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Abstract

Very early in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, when Oriane is still the Princesse des Laumes and has yet to assume her more imposing role of Duchesse of Guermantes, she engages in one of those tac a tac conversations she so enjoys with Swann. Thinly veiling her dislike of the younger Mms de Cambremer, who has just prevented a candelabra from plummeting to the ground during a piano recital and thus, to Oriane's mind, made a spectacle of herself, the future duchess remarks that this family name is quite astonishing. "Il finit juste a temps, mais il finit mal! (I, 335), she laughs. Swann, for his part, comments that the name does not begin any better than it ends, suggesting that someone quite angry but also very proper did not dare finish the word of the name. Certainly this is a reference to General Cambronne who, according to the famous Waterloo anecdote, rebuffed an English officer with the epithet hinted at in the last syllable. Indeed, "le mot de Cambronne" quickly became a euphemism for the scatological term *merde* (Rey, 142). However, "le mot de Cambronne" aside, it seems to me that Proust's use of homophony, documented by several critics, permits an additional interpretation, although admittedly less amusing than the "liftier's" Camembert. Cambremer appears to be a textual echo of the Combray mere.

Keywords

Homophony, treatment of motherhood, Marcel Proust

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LE MOT DE CAMBRONNE: AN EXCREMENTAL
EXCLAMATION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS IN
A LA RECHERCHE DU TEMPS PERDU

ELIZABETH RICHARDSON VITI

VERY early in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, when Oriane is still the Princesse des Laumes and has yet to assume her more imposing role of Duchesse de Guermantes, she engages in one of those *tac à tac* conversations she so enjoys with Swann. Thinly veiling her dislike of the younger Mme de Cambremer, who has just prevented a candelabra from plummeting to the ground during a piano recital and thus, to Oriane's mind, made a spectacle of herself, the future duchess remarks that this family name is quite astonishing. "Il finit juste à temps, mais il finit mal!" (I, 335), she laughs. Swann, for his part, comments that the name does not begin any better than it ends, suggesting that someone quite angry but also very proper did not dare finish the first word of the name. Certainly this is a reference to Général Cambronne who, according to the famous Waterloo anecdote, rebuffed an English officer with the epithet hinted at in the last syllable. Indeed, "le mot de Cambronne" quickly became a euphemism for the scatological term *merde* (Rey, 142). However, "le mot de Cambronne" aside, it seems to me that Proust's use of homophony, documented by several critics, permits an additional interpretation, although admittedly less amusing than the "lifter's" Camembert. Cambremer appears to be a textual echo of the Combray *mère*.

A variety of information supports this comparison. Because she is Legrandin's sister, Mme de Cambremer, like the narrator's mother, has roots in Combray. Not insignificantly, her first name is Renée and it is a short step to transform Renée Cambremer into Cambremer, Renée, the Combray *mère renée*, reborn. In addition, each woman has an older counterpart, in one case it is the narrator's grandmother and in the other

it is the dowager Mme de Cambremer, whom, in fact, the younger woman frequently calls "ma mère." Both have one son who markedly takes after the maternal side of the family and who eventually becomes a writer. Furthermore, the Cambremer male is a homosexual, information supported by a supposed affair with Saint-Loup and confirmed by the "sous-maîtresse" of the Maineville Palace as well as Charlus – serving as one of many subtle hints at the narrator's own inversion. Moreover, I suspect that the young Cambremer has what would have been for the narrator and Proust alike a marriage made in heaven. His bride, Mlle d'Oloron, Jupien's niece and Charlus's adopted daughter (although Basin gives the impression that she is his brother's illegitimate daughter), not only brings a considerable fortune to the recently impoverished Cambremer family, but she also offers easy access to the Guermantes, coveted by the Cambremer women. Finally, she has the grace to die of typhoid only a few weeks after the wedding ceremony, leaving her homosexual husband (whom the baron deems the best kind) free to pursue his sexual preference without the accommodations to a wife that limited Saint-Loup.

