"combray" and self

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The " Combray" section of Marcel Proust's Swann's Way is an extended meditation on an idyllic past. The book begins, though, not with recollections of Combray, but with a description of the narrator's half-asleep state, a state of consciousness where he does not know where, or even who, he is. The expanded memories of his past, then, seem an attempt to establish a stable sense of self, a sense that continually eludes him. In this exploration, which constitutes the entirety of the " Combray" section, we find the narrator, a young man with literary aspirations, struggling to understand the characters of his childhood in a way that captures their contradictions, only to find that each person seems more like a spectrum of singular, varying selves than a single delimited identity. When we encounter the narrator addressing the problems faced by the artist, he notes that " the ingenuity of the first novelist" lay in the realization that a simplification of characters that corresponds to the " suppression" of "' real' people" inevitably makes novels stronger, more effective in conjuring a sympathetic response from a sensitive reader. " A ' real' person," he begins, profoundly as we may sympathize with him, is in a great measure perceptible only through our senses, that is to say, he remains opaque, offers a dead weight which our sensibilities have not the strength to lift. If some misfortune comes to him, it is only in one small section of the complete idea we have of him that we are capable of feeling any emotion; indeed it is only in one small section of the complete idea he has of himself that he is capable of feeling any emotion either. (83) How a novel works, Proust's narrator suggests, is by a trick of illusion, a sleight of hand, towards the end of eliciting sympathy. By substituting " immaterial…things…which the spirit can assimilate to itself" for the " opaque sections" of " real" human existence, the trick of sympathy

is enacted; we now can substantiate and corroborate the veils which the novelist has created for us, and feel corresponding emotion for the illusory " feelings," in the " guise of truth," of literary creations (83). The novelist's art is in paring the " dead weight" of real life, and presenting us with responsive abstractions. As the whole of a being is inassimilable, untenable, wrought with contradictions (hence, " opaque"), the reader must be given the effective parts, whence he creates the affective illusion of a whole. This theory of the novel inevitably extends into our own reading of experience, how we feel and sympathize with the indubitably ' real' people with whom we interact. Because of the incontrovertible fact that we can never feel how another feels, just " see" how they feel, our experience of others ends with our observation of them; what we call " sympathy" is made of expectations. The introduction of more information, the creation of opacity, may even be a mitigating factor to sympathy, as Francoise's heartfelt response to distant tragedies, but indifference to local misfortunes demonstrates (122). We believe the interior life of others to be as we assume it to be; the work of the mind is (though it may be unconscionable) to remove any dissonance in our impression of what can only be experienced as stable, consistent characters. In the leisure-class world of Combray, this is accomplished by reducing people to their social environments, with an exacting eye for the nice distinctions of class. " Even in the most insignificant details of our daily life, none of us can be said to constitute a material whole…our social personality is created by the thoughts of other people," the narrator avers, " We pack the physical outline of the creature we see with all the ideas we have already formed about him, and in the complete picture of him which we compose in our minds those ideas have certainly the principle place" (17). These " ideas

we have already formed about" the person in question include their determined position in the social cosmos, their family background, and their profession, assumptions which may linger uncorroborated (as in Swann's case), and which may be of only incidental importance. In a small town like Combray, in particular, these preconceived details of what can broadly be referred to as status are patent, omnipresent, and difficult to amend. In order to investigate how these perceptions function, it may be useful to examine one of the most tightly characterized figures in the novel, the narrator's Aunt Leonie. In her surveyor's perch over Combray, she may rightly be called one of the guarantors of the stability of the social order, despite her self-ordained exclusion from it. The narrator's aunt Leonie is the daughter of his great-aunt, or grandfather's cousin (48). Though apparently of the same generation as his parents, she seems much older than they. Perhaps this is because she is a widow, and formally addressed, after her departed husband, as Mme. Octave. She is bedridden, though has not been that way for the entirety of the narrator's young life, as he recalls visiting at her house in Paris, when she lived with her mother. Her confinement as an invalid was a gradual process; " after her husband's…death, she had gradually declined to leave, first Combray, then her house in Combray, then her bedroom, and finally her bed; and…now never ' came down,' but lay perpetually in an indefinite condition of grief, physical exhaustion, illness obsessions, and religious observances" (48). She has restricted her movement to a series of increasingly smaller concentric rooms, and the last, her bedroom, with her bed near the window, forms, if not a panopticon, then a perch whence she can watch the events in her largest sphere, Combray, virtually unobserved. When the episodes of her life do not derive from the

