PC6: The Fugitive

EC: Hello and welcome to *Proust Curious*, a podcast in partnership with *Public Books*. I'm Emma Claussen, an early modernist at Trinity College, Cambridge.

HW: And I'm Hannah Weaver, an Assistant Professor of Medieval Literature at Columbia University and Fellow at the Institute for Ideas and Imagination. *Proust Curious* is a podcast about the experience of reading *À la recherche du temps perdu*, all seven volumes. Written between 1906 and 1922, published between 1913 and 1927, Marcel Proust's cultural touchstone is an object of enduring fascination and, let's face it, intimidation.

EC: We're not Proust experts, but we do study literature for a living, so we feel both under and overqualified to tackle this. Join us as we search for lost time and remember things Proust.

HW: Today we're talking about the penultimate volume of the *Recherche*, *Albertine Disparue*, or *The Fugitive*. As you'll recall, at the end of the last volume, Albertine had escaped from the narrator's prison. This volume opens with his frantic, if badly dissimulated, search for her and his attempts to lure her back. Attempts which are doomed to fail, as Albertine dies in a riding accident, only days after leaving his house. Pages and pages pass in meditation on the nature of forgetting, habit, love, jealousy, and death, accompanied by obsessive investigations into Albertine's possible trysts with other women before she died. As his memories fade, the narrator re-enters the world through women that remind him of Albertine and finally becomes a published author.

He travels to Venice with his mother to work on Ruskin, and on the train back to Paris, they receive word that the social order has been turned on its head by two shocking marriages, that of his friend Robert de Saint-Loup with Gilberte Swann, and that of an aristocrat with a tailor's niece.

EC: Put more simply, in this volume, Albertine is gone and then forgotten.

Before we talk in more detail about this volume, it's time for a question from the famous Proust questionnaire, answered by Proust twice at ages 13 and 20, and used as an interview device by *Vanity Fair*. We'll put a link to the questionnaire in the show notes.

But this week's question is, 'What is your favourite occupation', 'votre occupation préférée'?

HW: And Proust answered, 'To love', 'aimer'.

Loving as an occupation is a lot. Did he mean like preoccupation? But Emma, I was saying that we should also answer with infinitive verbs. So I wondered if you took up the baton or if you were going to answer differently.

EC: I struggled with this question because I just found it really hard to come up with one answer and also to come up with an answer that wasn't like really banal, or just like what I would fill in on a dating profile. Like, 'I like long walks on the beach'. Which I guess I do.

I actually did consider long walks (not specifically on the beach). But I've got an even more uncool answer than that.

Okay, do you want to hear it? I tried to go with a verb, but it's not totally. But like, my favorite occupation is to hang out with people I like, but in motion.

HW: Emma, you just described the origin story of our friendship. I'm kind of touched.

EC: You know, it could be running, it could be dancing, it could be walking, you know, some kind of hanging out in motion is my favorite occupation, I think.

HW: Hanging out in motion. I love this. I think we have all the same favorite things. So it's hard to feel original after that. Because my answer was going to just be 'to walk'. But it's, I think it's better. I think it's better. You're right that like, my very favorite is to walk with a friend. That's even better than walking alone.

EC: I do like to walk alone, like the cat that walks by itself or whatever. But I think... oh no, gosh, cringe, cringe.

HW: Other candidates were like, 'to read'. I'm so predictable. I'm exactly who you think I am at the end of the day.

What would be the worst possible answer to, like the most off-putting answer? For me, that someone might sincerely say, so obviously not like to murder or whatever. I was thinking about it. I was like, if someone was like, my favorite occupation is 'to argue', which some people do really love debates or whatever. For me, I'd be like, 'okay, we are not going to be friends'.

EC: That's a turn off. Okay, bear with me. The real turn off to me would be, and this is going to sound like a psycho. If someone said their favorite occupation was helping others.

HW: You do sound like a psycho.

EC: I'd be like, barred.

HW: Hard pass.

EC: Yeah, because I just don't trust people who like, who advertise that quality in themselves.

HW: Yeah, it is a bit odd to like, trumpet being selfless.

EC: Yeah, you know, like, I'm just such a giver. I'm just, just don't worry. I love to give, you know, no thanks.

HW: Incredible. Give it to someone else.

EC: I do think that Proust's answer to love is totally insane also, considering that he has written one of the most pessimistic takes on love I've ever encountered.

HW: Well, to be fair, he did answer this answer when he was 20. So perhaps he just hadn't lived enough life to become such a love pessimist yet.

EC: Yeah, yeah, perhaps.

HW: How did you find this volume? What did you notice?

EC: I love this volume. I mean, I seem to have loved all of them, but I really liked this. Again, I wasn't totally expecting to because some people had told me that it was a bit doleful, but I found it extraordinary and really, really moving. I will say that the little comment on the back of my paperback in English that says, like, 'people love this because it's ceaselessly truthful'. I'm a bit like, really? This is all about how truth is impossible to find and there's some deeply weird and unlikely behavior in it. I don't know if I'm not reading this thinking, 'oh yes, this is the truth of life'. And yet, in that bit after Albertine dies and he's reflecting on grief and memory and shock, I did feel that some kind of really intense truth of existence was contained in that, and it was so beautiful and so lyrical.