The portraits of the two Mme de Cambremer ultimately collapse into one to resonate with the portrait of the Combray *mère* who herself is a composite of Marcel's mother and grandmother. Consequently, when it is with both older women that the narrator has most contact in Balbec, his relationship to the Combray *mère* in no way diminishes. In fact, Oriane's description of the dowager Mme de Cambremer reminds readers of she who is behind the fictional mother, Mme Jeanne Proust: The duchess sees her as an anglophile (she speaks of a recent trip to the British Museum) and musicophile who is somewhat pretentious in her language use. In her mean-spirited fashion, Oriane also describes a "grosse femme," or worse, an "énorme herbivore." The narrator himself is no less unflattering in his physical appraisal. When Mme de Cambremer makes an impromptu visit to the beach Marcel describes a woman whose "yeux brillèrent . . . et sa poitrine huma l'air de la mer . . . Je crus qu'elle allait poser sur ma joue ses lèvres moustachues . . ." (III, 212-213).

Most remarkable in this characterization is its resemblance to that of Mme Verdurin in Swann's celebrated dream. The dilettante looks at La Patronne who "le fixa d'un regard étonné durant un long moment pendant lequel il vit sa figure se déformer, son nez s'allonger et qu'elle

avait de grandes moustaches" (I, 372). As Bellemin-Noël points out in his analysis of this dream, Mme Verdurin suddenly becomes the phallic mother, viewed as such because Swann sees himself as castrated (53). A second dream, this time tellingly the narrator's, demonstrates the ambivalence a child feels toward the phallic mother who either accords or refuses the child a phallus: "j'avais rêvé que M. de Charlus avait cent dix ans et venait de donner une paire de claques à sa propre mère, Mme Verdurin, parce qu'elle avait acheté cinq milliards un bouquet de violettes . . ." (III, 375). Furthermore, it appears that the line that extends from Mme Verdurin, Proust's "mère méchante" par excellence whose negative qualities have their impact where they can do the most harm and whose power can render men helpless (Richardson Viti, 78), through Mme de Cambremer to the Combray *mère* is expressly drawn. Not only does Mme de Cambremer's outstanding physical attribute, a hairy upper lip, link her to La Patronne but the kiss Marcel is afraid she will place on his cheek recalls the "baiser maternel." But this time it is a reversal of the Proustian commonplace. Instead of seeking out this kiss and longingly choosing the place on his mother's cheek where Marcel will kiss her, it is the narrator whose cheek will possibly receive a kiss. However, this time the woman who seemingly ingests the maternal identity, who "huma l'air de la mer," is someone to flee rather than someone to seek out continually. In short, what these women have in common is their role of Mother held in horror.

Not surprisingly then, the real key to the conversation between Oriane and Swann is the relationship between Cambremer and the "mot de Cambronne" – between motherhood and *merde*. Waterloo (water/loo), thus, seems the perfect context for the celebrated insult. And, in fact, this is not the sole example of the motherhood/excrement equation. Proust suggests the connection in a scathing indictment of that matriarchal domain, the salon (Mme Verdurin's *petit noyau* is the best example), which he compares to a public restroom. Overcome by nausea, his grandmother asks Marcel to follow her to a Champs-Élysées facility he had been to earlier with Françoise, who had said that the custodian was actually a marquise belonging to the Saint-Ferréol family. While the grandmother is inside, the "marquise" discusses with a park attendant her clientele, in particular a magistrate of whom she is very proud. She continues: "Et puis . . . je choisis mes clients, je ne reçois pas tout le monde dans ce que j'appelle mes salons. Est-ce que ça n'a pas l'air d'un

salon, avec mes fleurs?" And when a poorly dressed woman appears before the attendant "celle-ci, avec une férocité de snob lui dit sèchement: 'il n'y a rien de libre, Madame.'" Later, the grandmother tells her grandson she overheard the conversation, saying: "C'était on ne peut plus Guermantes et petit noyau Verdurin. Dieu! qu'en termes galants ces choses-là étaient mises" (II, 607).

