 11–12 We are introduced to the final character, a would-be client, badly dressed, who appears to be in urgent need of a cubicle. With “une férocité de snob,” the Marquise tells the woman that nothing is free, a blatant lie since she just offered one to Marcel.

Paras. 13–14 The poor woman, “rouge sous ses fleurs jaunes,” asks if there is a long wait. The colors complete the Impressionist painting. The red face of the would-be client who is dying to relieve herself reminds us of the red flowers on the Marquise’s bonnet, as well as her red-haired wig. (The wig itself recalls Léonie’s “faux cheveux.”) But there is a big difference: Whereas the color red is associated with the Marquise is a sign of coquetry, it is a symptom of acute bodily discomfort in the case of the client with urgent needs. The Marquise now adds a new lie by telling the poor woman that the park-keeper and Marcel are waiting, which as we know is not true, and that only one cubicle is functional, also a lie, since at least two are fully functional. As in any salon, that of the Marquise is defined as much — in fact more — by the people excluded from it as by those admitted to it. She explains why she was so mean with the red-faced woman. She looked like a “mauvais payeur” and would probably leave a dirty mess that would have to be cleaned up afterwards. One shudders at the thought, especially if these are *toilettes à la turque*, as suggested in *À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* (I, 484).

Be that as it may be, the Marquise demonstrates cruelty here. Long before today’s modern street toilets, women had a real problem in Paris as to where to go. The *édicules Rambuteau* that Proust mentions later were limited to men and were for urinating only (hence the name *pissotières*, although the family butler persists in omitting the O [IV, 329]). No doubt other activities occurred therein also; but women were not welcome. The only option for them was to go to a café where an order had to be placed and paid for before going to the W.C., which was often squalid. The Marquise must know all of this, but she is adamant. She has a sadistic side to her.

For an interesting discussion of *vécés* and *vespasiennes*, see Thad Carhart’s excellent book, *Finding Fontainebleau*.⁴

Para. 15 The grandmother re-appears at last. The adverb *enfin* underscores Marcel’s impatience. Remember that he is going to a party after this outing with his grandmother, and he is anxious to get it over so he can have fun with his friends. He is worried that the Marquise will be annoyed at the grandmother’s staying so long and not leaving a tip, so he beats a hasty retreat. Marcel is both stingy and cowardly, a perfect prick. Leaving his grandmother to follow him, he goes into the park. Moreover, he expects her to apologize for having kept him waiting: “Je pensais que ma grand-mère allait me dire: ‘Je t’ai fait bien attendre, j’espère que tu ne manqueras tout de même pas tes amis’, mais elle ne prononça pas une seule parole, si bien qu’un peu déçu, je ne voulus pas lui parler le premier.” In theatrical terms, the grandmother has missed her cue, at least from the point of view of Marcel. He invents an imaginary apology that appears quite in character with the old woman. But in doing so, he appears as out of it as he is selfish, childish, egocentric; he even has the cheek to want to punish his grandmother for not apologizing to him by refusing

⁴ Thad Carhart, *Finding Fontainebleau: An American Boy in France* (New York: Penguin, 2017), pp. 145–51

to speak to her first. Marcel is having a bad day and responds with a tantrum. The grandmother does not apologize; why should she? In any case, she is probably saving her energy for her big speech to come. He waits before finally noticing that something is wrong, for she has turned her head away. One wonders what the *sous-conversation* à la Sarraute would have been.

Then Marcel realizes that his grandmother is walking awkwardly, her hat is on wrong, and her coat is dirty: “elle avait l’aspect désordonné et mécontent, la figure rouge et préoccupée d’une personne qui vient d’être bousculée par une voiture ou qu’on a retirée d’un fossé.” The grandmother is red-faced, just like the would-be customer sent away by the Marquise. But the grandmother looks much worse than the woman in need of relief, for she resembles a person knocked down by a carriage or pulled out of a ditch. The narrator is realistic, even naturalistic here, sparing us none of the details of physical distress. As for the ditch (*fossé*), it reminds us of the expression *fosse d’aisances* (itself an echo of *chalet d’aisances*), just as it anticipates the tomb (*fosse*, as in *fosse commune* or *avoir un pied dans la fosse*).