HW: I also really loved it.

EC: But what I noticed most that I wanted to mention before we really get into it, is that this is the volume where he actually becomes a writer. I know you mentioned that in the introduction, but he actually gets a publication.

HW: He publishes an article.

EC: Yeah, in *Le Figaro*, which is one of the best known, I think now quite a bit conservative of the French newspapers, *Le Figaro*. So we don't get to read this article, and the narrator doesn't tell us what it's about, which one would think would be significant, but no. We do find out that it mentions Elstir, so we can imagine that it's probably about art, since he also works on Ruskin, the 19th century art critic later on. But yeah, it's finally happened. In our earlier episodes, we're saying, you know, he's not writing yet, he's too busy hanging out, he's too busy having fun, he's too busy, like, navel-gazing.

HW: Although, to be fair, it seems like he wrote this article, sent it out, and it took years for it to appear, maybe.

EC: Yeah, that's true.

HW: He just sort of anxiously waited for it to appear, and doesn't seem to have written anything in the meanwhile. But I mean, this is probably ungenerous, and also doesn't matter. But like, it is funny that just this one piece, and he's like, that's it. Everyone is seeing this. I'm a writer now.

EC: Yeah, he's imagining everyone getting their newspaper delivered to them in the morning, in bed, I think. And so that passage where he's like, imagining, fantasizing about what it will be like to have readers is really delightful and funny, especially since afterwards, you get the reactions of the duc de

Guermantes and of Bloch, and the duc de Guermantes is like, ‘oh, well done. It's a bit clichéd, but cool’. And Bloch doesn't even acknowledge it.

HW: Yeah, Bloch blanks him until later when he makes a sort of inscrutable comment.

EC: Isn't it that he also gets an article in the Figaro?

HW: Right, and then he's able to acknowledge it.

EC: Oh, I know that you also had that one time. So yeah, it's a kind of red-letter day for our narrator that is quite a fun bit of the text. And there's also this really, really amazing image of the relationship between the writers and readers, because he has this typically wacky attempt to imagine what it's like to not be him, to be reading it, and to think about what it is to be a reader and a writer at the same time.

It's sort of semi-successful. But ultimately, generously, in his little fantasy about what it is to finally be read by a public, he says, ‘the beauty lies in the impression of the readers. It is a collective Venus, of which we have but one truncated limb if we confine ourselves to the thought of the author, for it is fully realized only in the minds of his readers’.

HW: This is very like, I don't know, did Iser and Jauss rely on this passage when they were developing reception theory? It's just like, ‘it is the gaps in the text and the reader rises to the occasion’. And it's all that, you know, the virtual text is the collective Venus, as it were.

EC: Yeah, it's quite a Renaissance image as well, you know, creating a kind of something new out of a ruined sculpture, which should be this Venus. Anyway, I underlined that because I was like, thank you, Proust, we will indeed participate in this collective Venus, which could be an alternative title for our podcast.

HW: I was going to say, should we have called the podcast Collective Venus? I mean, we didn't know because we started at the beginning. So, alas.

EC: So yeah, yeah, I really liked it. It was weird and beautiful and lots of funny anecdotes like that one. How did you find it?

HW: I found it astonishing. I really did. I think this may be, I mean, I really loved *Le Côté de Guermantes*, the third volume, it was very funny. But this volume I found just so artfully constructed. It really felt to me like a musical composition, like there were very distinctive rhythms. And I also found it fascinating that he somehow managed to produce in the reader the same trajectory that he depicts the narrator going through from basically obsession to forgetting. And when we were chatting before recording, Emma, you mentioned that by the end of the book, you were almost having trouble remembering the beginning of the book. And I should mention that this volume is the shortest one I think we've read so far, or certainly one of the shortest ones. And I completely agree with that assessment. I also had trouble remembering at the end where we had been. And I think the novel creates that effect. And part of the way it does it is in the first section of the novel, which is sometimes divided off as a chapter. In my particular edition, it wasn't. But it's a

section where Albertine has gone, he pursues her, he finds out that she is dead. And once she dies, the past participle *morte*, which means dead in the feminine, reoccurs 51 more times in the chapter. And it reoccurs verbally as a past participle. It's used as a verb, as an adjective, as a noun. And most commonly, it's in the phrase, '*Albertine était morte*', Albertine had died.

I pulled out a drumbeat to this whole chapter. It's like *morte, morte, morte*. So here's a passage that shows that rhythm.

