

Hawthorns, nenuphars, mind, society, the Virgin, Hell, etc.

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Peter Stephenson — 26 Jul 1999, 14:04

I said I'd report back if I found anything relevant in Proust on the subject of hawthorns. This turns out to be embarrassingly rich for what in Claw is only about two pages (and I would certainly not have spotted it without Roy's work on flowers). But I think it's interesting to see a particularly strong reference to Proustian imagery since, although Wolfe is a known fan, there are few overt references apart from the opening of Fifth Head. Presumably Wolfe's subconscious is working overtime (suprised?).

Here's the paragraph again, from C. XXIII, Jolenta, about half way through the chapter in my distinctly yellowing Arrow paperback:

I heard the sound of water sliding over stones, and having no better goal to seek made for it. We passed through a hawthorn hedge show spotted white blossoms seemed from a distance to present an insurmountable barrier, and saw a river hardly wider than a street, on which swans sailed like sculptures of ice. There was a pavilion there, and beside it three boats, each shaped like the wide flower of the nenuphar. Their interiors were lined with the thickest silk brocade, and when I stepped into one I found that they exuded the odor of spices.

(See, I didn't even change odor to odour.) Note the nenuphar as well as the hawthorn in the same paragraph --- that's why I'm fairly confident the connection is there. He's even used the French name for it, minus acute. Hawthorn, by the way, is aubépine, hope `le quoted-printable' is OK for most readers.

I should say at the start that flowers are ubiquitous in Proust, too: lilacs, irises, jasmine, orris root, tisane, cattleya, many of which I can't even spell in English, all have some kind of association usually more personal than conventional, though in some cases, as here, they seem to step over the bounds from the individual to the universal.

`Swann's Way' is really `the way by Swann's house'. It's one of two walks from the narrator's aunt's house in Combray, the other being the `Guermantes Way' (the title of book three: Guermantes is both a place and the aristocratic family who have owned the land for centuries). The difference between these two ways will acquire a heavy symbolic load. Swann's way is the way of the intellect, of the inner senses --- and sensuality in Proust is never too far from sensuousness. The Guermantes way is the way of society and social climbing; it's somehow associated with the darker side of sex and sexual perversion, opposed to the more direct way of the senses associated with the other way. Swann himself, and the Guermantes themselves (particularly the Baron de Charlus), are the personal representatives of the two ways which come to stand for them. Although it's not immediately relevant to Wolfe, I've appended the passage where Proust introduces this theme (all translations home-made, from the Flammarion edition, 1987), since it's a wonderful introduction to Proust.

However, the hawthorns first turn up in the church in Combray some pages before --- luckily there's a resumé at the back, or this would have taken days longer. They are associated with the Virgin Mary, decking the church for May, 'Mary's month' (p 217):

... placed on the altar itself, inseparable from the mysteries in whose celebration they took part, their branches, attached horizontally to one another in a festive arrangement, were strung out towards the torches and the sacred vessels, enlivening still more the festoons of their greenery on which were scattered, as on a marriage train, a profusion of little bunches of buds of a brilliant whiteness.

Maybe one can begin to see what it means when Severian and Jolenta go through the hedge of hawthorns. But there's more to it than virginity and decoration: after the service (p 219):

On leaving the church I knelt down before the altar, and as I stood up I smelled all of a sudden a bittersweet almond odour(*) escaping from the hawthorns, and noticed on the flowers little places whiter than the rest, on which I supposed this scent must be hidden like the taste of marzipan under a dusting of breadcrumbs(**) or like the cheeks of Mlle Vinteuil under their red freckles. Despite the silent immobility of the hawthorns, that intermittent scent was like the murmur of an intense life which made the altar vibrate as a rural hedge probed by living antennae where, on some stamens(***) which were almost red and which seemed to have kept a springlike virulence, one thought to see the provoking power of insects now metamorphosed into flowers.(****)

(*) I get away with it this time.

(**) I haven't done very well with 'comme sous les parties gratinées le goût d'une frangipane', but being culinary it was never really supposed to be translated.

(***) 'étamines' can mean both 'stamens' and 'bunting'. I have translated it once each way; neither really seems right.

(****) Phew.

This is an introduction to the sensual associations of hawthorns. Mlle Vinteuil, whose father is a music teacher --- and, we later learn, a composer --- is also a dweller along Swann's way. Later (p 246), the narrator is walking with his father and grandfather past Swann's house itself, where there is a hawthorn hedge, because they think the Swanns are out (Swann has made an unsuitable marriage, detailed later in the book in 'Un Amour de Swann', usually translated as 'Swann in love'). The passage is too long to quote at length (it is, incidentally, the part which convinced my mother she couldn't take Proust), but it starts:

I found them quite humming with the scent of hawthorns. It was as if the hedge formed a suite of chapels that disappeared beneath their strewn flowers, heaped up in their resting place, while beneath, the sun spread a chequerboard of light as if it had just passed through a stained glass window; their perfume wafted, so oily, so fixed in its form as if I had been before the Virgin's altar and the flowers, just as much adorned, each held with a distracted air a glittering bouquet of bunting...

(at this point it gets difficult).

He goes on to compare the hawthorns both to music and to painting. Finally, he notices a girl in the garden: it's Gilberte Swann, who rather more than Mlle Verdurin (soon to be regarded as even more unsuitable than Mme Swann) is the object of the narrator's youthful longings.