Para. 16 Worried that she is nauseous, Marcel asks his grandmother if she is feeling better. Let’s not forget that the grandmother has not been in good health for some time.

Para. 17 Marcel comes up with an explanation for the old woman breaking her silence: “Sans doute pensa-t-elle qu’il lui était impossible, sans m’inquiéter, de ne pas me répondre.” His explanation puts him front and centre as usual, yet it is probably the right one. The grandmother does not want to worry Marcel, whatever the cost in physical pain or mental strain.

Para. 18 There now begins a new dialogue, this time between the grandmother and Marcel. It will be infinitely more personal and wittier on her part than the imaginary words that he put in her mouth in paragraph 15. The new dialogue echoes the earlier one between the Marquise and the park-keeper. But whereas the earlier dialogue had a comic turn, this one will be characterized by a sense of pathos. The two dialogues are skilfully linked by the narrator, since it turns out that the grandmother has heard the conversation between the park-keeper and the Marquise. The grandmother describes their dialogue as being “on ne peut plus Guermantes et petit noyau Verdurin,” an elegant allusion to the salons described in *Du côté de chez Swann* and *Le Côté de Guermantes*. She goes on to add, “Qu’en termes galants ces choses-là étaient mises,” a quotation from Molière’s *Le Misanthrope* (Cf. II, 1670, note 1), an appropriate intertext for the stage of this “rustic theatre.” This is followed by another quotation, this time from one of the grandmother’s favorite authors, Mme de Sévigné: “En les écoutant je pensais qu’ils me préparaient les délices d’un adieu” (Cf. II, 1670, note 2). In this context, the adieu takes on a sinister meaning, not to be found in the original. The grandmother has spent part of her time in the cubicle where she fell ill by coming up with this double gem of intertextuality. As for the juxtaposition of literature and the *chalet de nécessité*, it seems strangely appropriate for the grandmother: “Adepte du mouvement libre et spontané, [la grand-mère] s’oppose à tout ce qui est figé et convenu, en art comme dans les relations sociales.”⁵

⁵ Francine Goujon, “Grand-mère,” in *Dictionnaire Marcel Proust*, ed. by Annick Bouillaguet and Brian G. Rogers, new edition (Paris: Champion Classiques, 2014), pp. 432–33 (p. 432).

The grandmother is right, of course, since the conversation between the *dame pipi* and the *garde forestier* did resemble that of a salon, at least to a certain extent. But from what we know of the actual conversations of Mme Verdurin or the Duc de Guermantes, the dialogue in the *chalet d'aisance* was of better quality. The literary French of the 17th century mastered by the grandmother bears a better comparison, since so much of the salon dialogue in *Le Côté de Guermantes* is characterized by stupidity, anti-Semitism, and bad French.

Clearly, the grandmother wants to reassure Marcel that she is all right, that her memory is intact. But he has to guess at her words. She tries to lie to protect her grandson from the truth, but tragically her body gives her away.

Para. 19 The narrator underscores his grandmother's culture, her love of literature, her memory of classical works: "toute sa finesse, son goût des citations, sa mémoire des classiques" which she has harnessed to show Marcel that she still has her wits about her. Note that the narrator demonstrates a much greater understanding of and appreciation for what she says than Marcel was capable of at the time, an example of Proust's use of stereographical time, to recall Roger Shattuck's great classic, *Proust's Binoculars*.⁶ The cruel irony is that Marcel barely hears what she is saying; he has to guess at her meaning because of her clenched teeth, her voice a mere mutter: "Mais ces phrases, je les devinai plutôt que je ne les entendis, tant elle les prononça d'une voix ronchonante et en serrant les dents plus que ne pouvait l'expliquer la peur de vomir." He understands that his initial diagnosis of nausea cannot account for all of this. Clearly, his grandmother is in more physical pain than mere heartburn. We can only admire her courage and stamina.