'But caressing her in her raincoat was no longer possible, for she was dead. I might scour the whole world now without encountering the woman who is prepared to give certain pleasures to me, for Albertine was dead. It seemed that I had to choose between two facts to decide which of them was true. To such an extent was the fact of Albertine's death arising for me from a reality which I had not known, her life in Touraine, in contradiction with all my thoughts of her, so great a wealth of memories borrowed from the treasury of her life, such a profusion of feelings evoking, implicating her life, seemed to make it incredible that Albertine should be dead.'

And what I find so remarkable here is we have this 'she was dead, Albertine was dead', her death, so we have it as a noun, and then it passes into the subjunctive mood at the end. It's incredible that Albertine should be dead. There's this feeling that it's all he can think about and yet he continues to have this shadow of a doubt about it.

EC: Yeah, it's kind of an incredible representation of shock, isn't it? And that shock is repeatedly activated through this use of *'était morte'*, 'she was dead', that you're pointing out. And the incredulity that is highlighted in the passage that you just read as well, seems like a really key part of this text because it's incredible that she was dead. But then, as you were saying before, we live that obsessive disbelief and interrogation of what it could mean that she has died in the long first chapter that is so amazing. And then we gradually forget about it. And then by the end, yeah, as I said to you before, it seemed incredible that she was dead in a different way. Because I couldn't believe that that happened in the same book. I also want to mention briefly that idea of succession that is so present, almost as densely mentioned in this part of the text as the death. He talks about his memories as painful, successive colorings. He talks about each of the particular ideas of Albertine that I successively formed. And that really mirrors the way that it's written because there are these cascading successive clauses that are then punctuated by that shock, 'she was dead'.

And that, I think, was the kind of structural or formal aspect that really just carried me through these pages of reflections that just like in a very liquid way.

HW: You're right, it often came at the end of these cascading sentences, it would just sort of come to an abrupt stop with '*Albertine était morte'*. And what I noticed, I actually used an online edition to search the appearance of that word. That's how I have my count of 51 occurrences, I counted them up. But in the second half of the volume, the word becomes very rare. It's only used a handful more times after that initial meditation. And I think that the fading away of that drumbeat is part of what contributes to us also beginning to forget Albertine, beginning to when she is brought up, to be remembering her without focusing on the fact of her disappearance.

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HW: Emma, even in that long chapter about grief and about shock, really, it's also already immediately about forgetting, like his hope and fear in equal measure is that he will forget Albertine.

EC: Yeah, he says, 'I knew I should forget her one day. I had forgotten Gilberte and Madame de Guermantes. I had forgotten my grandmother'.

So this is the kind of the curse and the cure. And it's the process that's happening in that fade that you described so beautifully.

HW: And I think it's already so interesting because what we see in this forgetting is he's talking about two kinds of reasons for forgetting. He's talking about the reason of falling out of love, which is what had happened with Gilberte and Madame de Guermantes. And he's also talking about the reason of death. And so he really is, I think, hoping for those twin reasons to help him get through the grief for Albertine.

EC: But he's kind of shocked. He's like, 'how could I possibly be forgetting this person who was me, who lives in me, who is the same thing to me as my own life', in both a kind of narcissistic, but also a loving way.

HW: Right, right. But he goes through quite a number of phases with forgetting. And the meditation has to do with habit. It seems like a critical aspect of love and forgetting is habit. So if you're in the habit of loving someone and having them around, it's very shocking when that ends. But once you build the habit of knowing they're gone, that's what allows the mechanism of forgetting to take over and to be able to get through and out of grief.

EC: And we see him transition through forgetting that she's dead because she's so alive to him. In a way. And then that's what makes him constantly have to say, 'but no, actually Albertine was dead'.

HW: Yeah, we have a nice passage about that sort of continued presence of Albertine. Do you want to read it for us, Emma?

EC: Yeah. The narrator, Proust writes, 'Without my being precisely aware of it, it was now this idea of Albertine's death, no longer the present memory of her life, that formed the chief subject of my unconscious musings, with the result that if I interrupted them suddenly to reflect upon myself, what surprised me was not, as in the first days, that Albertine, so alive in me, could no longer exist upon the earth, could be dead. But that Albertine, who no longer existed upon the earth, who was dead, should have remained so alive in me, built up by the contiguity of the memories that followed one another, the black tunnel in which my thoughts had been dreaming so long that they had even ceased to be aware of it, was suddenly broken by an interval of sunlight, allowing me to see in the distance a blue and smiling universe in which Albertine was no more than a memory, unimportant and full of charm.'

HW: This passage is remarkable because it's talking about the continued life of the dead, which we've already talked about in relationship to the grandmother back in volume four, and then it also ends on that incredible image of the blue and smiling universe in which Albertine was no more than a memory. The idea of this being a journey, a tunnel that you have to get through, that's a bit of a cliché idea about grief, but he starts with this cliché and immediately turns it into this incredible, vivid image where scale is at play, the claustrophobia of the tunnel gives way to a universe, the idea that the universe might smile, that Albertine continues to be a memory, which actually goes against a lot of what this section is about, which is about not even having the memory, and that lack of importance can give a certain charm. I'm just fascinated by this passage.

