



Marcel Proust

# A la recherche du temps perdu

Volume 1 Du côté de chez Swann

Part 3: Noms de pays: le nom



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Marcel Proust  
**DU COTE DE CHEZ SWANN**

**Troisième partie**

**NOMS DE PAYS: LE NOM**

*"Parmi les chambres dont j'évoquais le plus souvent ... ".  
Paris, I am around fourteen and devotee of natural nature, to  
which I decide to reckon gothic architecture.*

Those many times I could not sleep I often thought, as told, about other sleeping rooms, and during heavy storms, the ones that prompted Françoise to tell me to stay clear of facades in order not to get any tiles on my head, my thoughts went to the exceptional case of Balbec, the hotel. Shiny painted walls with windows displaying moving windy sea-pieces.

And that led me to "nature". To me, "nature" could not be pure enough. Sea waves were great, but only if instead of against a dike, they would hit a virgin coast line, they were the real ones.

But Swann, who knew very well the Middle Age church of Balbec, prompted me to make an exception for gothic architecture: for tenacious savage Middle Age fishermen, of whom always a few would survive the storms at the coasts of hell, behind the rocks of death, had left behind their trails like the ribs of perished clover-leaves had remained, stuck, like a message of death from the frightening past, on the stone they

had clamped themselves to. Gothicism! And thus to me Gothicism was intimately connected to storm.

I could go on like this very long and resolved not to shy away from that when later I would write *La recherche*.

*"Combien ils prirent quelque chose de plus individuel ... ". I judge proper names more proper than other names.*

My longing for towns and places they told me about made them almost like persons I could relate to, which was the main reason why so often I got disappointed when I really went there.

They became persons because they were denoted, not by just a name like you saw on those class-room wall illustrations: "seagull", or "ant-eater", but proper names: Parma, Florence, Balbec.

That was a misunderstanding and resulted in them becoming the storage for my dreams. Too simple dreams. Thus, Balbec, in my dream, was a gothic church with Persian influences, surrounded by sea waves.

And thus, in Paris I did not see the things right before my eyes, for I dreamt of far away things that did not exist. When the winter was cold I dreamt of Florence, were everything, I imagined, would be in flowers that very moment.

But it did make me fond of travel guides and time tables of trains.

Once the great moment seemed to have come, we planned to go, but I got so sick of joy that the doctor told us that for the coming year I should not think of traveling.

*"Et hélas, il défendit aussi d'une façon absolue ... ". Still suffering the deprivation of theatre but: Gilberte.*

And he also strictly prohibited theatre visits, so gone was my chance to see La Berma, the heroine of Bergotte.

So all left was just some playing in the park of the Champs Elysées, at Concorde. Françoise - in our service since the death of aunt Léonie - got charged with accompanying me to make sure I would stay a bit calm.

The Champs Elysées. Unbearable. No reference to them in the entire work of Bergotte!

Françoise once took me a little further down the park, where the horses of the wood carts were resting and the sheep from the Seine barges passed to go to their butchers.

At the fountain, two girls of my age were playing badminton. One left and shouted: "Gilberte! Don't forget I come to you after dinner!"

Total shock and consternation, after which I deeply submerged in thought and phantasies concerning these two ladies, tonight, with all the nobility of their souls at home together at M<sup>lle</sup> Swann's place, and got rudely picked out by Françoise who said, in her awfully contrasting vocabulary: "Come, we bug out, close your buttens". With disgust I realized she even had no blue plume on her hat. How could I hope for a successful approach of Gilberte in her company?

A few days later she was there again, and again later they were playing with many and Gilberte felt her team was too small. She gave orders to crimp me. Since then I was there every day.

She was not always there. If she had to do something boring, school or stuff, it was bearable for she would say: "Bah! Tomorrow you will enjoy yourselves without me!" But did I ask whether she would come tomorrow she could say something like: "I really hope not, I might be allowed to go and play with a friend!" After which I could hang myself.

Sometimes her mother took her by surprise and went elsewhere with her without realizing for a moment what a total disaster she caused me.

Whether or not Gilberte came, always an older lady, always harnessed in the same magnificent somber outfit, sat and watched us playing. I would readily sacrifice my entire future career to be introduced to her, for Gilberte always greeted her and the lady always asked how her "amour de mère" was doing. She clearly knew everything about her parents.

The old lady even sat there one time when there was snow and ice. She was about to leave when I saw, from far, the blue feather on Gilberte's hat running at me, with herself under it, totally happy and excited in the prospect of games. Still far from me she reached ice and glided all the rest of the way to me, arms wide, one leg forward, praised loudly by the old lady on behalf of the entire, totally empty, Champs Elysée.

*"La vieille dame elle-même ayant plié ses Débats ... ". Gilberte recognises my existence but my advance is regrettably insufficient.*

We started playing. We were alone. What an intimacy! Drunken with joy I had my neck crammed with her snow balls.

More children arrived. Two teams were formed and the old lady said to me: "No no, we all know you want to be with Gilberte, look! She is giving you a sign!"