Para. 20 Marcel reacts by telling her he does not want to walk with a grandmother who has indigestion. Although he realizes that something major is wrong, he makes light of the situation, again suggesting heartburn: "Allons, lui dis-je assez légèrement pour n'avoir pas l'air de prendre trop au sérieux son malaise, puisque tu as un peu mal au cœur, si tu veux bien nous allons rentrer, je ne veux pas promener aux Champs-Élysées une grand-mère qui a une indigestion." Unlike earlier, he now understands that something more serious than nausea is at stake. He lies to save his grandmother's face, not to worry her by showing that he is worried. But perhaps he is also ashamed of the way the old woman looks; the grandmother raised this possibility in the first paragraph; and she is no fool!

Para. 21 The grandmother agrees to leave the Jardin des Champs-Élysées. Bad as things are, she is not yet ready for heaven, as she has to get on with the business of dying. She calls Marcel "Pauvre petit!" because he will have to miss his friends' party and/or because she realizes how much he is going to miss her, although this will not happen until the second visit to Balbec, in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*.

Paras 22 and 23 Marcel is afraid that his grandmother will notice just how deformed her speech is actually. In another face-saving gesture, he returns to the indigestion scenario, while effectively telling her to shut up: "Voyons, lui dis-je brusquement, ne te fatigue donc pas à parler, puisque tu as mal au cœur, c'est absurde, attends au moins que nous soyons rentrés."

⁶ Shattuck, *Proust's Binoculars* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).

Perhaps he is embarrassed by her; as elsewhere, the unsaid speaks volumes here. In fact, it is not totally unsaid, since the adverb *brusquement* (if we go with the older psychological [“avec rudesse, brusquerie”] over the modern temporal meaning) reveals a petty, mean, even cruel side to Marcel. A kinder interpretation would be: he tries to take control of a situation that he is not in control of, which scares him.

Para. 24 The grandmother smiles sadly and agrees to go home in silence: this is the meaning of her taking his hand. She understands that her grandson understands that she has had a slight stroke: “Elle avait compris qu’il n’y avait pas à me cacher ce que j’avais deviné tout de suite : qu’elle venait d’avoir une petite attaque.” This appears to be a face-saving explanation on the narrator’s part, since it is clear from what was said earlier that Marcel did not guess at the explanation of a stroke right away. If he had, his conduct would be even more unbecoming.

Traces of time past

One cannot help noticing the ways in which Proust has programmed associations with the *ancien régime* into the passage. For example, the park-keeper’s sword reminds us of the ones worn by the *petits marquis* of yesteryear. It, like his green uniform, is explained by his role as a *garde forestier*, which was a military rank. But for now, he does not have any use for something akin to a garden tool, a case of bathos.

As for the *chalet de nécessité*, in *À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* the narrator compared it to one of the former *bureaux d’octroi* (I, 483) erected in the 18th century to the objections of Parisians who didn’t want to pay the customs duties that were imposed there, hence the famous saying, *Paris murmurant le mur murant Paris*. Money or the lack thereof still characterizes the place, as we saw with the would-be client. No money = no relief, although the Marquise was willing to forego her fees for Marcel, a singular honor similar to his unexplained success in high society.

Françoise has awarded a title to the Marquise that is redolent of pre-republican France, so many traces of which abound in *Le Côté de Guermantes*. In fact, she is at the center of a cluster of marquises: first, Mme de Villeparisis, who as we learn in this volume of the novel shares a love of flowers with her homologue in the park; second, Mme de Pompadour, who lived in the nearby Palais de l’Élysée; and third, Mme de Sévigné, one of the grandmother’s favorite authors, whom she quotes in her conversation with Marcel after she leaves the *chalet de nécessité*. Three marquises from the 19th to the 17th centuries who anticipate the *dame pipi*, their logical if not their biological heir. Certainly, according to the grandmother she is the intertextual heir of the one closest to her heart, Sévigné. These associations anchor the passage in time past, of which the grandmother was so fond, as witnessed by her predilection for several *épaisseurs d’art* in “Combray.”