EC: Yeah, and I love that it's a blue universe. It reminds me of Renaissance paintings, especially the Italian ones that have a really blue, far, distant background.

HW:Yeah, well, and indeed, later on he visits the Scrovegni Chapel, right? And Giotto's particular shade of blue is an object of fascination for him, so it feels like maybe that's the universe that Albertine has gone into, the universe of the *putti* in a Giotto painting.

EC: Yeah, but blue is the color of distance.

HW: Blue is the color of distance, ah!

EC: In those paintings it is, and so I just think it's so amazing that that's here. And I love that he says unimportant and full of charm.

HW: I know, I know. I guess this is what your copy is getting at with this ceaselessly truthful comment, because it just does feel so right. It feels just, in French, just really *juste*. That's just what it's like to lose someone. And I would say in a romantic separation, like a definitive breakup, or in dying, right? If someone is gone from your life in a permanent way, this is what it's like.

EC: Yeah, they enter the blue and smiling universe. And that charm, I think, is charisma or kind of like an attraction that still exists. But it's also the kind of magic, kind of necromantic side of charm that Proust is also really interested in. But also on this point about charm, it reminds me of another moment that rang extremely true to me when the narrator is starting to be less devastated about Albertine's sudden death. And he says, ‘it was from this moment that I began to write to all my friends that I had just experienced great sorrow, and to cease to feel it’.

HW: Yeah. There's something really private about great sorrow, isn't there? It feels really inexpressible. And so when you're able to express something about it, it can't be the thing itself. Now, that being said, I think that's what's remarkable about this volume is, it somehow does express great sorrow. It expresses something that I feel often remains deeply individual and ineffable.

EC: Yeah. And at the same time, kind of showing it to a kind of unknown reader as its own version of a blue and smiling universe, right? Kind of seeing it from a distance and finding it charming.

HW: Right. Being able to analyze it and being able to construct it so artfully. Yeah.

EC: And experiencing the magic. Right. Right.

HW: Part of what ends up coming out of his long meditations on forgetting and memory is perhaps unsurprisingly, more reflection about the nature of time. Because obviously, forgetting memory and time are intimately bound up with one another in a lot of ways.

EC: Yeah, I feel like we almost can't talk about the title of this series, *In Search of Lost Time*, because it's just so present in everything we're talking about. But this volume does really ask like, 'what is the lost time that we're searching for? Why are we searching for it? Is it because we've forgotten it? Why do we want to get it back?'

HW: And how do we get it back? Is it possible to recover it? And, of course, we all know that the next and final volume is called *Time Regained*. So evidently, we're going to get it back. But here, his reflections on getting over Albertine, starting to emerge from that great sorrow, yield some really shocking and exciting thoughts about time. Let me read this passage. Oh, I should say that he mentions a girl that he's attracted to here. He saw a blonde woman coming out of the duchesse de Guermantes' house, and he thought it might be a distant relative of the Guermantes who works at a brothel. So when she gave him a flirty look, he was like, 'ah', and got very excited about this possibility. And so he thinks about this and writes, 'by another reaction, albeit it was the distraction, the desire for mademoiselle de Forcheville', [that's the girl that I just mentioned], 'that had made my forgetting suddenly apparent and perceptible. If the fact remains that it is time that gradually brings oblivion, oblivion does not fail to alter profoundly our notion of time. There are optical errors in time, as there are in space. The persistence within me of an old impulse to work, to make up for lost time, to change my way of life, or rather to begin to live, gave me the illusion that I was still as young as in the past. And yet the memory of all the events that has exceeded one another in my life, and also of those that has exceeded one another in my heart, for when we have greatly changed, we are misled to suppose that we have lived longer. In the course of those last months of Albertine's existence, had made them seem to me much longer than a year. And now this oblivion of so many things, separating me by gulfs of empty space from quite recent events, that they made me think remote, because I had what is called the time to forget them, by its fragmentary, irregular interpolation in my memory, like a thick fog at sea that obliterates all the landmarks, confused, dislocated my sense of distances in time, contracted in one place, extended in another, and made me suppose myself now farther away from things, now far closer to them, than I really was.'

EC: Then I really was. That's a good kind of landing pad. Yes. Incredible couple of sentences.

HW: One incredibly complicated sentence that follows this sort of lapidary declaration that there are optical errors in time as there are in space. Yeah. Emma, what can it possibly mean for time to have an optics?

EC: A fair question. I've been thinking about that since I read it. I guess it's just the way that the mind kind of latches onto a way to make this abstract thing tangible.

You just automatically turn it into a kind of image or a metaphor. And in this case, it's a landscape. And so, it's the sense that time is something that you see.

HW: And that you're seeing it through a distorting lens of some sort.

EC: Yeah. I suppose it's about imagining time involves making images in that sense of what imagination is.