My love got worse and more exclusive: when once everybody at home was worried, for my grandmother was unusually late, I thought: "My God, if she got killed under a cart I will not be able to go to Gilberte".

I hasten to add that Gilberte had not admitted her love for me. On the contrary, some friends pleased her more, she had said, for their concentration on the game was better.

In Combray some things about her features had escaped me, most notably that parrot nose of hers, and in all my dreaming it had been replaced with a nose from some painting.

This had hardened so much in the sediment of my memory that I saw her double, among other things with two noses, as a result of which I sometimes failed to catch her ball, which, in its turn significantly harmed my goodwill and reputation.

But there were some small feats: at a stand where a toddler wanted that other prune from his nanny, stamping the ground for having to explain her that of course that was the better one for it had that beautiful lively worm, I spotted two splendid

marbles. Had I been that toddler, I would have wanted those instead of the prune.

Gilberte got much more pocket-money. I asked her which one she liked best. I told her I preferred the one which was like her eyes. She paid the ransom and gave it to me: "Here, for you, keep it as a memory".

I also mentioned to her [Swann's little book](#) by Bergotte where he, dealt with Racine. I was asked at home to put the exact title on telegram. And yes, it surfaced. "Look, its exactly the one", Gilberte said and took out of her muff the pneumatic tube telegram I send to her.

And one day she sad: "Listen, call me by my first name, I am going to do that anyway, this is too ambarassing". But at first she sometimes failed and when I told her she smiled and quickly said something using my first name

All well, but I still saw double and that Gilberte with the parrot nose, who was far from the verge of confessing me her love, was not the real one, not the one of my Overwhelming Love.

*"C'était ce mystère aussi qui me troublait quand ... ". M. Swann, father of Gilberte.*

Then there was a third Gilberte: as she would be at home with her parents. That one I saw when she made a reverence for the old lady, with a stiffly courteous smile.

It became openly visible when once M. Swann came. He had stopped visiting us quite some time ago. I saw him coming and felt my hart thumping. Once that was over, he looked as a main character escaped from some book of great reputation.



Friendly he answered the greetings of all children, mine included, though it looked like he had forgotten about me. Though I had managed to remember the Bergotte-Racine thing, for the rest M. Swann had fully become Gilberte's father and my Combray-recollections had gone in hiding. Now they came back and I started to see him double like I did Gilberte.

Gilberte got allowed to keep playing another quarter of an hour, he said, and took a chair, paying the rent with that hand that so often shook the one of Philippe VII.

*"Un de ces jours de soleil qui n'avait pas réalisé mes espérances ... ". Gilberte looks forward to things more fun than playing with me.*

The last days, after playing, Gilberte had returned home quickly, so by now I had so much to tell her that I almost burst. When she wanted to make the same quick withdrawal the next day and I protested, I was given an overview of her crammed schedule for the coming days, after which it would be Christmas and she would at once go on holiday. "Bye, Daddy calls me!"

That was it. I heard nothing anymore until well in the new year. To prevent my total demise I tried to see it as romantic and to dream I got a letter from her. But within some days the letter got so beautiful that sure the real one, if it ever came, would be no match and a terrible disappointment! So I promptly set out to forget those words again, sitting next to the marble and the Bergotte-Racine booklet.

And I discovered the consolation you get by seriously holding that one can better be in love with someone of elevated value

who does not want you, than with some common person who reciprocates it.

But that does not mean I started to neglect the practical side of the endeavour: I asked my mother whether we could not buy a dignified rain coat for Françoise and a hat with blue plumes.

If Gilberte told me again she loved me less than some other friends because her team had lost several times purely due to my errors I offered my apologies and asked her what I could do to avoid them in the future.

But in the end I confided to my own love that we probably should abandon all hope for reciprocation. My own love turned out to have had similar thoughts for a while already, so there we stood, the two of us, taken aback, staring to the ground.

But it did not help. I could not give up yet.

At home I started to highly praise the haughty old lady who always sat next to our playing lawn. After all, she might be a useful connection. I did not shy away of publicly presuming she might be an ambassador or even a princess.

I also said Gilberte called her M<sup>me</sup> Blatin.

I should not have done that.

"O we know her", my mother said, "A terrible person! She's the widow of an usher."

*"Quant à Swann, pour tâcher de lui ressembler ... ". I want to look like M. Swann, but at home we return to the womb of Hinduism.*

As far as M. Swann was concerned, I now wanted to look like him as much as possible. The entire day I pulled my nose and rubbed my eyes, and I also wanted to be bold, like him.

My father openly doubted my mental health and urged I should occupy myself with the sensational state visit of king Theodosius to France. But I only stretched my back when my mother told us she had seen M. Swann buying an umbrella.

"Did you greet each other?"

"Of course", my mother said, who did not like to spread the news of the bad terms on which our family now was with M. Swann for fear of spontaneous reconciliation initiatives, since under no circumstances she would ever want to see M<sup>me</sup> Swann, "... and we chatted about you", she continued casually, "that you were playing with his daughter ..."