Themes

Here are the main themes to be found in these few pages: anger, bodily functions, cruelty, death, humor, illness, language, literature, love, lying, memory, pathos, sadism, salons, selfishness, selflessness, snobbery, theatre, and time. This is a remarkable thematic cluster, since it includes

most of the important themes of the entire novel, apart from jealousy and homosexuality. But since these two themes are so intimately tied up with lying, they are here, if only indirectly, virtually.

One is struck by just how much lying goes on these pages. Unfortunately for Marcel, he doesn't understand how commonplace lying is in social interactions, although he indulges in lies in the passage. (In general, Marcel, as opposed to his later incarnation as narrator, doesn't get much about life.) If he had, he could have spared himself a lot of suffering later on in *La Prisonnière* and *La Fugitive*, where he torments Albertine with his interrogations and his own lies that he uses to try and trap her into confessing all sorts of things.

A slight stroke?

I have wondered about Proust's description of what the grandmother has suffered as "une petite attaque." The symptoms described would seem to indicate that she has had something more serious. When I had a stroke, I certainly could not have come up with Mme Amédée's dissertation, not even using muttered words. (I cannot remember how the doctors described what I suffered in May 2010.) But I am no medical doctor; neither was Proust, although his father, who suffered a stroke in the W.C. of the Faculty of Medicine, was. So perhaps it was just a "slight stroke" in the case of the grandmother. Or perhaps there is something more at stake.

I believe that there is a mathematical cipher referring to the passage of time in the repetition, twelve times, of the word *petit* in the passage. (By way of contrast, there is only one occurrence in the five pages preceding the passage.) Twelve, as in the months of the year, or the hours of the clockface, resonates in the fabric of the text like some soon-to-pass death knell of what is to be but also what has already begun, the leave-taking of Marcel's beloved grandmother about whom he demonstrates himself, at first anyway, to be so completely unconcerned in his selfish anticipation of a *partie de campagne*. One also recalls the Twelve Labors of Hercules, the Twelve Apostles. The narrator could be considered as the grandmother's apostle, here especially where he spreads her wonderful words. One also thinks of the twelve letters of each of the two parts of the 24-character title of the novel, *À la recherche / du temps perdu*, that inscribe time in the very letters that make up the title.

Occurrences of PETIT

1. "le *petit* pavillon ancien, grillagé de vert, où un jour j'avais attendu Françoise" (para. 2)
2. "je montai les degrés du *petit* théâtre rustique édifié au milieu des jardins" (para. 2)
3. "son *petit* bonnet de fleurs rouges et de dentelle noire surmontant sa perruque rousse" (para. 2)
4. "c'est ce que j'appelle mon *petit* Paris" (para. 4)
5. "il reste plus d'une demi-heure pour lire ses journaux en faisant ses *petits* besoins" (para. 4)

6. “On sentait qu’il avait été tout dérangé dans ses *petites* habitudes” (para. 4)
7. “Venez comme avant, dans votre chagrin ça vous fera une *petite* distraction” (para. 4)
8. “toujours l’un ou l’autre veut m’apporter une *petite* branche de beau lilas, de jasmin ou des roses, ma fleur préférée” (para. 6)
9. “Vous ne voulez pas que je vous ouvre une *petite* cabine?” (para. 8)
10. “C’était on ne peut plus Guermantes et *petit* noyau Verdurin” (para. 18)
11. “Pauvre *petit!*” (para. 21)
12. “elle venait d’avoir une *petite* attaque” (para. 24)

Final thoughts

Most of the examples of *PETIT* occur in the first two pages. The majority are of *petit(s)* in the masculine, perhaps to underscore the unsaid word *petit-fils*; the first example is in the masculine singular, the last in the feminine singular. Eight examples occur in dialogue, including one in *dialogue rapporté*; the remaining four occur in descriptive and narrative passages. Clearly, the Marquise likes to use the word *petit*; half of the twelve examples are used by her. She uses it as a euphemism, a term of endearment, as well as literally.