HW: And we do perceive time in some way. And it's easier to perhaps talk about perception by talking about sight than it is to talk about the really famously difficult to articulate experience of time. There's also this sense of a persistent anachronism, a persistent disjuncture within time so that there will be these old things that have remained, these old hopes, dreams, the idea that he will change his way of life, etc. That persists even though more recent things that were more discrete as events start to recede into the far distance, even though the beginning of the impulse to make something of his life is even more distant, right?

EC: Yeah. And he's challenging you to be aware in words and pictures of something that we all kind of know and avoid, which is that we don't really know where we are in time. We don't really know how all the different bits of time that we remember relate to one another. And we really don't remember that much.

HW: Terrible, Emma. Terrible. How dare you? I already told you that I wished I had the gift of memory and you're telling me this.

EC: Yeah, this longing for a real, real kind of subjective grounding of the self is very relatable.

HW: And it can't help but be fogged over, really. Yeah.

EC: But Proust is also thinking beyond the really intensely individual here because, I mean, we could definitely be forgiven for talking about this volume entirely in terms of this really intense, isolated, singular perspective that we are being kind of seduced by, I would argue. But I also really appreciated the moments where, to continue the visual metaphors, he kind of zooms out or maybe even massively zooms in. He compares the renewing of cells in the human body to the less mechanical renewal or failed renewal of memory. And I think he makes an analogy between the successive phases of a person's life and successive periods of history. And he also thinks about unconscious retained habits that occur within a single person's life, but also across generations and in families. So there's a section about Gilberte, because she comes back with a bang, as we mentioned, and about what she's like. And there's a kind of epigenetic memory in her personality, right? Because she has some of the qualities of her parents. She has some of her own qualities. And Proust reflects on generations as accumulated egoisms, which I appreciated for various reasons. And I had thought about that in relation to forgetting. These kind of habits and behaviors and ways of being that seem to be forgotten because they're from a past generation. They're from people who've been forgotten, but they are coming back in this kind of almost automatic way.

HW: It was sort of like that. It's a haunting, really, in a way. It's an involuntary persistence of certain qualities that, in a sense, it's almost like the way in which Albertine remains alive inside the narrator for at least for a long time, regardless of the fact of her death. This is almost like the physical manifestation of that within families. Swann remains alive in Gilberte, even though she attempts to erase him. It's ultimately going to be unsuccessful. In case you haven't read this recently, Gilberte takes the name of her stepfather and doesn't allow anyone to mention Swann in her presence, even though he was a devoted father who also left her the fortune that makes her a very eligible young

woman in society. He was also popular, so it's a little bit baffling. It's very harsh and it's fairly under-motivated, seemingly.

EC: It's almost like a vehicle for Proust to show us forgetting and remembering and how that gets contained within a generational shift. I was really interested in the ways that these kinds of themes that we've been talking about broaden out into the world. I love that description of generations as accumulated egoisms, but I will note that those kind of defects are tempered, according to Proust, by some natural restrictions. He says, 'the combinations by which, in the course of generations, moral chemistry thus stabilizes and renders innocuous the elements that were becoming too powerful are infinite and would give an exciting variety to family history'. That's one of my favorite sentences in the whole thing. I can't be arrogant now about memory after all of our discussions, but I think I'm going to keep the phrase moral chemistry.

HW: Moral chemistry is really powerful as a phrase.

EC: Yeah, and just continuing on this kind of brief broadening out, there's a kind of darkness to all the different kinds of family social constructions that are being forgotten and renewed across this book. I mean, we should just mention briefly that there are some real kind of cruel and criminal behavior. There's a bit more kidnapping, more than one, actually, incident of kidnapping.

HW: More than one instance of seduction just to wring information from someone.

EC: Yeah, yeah. People are not treating each other with that much kindness in this volume.

HW: Well, you did say that you didn't like it when people declared their goal was to be giving or kind.

EC: Listen, I didn't say I don't like kindness. I obviously like kindness. I just don't like it when it's really loudly advertised. Okay, but no one, no one is doing that in volume six of *À la recherche du temps perdu*. But I think all the different characters are kind of circling around each other in a relationship of exchange and mistrust and stimulation, I guess.

HW: Yeah, I do think mistrust has been, whether or not trust is possible, has been a real theme. And not just with the jealously guarded love objects, but also, you know, between friends, like Saint-Loup who reveals himself to be hideously cruel when he doesn't realize the narrator is listening, and then towards the end of the volume is unable to maintain his friendship in the same way. It's just this sort of attenuation of any sort of possibility of trusting anyone you're not paying, basically. And even then, like, questions arise.

EC: But that is also part of the way that the narrator discovers at the end, like a completely different second version of Saint-Loup's life, where, and he also has a kind of second version of his own life, because he starts to, according to the narrator, be attracted to men rather than women. And the narrator comments, everything is at least dual. '*Les choses en effet sont pour le moins doubles*'. And this idea of doubling and the double being a kind of confusion in relation to how you can actually perceive reality is also something that comes through very strongly in this volume. There are lots of kind of symmetries and doubles that aren't quite balanced. So kind of half symmetry, false doubles.