vicissitudes in the state of her own torpid body, they come from the minutiae of small town life. Her mental life derives entirely from watching others go about their lives. But this is a particular kind of speculation: she looks out onto the street, not into windows (to contrast her constant " voyeurism" with her nephew's unintended glimpse through Mlle. Vinteuil's sitting room window). From their activities in the street, an intensely public sphere, Leonie can only derive speculations on the social lives of Combray's inhabitants, the comings and goings, entrances and exits, of which society consists. Though those she watches may not know they are being observed, it could not be said that their private (interior) lives are disclosed or revealed to Mme. Octave. This intense vigilance of the outside world is simultaneous with Leonie's constant preoccupation with herself, with the state of her body and soul. She has, gradually, secluded herself from the world, narrowed the circle of her acquaintances to only those who confirm her rather paradoxical view of her own health. When we meet her, this company is of one—Eulalie, a retired servant whose life consists only of the ill and the church, with the addition of the Cure, who secures the health of her soul. Her society is circumscribed, then, not only by the illness that keeps her bedridden, but also by her own notion of the nature of that illness, that she must sustain at all costs. She claims to be severely ill, so ill that she does not sleep, but keeps reminding herself of this fact, as if it is something that needs to be confirmed by staid repetition, and her solitude is saved from silence by the converse that she holds with herself, a converse that revolves on her own condition, and confirming her dubious views on herself. Her malady, then, does not have the phases and relapses that we associate with long illness, but is rather a sustained state of being on the verge of death without

actually expecting death. Jokingly, yet with canny truth, her nephew reports that when Eulalie suggests to her that she may live yet to be a hundred, she answers, “ I do not ask to live to a hundred,” not because of gloomy forebodings, but rather because “ she preferred to have no definite limit fixed to the number of her days” (69). Really, monitoring her disease like she does is tantamount to fixing it in a constant state. The narrator notes later, “ the heart changes…but we learn of it only from reading or by imagination…for in reality its alteration is so gradual that…we are spared the actual sensation of change” (84). Part of Leonie’s illness seems to be a ruse contrived by her own vanity. Some of the “ symptoms” she suffers, for example, her sleeplessness, are manufactured, but out of a benevolent indulgence, the members of her household indulge them. One of her countless eccentricities is in her speech: She never spoke save in low tones, because she believed that there was something broken in her head and floating loose there, which she might displace by talking too loud [and] she never remained for long, even when alone, without saying something, because she believed that it was good for her throat, and that by keeping the blood there in circulation it would make less frequent the chokings and other pains to which she was liable. (49) As is her tendency, physiological explanations are given for what otherwise would be pure eccentricity (just as her refusal to leave her bedroom is explained by a physiological symptom of her illness🏄her “ tiredness”). However, as all these explanations are dubious, at best, it is up to the narrator, and the interpreter, to try to decipher the psychological motivations for these behaviors. Her constant speech destroys any semblance of private life she has. Although she lives as a recluse, in virtual seclusion, she reveals everything. As Leonie reports on