The Marquise likes to talk. She speaks with the park-keeper, Marcel, even the client in urgent need to whom she refuses entry to her “salons,” not to mention the judge, one of her favorite customers. She also talks to herself. There is no dialogue between the Marquise and the grandmother, but there is a dialogical relationship between them. The grandmother, who has listened attentively to the conversation between the Marquise and the park-keeper, describes it by using two quotations, a form of intertextual dialogue. The Marquise’s use of the adjective *petit* (six occurrences) is echoed by the grandmother’s use of the same word (two occurrences).

There is a gap of nine paragraphs (9–17) where there are no examples of *petit*, so that we almost forget the word, before the grandmother makes her big speech about Molière and Mme de Sévigné in paragraph 18; then there is another gap, this time of two paragraphs before the grandmother uses the word again, to describe her grandson, followed by another gap of two paragraphs before the final occurrence to describe the slight stroke, a euphemism worthy of the Marquise. The rhythm is poetical, almost musical, as the last occurrence ends the passage and the first part of *Le Côté de Guermantes*, on that final, resounding note: “une petite attaque.”

In terms of structure, there is a *mise en abyme* in the grandmother’s speech when she refers to the côté Guermantes and the petit noyau Verdurin, associated with Swann’s way. These are not only linked to the geography around Combray, since they give the structure to the first half of the novel, namely, up to the end of the two Guermantes parts. This is a *moment fort* of the volume, indeed of the entire novel. In the original NRF edition, this was the end of the first of the two volumes of *Le Côté de Guermantes*.

We remember that the Guermantes way was associated with writing in “Combray,” since it was on one of the family’s expeditions in this direction that Marcel wrote his prose poem on the steeples of Martinville. Although he does not get much writing done, if any, in this volume where he is so taken up with his social life, the grandmother’s intertextual speech about Molière and Sévigné is a lesson about writing, not to mention memory and the life force of literature. It is also Marcel’s grandmother’s ultimate gift to him during their last walk together in the park.

The grandmother has had no access to the salons of either the Guermantes tribe or Mme Verdurin’s coterie of crackpots. Clearly, she has heard about them from someone else, possibly her husband in the case of the latter, since he knew Swann, possibly from Marcel himself in the case of the former, another example of dialogue, albeit unheard. Apart from so many likeable traits, the grandmother is as a good listener as she is a good reader. Although she can barely speak, her memory is still intact, for now.

This is her legacy to Marcel, although it will take him a long time to realize it before he assumes the mantle of writer for himself. (The bilingual reader thinks of the grandmother’s *mantelet* of which she is so needlessly ashamed in paragraph 1.) But her love of literature, her memory of 17th-century works, and her use of gentle humor will all be resurrected eventually in Marcel’s writing as narrator, as evidenced by this passage, which is as playful as it is poignant. It can be read as an expiatory offering, a literary *tombeau*, in honor of the most loveable character of *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

Post-readings

II, 609–41 The grandmother’s final illness and death.

II, 884 The red shoes of the Duchesse de Guermantes and the announcement of Swann’s impending death.

III, 152–60 “Bouleversement de toute ma personne.” Marcel finally understands that he has lost his grandmother.

III, 165–68 Marcel’s mother has become his grandmother; this “resurrection” complements her reappearance in memories and dreams.

III, 172–73 Françoise reveals the circumstances of the photograph that Saint-Loup took of the grandmother when she wanted to look her best for Marcel.

III, 499 Marcel’s punishment “d’avoir laissé mourir ma grand-mère.”

IV, 481 Marcel’s remorse.

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