HW: Yeah, it's really, I really feel like this particular volume is, it's like a series of proliferating possibilities, and a series of proliferating doubles. It almost feels like a hall of mirrors, and particularly doubles of Albertine. There are constant comparisons of Albertine and the narrator's relationship to that of Odette and Swann.

Albertine and Gilberte are entangled not only because of that moment where a desire for Gilberte, whom he sees and doesn't recognize on the street, helps him move through his grief for Albertine, but also in this very odd conflation of the two in a telegram. And then, perhaps least expected of all, there's a persistent link between Albertine and the narrator's grandmother. Albertine is somehow, it's almost like she's a fractal. She's repeated everywhere in all these different relationships. But Proust is careful to say that none of it is quite right. These repetitions are with a difference. When he's comparing Albertine and Odette, he writes, 'for nothing ever repeats itself exactly. And the most analogous lives that, thanks to the kinship of character and the similarity of circumstances we may select in order to represent them as symmetrical, remain in many respects opposite'.

EC: I was thinking that Gilberte is a kind of double for the narrator in some ways also. She's kind of, I know she's not really grieving her father. She's kind of, she's rejecting him, but she is dealing with his absence. And is she dealing with thwarted love and kind of misdirected signs? I think she is also.

HW: She also, at the end of the volume, they revisit their memories together and they really have grown up together and had almost parallel experiences with each other, but parallel in the most, you know, geometric sense of the term in that they never intersected. And somehow, even though they both were experiencing some of the same thoughts and hopes with regards to the other one, that was never communicated.

EC: There's a wonderful kind of tragicomic irony in Gilberte saying, oh yeah, you know, when I looked at you in that garden when we were kids, I thought you were extremely hot. And also when I saw you on the street and I kind of winked at you, yeah, I was totally hitting on you at that point, at that moment.

HW: Right. And he's, and he's like, he's like, but what about the part when we were at the Champs Élysées? She's like, then you liked me too much. It was too much for me.

EC: Yeah. It was just so, so funny that they actually weren't as different as they thought they were in that moment.

HW: Right. That the first perception is sometimes correct. That gives rise to a long meditation.

But the part about speaking of you about the part that I mentioned already, but that I think we need to talk about is, so the narrator has traveled to Venice. He's there with his mother and he receives a telegram and apparently the telegram system is very bad in Venice. And this one has been very battered and is difficult to read, but he makes it out. And it essentially says, 'Hey, it's Albertine. I'm not actually dead. And I was wondering if you want to marry me'. I'm paraphrasing, obviously that wasn't a Proustian sentence.

EC: I love that paraphrase.

HW: But, but he has moved so far into his forgetting of Albertine that he doesn't care that she's suddenly miraculously alive. And it's just like, 'whatevs', we're going to stay on my family vacation with my mom. He is in no rush to see her again and doesn't care. Obviously as readers, we see that it's deeply improbable that that is what that telegram is because it's been a long time, at least six months, probably a year since her death. He's been seeing many of her friends and acquaintances. No one has mentioned that she's hidden away somewhere alive. It's just that can't be right. Yet the narrator is sort of sanguine about it and just as like, 'yeah, well, whatever, I don't love her anymore'. Anyhow, it turns out that this telegram was in fact from Gilberte informing him of her marriage to Saint-Loup. And so when she's, when there's mention of marriage in it, she's talking about her own marriage to Saint-Loup. It has nothing to do with the narrator. He just completely misread it. Yeah. But this sort of like substitution of Gilberte for Albertine, but Gilberte telling him about something that actually has very little to do with him, whereas the putative letter from Albertine should have really inflected his entire life. I find this whole substitution really confusing.

EC: Yeah, I agree. And even when he realizes that he's been mistaken, he's like, oh yeah, well, you know, the way that Gilberte writes 'Gilberte' looks exactly like Albertine due to these quirks of handwriting. I just can't.

HW: That can't be right.

EC: I can't see it.

HW: But it's also just like these two women who, I mean, yes, he had that big crush on Madame de Guermantes, but that was kind of in a different category, right? Gilberte and Albertine are the two women with whom he actually does spend a great deal of time while infatuated with them and becomes deeply jealous of both of them. And they are sort of already bookends, we could say, of his adolescence or of his coming to manhood. Perhaps adolescence is too narrow of a band of time. And then for the conclusion of the Gilberte plot, the sort of definitive conclusion when she gets married to someone else to be a false opening into a false resurrection of an already concluded plot with the other one. I feel like I'm bumping up against walls everywhere I turn as I attempt to describe this, much less to analyze it.

EC: Yeah. And Saint-Loup says, or someone says of him, 'oh, he could that he could definitely have married Albertine'.

HW: Yes, yeah, that's right.