Moreover, no one makes this analogy between salon and restroom better, and more often, than Charlus. When asked if he will be attending Mme de Saint-Euverte's party (she is within earshot), he responds by saying that such a question is like asking him if he has diarrhea. He would try to relieve himself elsewhere, he says, and adds, "On me dit que l'infatigable marcheuse donne des 'garden-parties,' moi j'appellerais ça des invites à se promener dans les égoûts! Est-ce que vous allez vous crotter là?" (III, 99). In a passage which makes the Cambremer/excrement connection explicit, Charlus explains high society to Morel in the following manner:

Quant à tous les petits messieurs qui s'appellent marquis de Cambremerde ou de Fate-fairefiche, il n'y a aucune différence entre eux et le dernier pioupiou de votre régiment. Que vous alliez faire pipi chez la comtesse Caca, ou caca chez la baronne Pipi, c'est la même chose, vous aurez compromis votre réputation et pris un torchon breneux comme papier hygiénique. Ce qui est malpropre. (III, 475-476)

However, several *haut monde* duchesses observe, following a successful evening of entertainment organized by the baron, that Charlus himself could throw a party in a "cabinet de toilettes" and it would not be any less remarkable (III, 777). What is significant here is that while Charlus does indeed host this reception, he does so in the home of Mme Verdurin. Because this is the same woman who appears in the narrator's dream as Charlus's mother, the more important analogy between motherhood and excrement which underpins that of salon and restroom emerges.

That Proust should excoriate the powerful Mother by equating her with human waste is not unusual. According to Dinnerstein's *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise*, humans, unable "to reconcile the delights of the flesh with its anguishes, its victories with its mortifications," avoid this task by assigning untainted humanness to man and the body's "mucky, humbling limitations" to

the “goddess of the nursery” (133). Proust respects this dichotomy. All his great artists – Bergotte, Vinteuil and Elstir – are men while the one exceptional female artist, Berma, because she is an actress, seems simply to exploit her ability to assume other identities, something which comes naturally to the author’s females. Women, such as Elstir’s Gabrielle, can inspire or they can interpret like Mlle Vinteuil’s companion, but never are they creators themselves. Similar to Berma, they are vehicles for the true artist. Noteworthy are the artists under La Patronne’s tutelage – the pianist Dechambre, the violinist Morel and the sculptor Ski – who remain mediocre, unrecognized. In contrast, Elstir, an early “fidèle” known as Biche or Tiche, escapes the “petit noyau” and becomes one of *La Recherche*’s great talents, although Mme Verdurin sees things otherwise: “Du jour où il a quitté le petit noyau, ça a été un homme fini. Il paraît que mes dîners lui faisaient perdre du temps, que je nuisais au développement de son *génie*, dit-elle sur un ton d’ironie. Comme si la fréquentation d’une femme comme moi pouvait ne pas être salutaire à un artiste!” (III, 334). However, that is exactly Proust’s message: To move into the masculine realm of culture and society a man must extricate himself from Nature, from the omnipotent Mother.

To do so Proust conveniently arranges the Mother’s death, in a passage as well known as the Swann/Oriane conversation. When the Duc and Duchesse de Guermantes refuse to forgo a long-awaited masked ball in order to visit a dying relative, the novelist uses the unforgettable episode to enhance their shallowness and expose them for the reprehensible people they are. However, that the family member’s name is Amanien d’Osmond whose nickname is Mama is no small matter. Arriving at the Princesse de Guermantes’s home in his Louis XI costume, the duke is asked, “Mais vous ignorez donc que le pauvre Mama est à l’article de la mort?” (III, 61). His death becomes a reality shortly thereafter. Too close to the French *maman* to go unnoticed and immediately associated with the Mother in English – a language which Proust knew and uses in *La Recherche* – it appears that the death penalty is levied against the “goddess of the nursery” who prevents full membership in culture and society. In fact it is important to remember that although the narrator’s mother is still living when he begins his novel, it is not until Mme Jeanne Proust’s death that her son begins his masterpiece.

Indeed, Proust seems to be saying that he must rid himself of those "mucky, humbling limitations" that comprise the Mother. Brichot suggests this definition of the Combray *mère* when he explains that "mer voulait dire marais, comme dans . . . Cambremer" (III, 328). Even more interesting is the fact that this seems to be one of several etymologies of Proust's own invention (III, 1600, n. 2). And Proust does not wish to be trapped in this swamp, this spongy land, this soft, wet ground unfit for cultivation. Nor does he wish to be swamped, to be overwhelmed and rendered helpless. Quite the contrary. As the author of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, he must emerge from these beginnings if he is to equal the great artists of his masterpiece.

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