Enough of hawthorns. The way to Guermante is described as much more arduous, requiring a fine day, by the banks of the river Vivonne (p 281):

Soon the course of the Vivonne was choked with water plants. First of all they were isolated, such as a water lily placed miserably in a current which gave it so little rest, like a mechanical ferry that is no sooner by one bank than it has to come back from where it came, eternally making the double crossing. Pushed towards the bank, its stem unfolded, lengthened, spun out, and reached the extreme limit of its tension just at the point where the current picked it up again, the green rope folding up on itself once more and taking the poor plant back to its point of departure in such a way that it did not remain a second before starting a repetition of the same movement. On walk after walk I found them always in the same predicament, making me think of a type of neurotic, amongst whom my grandfather counted my aunt Léonie, who down the course of the years shows the changeless spectacle of bizarre habits which they believe each time to be about to shake off and which they always keep; caught in the gears of their own illnesses and manias, their futile efforts at struggling to escape only ensure their continued machinations, playing the escapement to the strange, inevitable and fatal daily routine. The water lily was one of those, similar to one of the wretches whose singular torment, repeated endlessly throughout eternity, excited Dante's curiosity and would have forced him to make the condemned man himself tell the tale of the details and the cause at greater length had not Virgil, striding ahead, forced him to catch up at top speed, as my parents did me.

(`Water lily', of course, is *nénuphar*; I have used the more standard English translation.) Later, there are more `*travaux d'horticulture aquatique*' with `*jardins de nymphéas*', a plant which Cassell's Concise Dictionary isn't able to shed light on. According to the notes, the Dante reference is to *Inferno* XXIX; there's a reminder about the descent to Avernus on p 284 where it's thematically associated with the source of the Vivonne.

To return to Jolenta, it seems to me Wolfe is also drawing together the two worlds, on the one side that of the intellectual senses of the hawthorn hedge itself, and of the gardens the pair pass through:

Couples lay on the soft grass beneath the trees and in the more refined comfort of summerhouses and seemed to think our craft hardly more than a decoration sent idly downstream for their delectation, or if they saw my head above the curved petals assumed us intent upon our own affairs. Lone philosophers meditated on rustic seats, and parties, not invariably erotic, proceeded undisturbed in clerestories and arboriums.

The summerhouse recalls Combray and the `*lone philosophers*' are also telling. On the other side, there is the world of voluptuousness, desire for its own sake, the incessant, almost manic need for what other people may not be able to provide which matches the Guermantes way,

represented in the water lily boat:

Jolenta's desire was no more than the desire to be desired, so that I wished, not to comfort her loneliness as I had wished to comfort Valeria's, nor to find expression for an aching love like the love I had felt for Thecla, nor to protect her as I wished to protect Dorcas; but to shame and punish her, to destroy her self-possession, to fill her eyes with tears and tear her hair as one burns the hair of corpses to torment the ghosts that have fled them. She had boasted that she made tribadists of women. She came near to making an algopholist of me.

(Exercise: try translating that into French.)

I've said quite enough about this passage, but the exercise suggest other possible Proustian connections. For example, the narrator's female counterparts in each book can perhaps be very loosely identified: Thecla with Gilberte, Dorcas with Albertine, Jolenta with Mlle Vinteuil (who doesn't appear all that much).

Appendix: The two « côtés » at Combray: Du côté de chez Swann, p242

For there were two 'ways' leading from Combray for our walks, so opposed that we did not even leave the house by the same door if we wanted to go one way or the other: the way to Méséglise-la-Vineuse, also known as 'Swann's way' because in that direction we passed by M. Swann's property, and the way to Guermantes. Of Méséglise-la-Vineuse, to tell you the truth, I knew nothing more than the 'way' and the strangers who came strolling to Combray on a Sunday, people whom none of us, this time not even my aunt, 'knew from Adam', and whom by that token we took for 'people who must have come from Méséglise'. As for Guermantes, one day I would know it better, but only much later; however, if Méséglise was for the whole of my adolescence something as inaccessible as the horizon, hidden from view, so far away that you went over the folds of a terrain which was already nothing like that of Combray, then Guermantes appeared to me more like the end point, ideal rather than real, of its own 'way', a sort of abstract geographical expression like the equator, the pole, or the orient. So to 'set off for Guermantes' to go to Méséglise or vice versa would have seemed to me an expression as devoid of sense as to set off to the east to go to the west. My father always spoke of the Méséglise way as the most beautiful vista of a plain which he knew and of the Guermantes way as the archetypal river landscape, and in conceiving of them thus as two entities I ascribed to them a cohesion and unity which belong only to the creations of the mind: the least portion of either seemed precious, showing its particular excellence, while beside them both, before I had arrived on the sacred ground of one or other, the purely material paths, in the midst of which they were posited as the ideal view of a plain and the ideal river landscape, only remained worth looking at for a spectator in love with the dramatic arts, like the narrow streets next to a theatre. But, much more than their geographic separation, I felt between them the distance between the two parts of my own brain in which I thought of them, one of those intellectual distances which are only there to keep apart, to separate and put into another plane. And this demarcation was made all the more absolute by our habit of not going both ways in the same day or in a single walk, but one time

the Méséglise way, another the Guermantes way, which enclosed them in a manner that made each distant and unknowable from the other, in the closed and uncommunicating vessels of different afternoons.

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