EC: This weird love square. Yeah, it is a love square is so there as a reminder, both that things could always turn out differently or be reinterpreted and this turn of reinterpretation, but also that every character is kind of in some ways, a stand in for someone else, a kind of substitute. Yeah, I don't think we're going to get to the bottom of it. But it does remind me of another problem that I also don't think we can get to the bottom of which is the way that this book contains characters that not only are in relationships of doubleness to one another, like in the diegetic narrative, but also there are these biographical readings. So Albertine is not only a kind of double for all the characters in the book,

including Gilberte, she's also a kind of figure for a man that Proust actually did love in real life, called, I think, Alfred. Yes, who died in a plane crash. So there is kind of...

HW: A plane that Proust had bought!

EC: Yes, yes. So, all the stuff about him being guilty that he kind of forced Albertine to her death by trapping her.

HW: By trapping her and giving her the horse that she fell off of. So it's like a very, it's a fairly direct echo of what had happened in his life with this Alfred guy. And we should mention that this is almost a system of reading Proust, where looking for biographical details that might explain some of the characters in the *Recherche*. This is called the transposition reading. I think it's rather unfashionable currently, but whether or not he's transposed his relationship with Alfred into what the narrator goes through with Albertine, it's clear that he was inspired by certain facts that happened in his life. To me, it's clear. It's like, okay, yeah, he bought him the plane, the plane crashed, he bought her the horse, the horse knocked her off. Like that's really a lot. And then there's this other really direct parallel.

EC: Yeah. Well, according to the footnote in my edition, the letter that Albertine writes to the narrator when she leaves him is the letter that Alfred left for the real Marcel. You know, the end's 'goodbye, I leave you the best of myself'.

HW: And honestly, that letter was really totally different. Like it didn't feel like it was written, which a letter should, but to bring the archive of this love affair that he had in real life into the fictional world and that sort of importation, which I guess he's been doing all along, right, with some of the witticisms that we've talked about. There'll be notes that he actually heard someone say that, etc. But it seems a little bit more central. The letter of Albertine leaving him is one of the sort of big events of this novel.

EC: Yeah. It's so interesting to me that's his real breakup letter. And then a lot of his kind of regrets and observations do read quite autobiographically after that. But I suppose that what Proust is telling us with all these doubles, all these pairs, all these awkward symmetries, is that we have to live with it being both. You know, Albertine is a woman who's a figure for what it is to be attracted to women, also for thinking about women who are attracted to women themselves, and a character in a text that has her own life as a character. But she's also a man, and this man, and all these other characters. And Proust is making us live with that. Because, as he says, reality is confusing and difficult to discern.

HW: Emma, I think that's actually a great segue into our capstone segment, the winners and losers of this volume.

EC: Yeah. Tell me, Hannah, who was your winner of volume six?

HW: I struggled with this. But I think of course, but I think that I'm going to perversely declare Albertine my winner.

EC: Oh, really?

HW: I think I am. And let me explain.

EC: I am shocked.

HW: I'm a little shocked, too. Possibly not fully convinced. But I do have an argument. At the end of this volume, in the final pages, the narrator reveals that he has trapped another woman. And he is keeping another woman. And he talks about how, even though forgetting has overtaken Albertine, he nevertheless is replicating these patterns. Yet another double to continue our earlier conversation. Okay, but that other woman gets like two paragraphs and is nothing. Whereas Albertine is most of a novel. So, I think that she has won in a sort of Ovidian way. Like her name will be remembered forever. And, therefore, if it hadn't been for that couple of paragraphs where he like, just briefly refers to some other love affair that was apparently obsessing him just as much but that gets basically no airtime, I don't think I would make this argument. But I think Albertine is the one.

EC: Yeah, okay, I'll buy it. Because also in that section, if I remember it right, he says that the force of the habits that he developed with Albertine mean he can't love any other way.

HW: Right. And like his whole way of moving on is actually seeking echoes of Albertine. Like, I think even like his way of forgetting Albertine is remembering Albertine actually, in a way. So I think she wins. Okay, who's your winner?

EC: And she did escape him.

HW: Oh, she did. Yeah, that's also true. She died in freedom.

EC: Yeah, I'm buying it. My winner is less compelling, but more obvious. I think my winner is Odette.

HW: Ah, okay. Yes. Yes. She's definitely won. But tell our listeners in case they haven't read this for a while, why she has won.

EC: So Odette, mother of Gilberte, formerly wife of Swann. Now in this part of the story, she's the wife of Monsieur le baron de Forcheville. So, she's made an excellent aristocratic marriage. And she has also succeeded in exploiting the love trials of her daughter and Saint-Loup, Gilberte and Saint-Loup to manipulate Saint-Loup into keeping her in the manner to which she's accustomed. So I think the last image we have of her is like glittering at dinner parties, dripping in rubies. And the narrator's like, you know, she's 50. Some people even thought, whispered that she might be 60. But she still looks as just dazzling and fascinating as ever on the social scene. And no matter what happens, no matter how the kaleidoscope turns, Odette rises. So she is the winner.