I was in heaven by delight that M. Swann should have remembered my name and my mother and my entire family at that memorable moment when trembling of love for Gilberte I had met him in the park and greeted him.

But obviously my parents had retreated into the womb of Hinduism they had left when some years ago that painting of Swann's collection had been reproduced in the Figaro: there was no more mention of M. Swann, nor even of his father, who had been such a close friend of my grandfather.

And thus, to my endeavours concerning Gilberte, even my own family had become totally useless.

All that was left to me was to embark on pilgrimages to her house and other places where it was rumoured one of the Swanns were regularly spotted.

*"Mais le plus souvent,—quand je ne devais pas voir Gilberte ...". I direct Françoise to the Bois de Boulogne.*

Since I had heard that M<sup>me</sup> Swann was, on almost a daily basis, on display in the allée «des Acacias», around Grand Lac, and in the allée de la «Reine Marguerite», I directed Françoise to the Bois de Boulogne.

Françoise probably thought - and I hoped she would - I loved the many varied little landscapes of the park's architecture but I only thought of M<sup>me</sup> Swann. It was the garden of women.

I was told I would often encounter ladies, elegant though not all married, in the company of M<sup>me</sup> Swann, usually known there under their *nom de guerre*, an assumed name to be used when referring to them in the context of the Bois de Boulogne.

Their dresses and coaches would reveal they were the initiated in the occult laws of Beauty - in the order of female elegance.

Françoise said she was tired. Couldn't we go home?

But I had no mercy. For there was one thing only: M<sup>me</sup> Swann. So the desire, awakened by my love for Gilberte, to come close started to stretch out to her parents who - as I would discover soon - were not at all pleased with me as a play friend of her. I

had become a victim of my own veneration bringing me even to those who harboured no friendliness to me at all.

There she was! M<sup>me</sup> Swann, in all her admirable simplicity, in a dazzling dress, she responded with a blink the greetings from some gentlemen in a coach.

Yes even more than her simplicity I admired the beauty and splendour, like the time I bumped into a unique victoria coach and found M<sup>me</sup> Swann sitting inside, in an unaffected pose, with a smile that could be majestic as well as defying, even slutty, so one passer-by could take it to mean: "Yes I remember, it was exquisite", another: "How I would have loved you, that was bad luck!", and a third: "But of course, I if you want, I will follow the line and put my coach aside as soon as possible".

Another time I saw her on the pedestrian pavement. Behind her she exhibited the long tail of her exquisite soft purple dress, full of rich ornaments, just like simple people imagine a queen, with all kinds of elegant little things other women can't afford.

Every now and then the gaze went down to the shaft of her sunshade, without in the least appearing to have any attention to all people around, near and far, gazing at her.

But when she turned around to call her greyhound her eyes could quickly scan the full circle.

The extreme exaggeration made bystanders not knowing her ask: "Who would that be?". And the rest mumbled: "Do you see M<sup>me</sup> Swann? Odette de Crécy, does that not ring a bell with you?"

"Odette de Crécy, I already ... those big eyes ...".

"But she can't be so young anymore. It must be over ten years ago I went to bed with her".

"Do not remind her. She now is the wife of a gentleman of the Jockey, a friend of the prince de Galles. But she still looks superb."

Now, after all those years, I know the conversation must have been like this, but at the time I only heard the mumbling and inferred she was a celebrity.

Just imagine that I, a little boy, would just go and greet her! Why not? She did not know me and after all I was the friend of her little daughter. I felt my heart thumping.

And before I realized I was already there and took my hat off, a little too deep. Here and there I heard some laughter.

M<sup>me</sup> Swann treated me amused, as part of the park's ambance. My impression was that I got subsumed somewhere in the category with the ducks she fed at the pond.

If I did not see her in the allée des Acacias, then I could find her nearby, in the allée de la Reine-Marguerite, where women walked who wanted to be alone or pretend so. She herself would soon have company. Of a friend, often with a grey "tube" as coiffure, and they would talk long and excited, while the coaches of both women slowly followed.

This complexity of the Bois de Boulogne, not more than an artificially planned Garden, both in the zoological and in the mythological sense of the word, I rediscovered this year, now I

am writing this episode with M<sup>me</sup> Swann for *La recherche*. After rain held me back for some days, when a sunny early spring day came, I finally could yield to my urge to be in the Bois de Boulogne. That would enable me to surprise my readers with an extensive and subtle description of the place, that in the end would come back to my curious experiences as a ten or eleven year old child with some *chefs-d'œuvre* of female elegance.

Not that they were still there, of course. No elegant ladies on foot, followed by their victorias, with slender skittish horses, light as wasps, with that blood in their eyes like the cruel steeds of Diomedes.

No ... cars!

Driven by *mécaniciens* with moustaches. And the ladies in that disgusting fashion of the day. Even the dresses of the classy whore-hoppers now made them a pain in the eye.

But in the avenue des Acacias—l'allée de Myrtes I saw some. Very old.

Streets, houses, people, dresses, all had fled with the years.

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