the incidental happenings of the town, so she reports the incidental happenings of her body. Her nephew recalls, “ in the life of complete inertia which she led she attached to the least of her sensations an extraordinary importance, endowed them with a Protean ubiquity which made it difficult for her to keep them secret, and, failing a confidant to whom she might communicate them, she used to promulgate them to herself in an unceasing monologue which was the sole form of her activity” (50). This monologue is remarkable partly because of the importance of decorum and understatement in polite society at the time, where subtlety is the expected currency of conversation (recall the narrator’s grandmother’s sisters, obtusely thanking Swann for the case of Asti (23-4)). Leonie puts much emphasis on this sort of propriety, as from her perch she tries to confirm whether Mme. Sazerat made it to church at the proper hour. Yet in her restricted life, she applies the same sort of vigilance she displays towards the happenings of the town to the “ least of her sensations,” existing in a state of hyper-sensitivity which is a parallel to that of the artist. Each event becomes engorged with such import that it becomes remarkable. The “ unceasing monologue,” the “ sole form of her activity,” is as grotesquely analogous to the artist’s work, as her complete self-absorption is to his methods. But in the conceit of her life she destroys any semblance of privacy. Her life consists in part of completely external events: the public (but secretly observed) commerce of the town, and in part is a running tally of her eccentricities, which her monologue necessarily reveals. She is entirely the product of her environment, sprung from the soil of small town existence where “ a person ‘ whom one didn’t know at all'”, and, by extension, any unfamiliar thought or sensation, “ was as incredible a being

as any mythological deity" (56). Consider, for instance, the incidental character, Theodore, the grocer at Camus; when Mme. Octave is unfamiliar with a person, or even, the narrator interjects humourously, even a dog, she sends Francoise on a sham errand to the grocer, as " it's not often that Theodore can't tell you who a person is," that is, it is never at all (55). In Leonie's world, and by extension, her nephew's, a satisfactory resolution only occurs if the " stranger," this agent of sudden change that appears, is revealed to be a familiar figure. This is the path that the protagonist's conservative family takes most often in explaining unsettling facts. For example, when evidence appears of Swann's more fabulous life as a denizen of high society, his great-aunt rationalizes that it must be a mistake, or refuses to consider the fact itself except as a likely disgrace. In Leonie's world, anything out of the usual serves only to increase anxiety. When facts are unresolved they cause her an incredible amount of tension; the possibility of uncertainty indeed makes her physically ill, as is demonstrated by her constant worrying over trivial concerns. The " most important" thing she has to ask Eulalie is whether Mme. Sazerat indeed arrived late to church; all such trifles must be resolved (67). Her view of the world cannot accept and challenges. Her life as an invalid, then, the essence of " her little jog-trot," consists of the unceasing attempt to confirm that everything remains in its proper place. The tone in which the narrator describes his aunt's eccentric existence is uniformly anecdotal, with one jarring exception. When he catches her unawares, talking to herself after awaking from a nightmare, there is something unsettling about the episode that cannot be immediately pinpointed. The conclusion of the paragraph, " and I crept out of the room on tiptoe, without either her or anyone else ever knowing, from that day to this,

what I had seen and heard” (109). Truly, it is not unusual to overhear Leonie talking to herself; the narrator tells us earlier that his Aunt “ having formed the habit of thinking aloud…did not always take care to see that there was no one in the adjoining room” (50). So what exactly is unsettling about this overheard utterance, and what does it tell us that the previous, meticulous enumeration of Leonie’s habits does not? Really, the reason for the terror on her face reads more like a punchline: her nightmares are about being forced to take a walk. There is something guilty about this admission, that amounts almost to a wish of gratitude, that her husband is dead. Her arrested movement towards the rosary, to mutter a prayer to expiate herself, but her utterance remains unshriven. The nephew catches his aunt, a woman so vigilant that “ she never sleeps a wink,” in a moment of confession. The society Proust describes is a masked society, where people exist in different states, or rather, different states of being overcome people, despite their intentions. So voyeurism, the act of watching someone while they believe that they remain unobserved, pretends that it may be a key to a secret life, or the key to inner life. As everyone is guarded, influenced by the conditions that surround them, the social conditions, it seems that only when alone may they be truthful. But instead of confirming this, instead of giving us insight into the “ core” essence of his characters, the “ truth” that all their masks conceal, Proust confounds us by making the confessions imparted in solitude as constructed as any others. In fact, perhaps the only distinguishing factor, is that in solitude, his characters are free to feel and admit guilt, something they would be reluctant to admit in public. But even in private, their lives are organized as a sort of public confession, as they struggle to maintain the illusion of a stable self.