HW: Yeah. I mean, you're right. So Odette has now won two volumes, I guess. She comes out on top.

EC: Yeah. In a kind of stupid way. Yeah.

HW: In a sort of facile way or like an ironic way. But she does. Nevertheless.

EC: And I totally still think, as actually Swann said about her in the first volume, that she herself is kind of stupid. And that's also what helps her to win.

HW: Yeah. She's stupid. And sort of like everything is instrumental for her, which we discussed in episode three, I think. But who was your loser?

EC: Okay. So, I had a main loser and a runner up loser. My runner up loser was the city of Venice.

HW: Ah! That was on my runner up loser list too! Okay. The city of Venice is a runner up loser. Yes.

EC: Because the narrator has been waiting to go to Venice for the entire time that we've been reading.

HW: Since volume one.

EC: Yeah. Two things happen in this volume that we've been waiting for a long time. He becomes a published writer and he goes to Venice. But Venice is very underwhelming in this text. It takes like 30 pages. Most of the time he's comparing it to Combray or talking about people who he knows from Paris. There are a couple of nice descriptions of the canal or of him walking around the city and of paintings that he sees there. And, you know, you got the description of him looking at the Swann's prints versus the actual paintings IRL. But in general, it's totally underwhelming. Yeah.

HW: But also that Swann's prints versus IRL thing, that's in Padua. So.

EC: Oh, oh shit. Yeah. Okay. So yeah, exactly. [laughs]

HW: I totally agree, Venice is on my list of potential losers. Who's your real loser, though? That was your runner up loser.

EC: My real loser was Swann.

HW: Oh, yeah, that's a good one.

EC: Because it actually broke my heart. I was quite fond of Swann, as many other of the characters in this text are. And his daughter, Gilberte, even though she's kind of like fun and cool and witty and etc., in the way that he would have hoped would be, has totally rejected him. She doesn't even want to hear any association between herself and her father in all the social settings that she is trying to conquer. And the narrator thinks back to when Swann was thinking about what would happen after he died. And he thought that he would be remembered because of Gilberte. And in fact, no, she is erasing his memory. So the thing that he thought of for his afterlife has, in fact, not come to pass.

HW: So in fact, he's sort of a loser for like an anti-Ovidian reason, even though he's in the novel. So like, okay, so actually, like, the point I made about Albertine applies to Swann as well. But the way his memory is being treated diegetically is very sad.

EC: Yeah, it's very melancholic and touching. And that's why he's my loser. What about you? Do you want to say anything more about Venice?

HW: I don't, just that that was like the part of the only part of this volume that I was like, okay. And it wasn't long, it wasn't onerous, but just, it just didn't, it didn't get me the way the rest of the volume did. My loser is the working class. Because basically, they're there to be like kidnapped and seduced and treated disrespectfully and not seen as full humans. So whoops.

EC: Yeah, that is very true. It's really harrowing, actually. Street girls and shop girls and laundry maids, etc. are just kind of there to be snatched in this vision of the world. Not only girls.

HW: Well, mostly girls. And it's in this particular volume, although elsewhere, it's been like valets and waiters and footmen. Yeah, it just seems like they are the prey of the haute-bourgeoisie and the aristocracy. And that's bleak. So they're my losers.

EC: Indeed.

HW: So, Emma, where are we now? We're like, this is our final where like, what's happening in the terms of our project? This is kind of our like, ultimate what's happening in terms of this project?

EC: I can't believe it. Only one more volume to go. That's where we are.

HW: That's where we are. We're facing down *Time Regained*.

EC: Yeah. But what's happening in terms of the narrative? Like, where are we with the narrator and the world that he's living in?

HW: So, we've had some pretty strong intimations at the end of this volume that society is in flux. We saw those shocking marriages that I mentioned at the top of the episode. And we also see at the end, Gilberte reveals to the narrator when they're in Combray together as adults, that the Méséglise way, which is Swann's way, connects to the Guermantes way, which is the way of aristocracy. And that shocks the narrator. He can't believe that these two places are reconcilable. And that to me seems like a pretty evident metaphor for the way that society is mingling. And that things that have been kept so strictly separate are no longer to remain that way.

EC: Yeah. And there's all these bits at the end where the mother is like, 'oh, your grandmother would have been shocked to see the way that people would marry across class boundaries' and so on. So, yeah, absolutely. By the end, we're in a changed world. The narrator has also changed a little bit. I'd say he's a full adult now. He talks about his own aging process. When he gets his *Le Figaro* article, he's like, oh, my brain had aged sufficiently that I didn't have the kind of alacrity of youth anymore. So, I think we've definitely got Marcel in maturity at this point. So, I'm interested to see what happens in the next and final part of this story.

HW: Well, I think that's it for this episode of *Proust Curious*. We hope we've piqued your curiosity. If you like the podcast, please tell a friend about it.

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Check it out at publicbooks.org. And join us next time for Volume 7, *Time Regained*. *Au revoir*.

Transcript edited by Duarte Benard da Costa