

# Marcel Proust's Interest in Names\*

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MARCEL PROUST, THE FRENCH novelist and critic, the author of one of the supreme imaginative creations of world literature, had a keen interest in names, as may be seen in *Cities of the Plain*, the fourth of the seven volumes of his life work under the general title of *A la recherche du temps perdu*. As a child, Proust spent his holidays at Illiers and Auteuil, which together became the Combray of his novel, or at seaside resorts in Normandy with his maternal grandmother.

His onomastic interest and knowledge of the changes that occur in names may be seen in the continuation of Chapter II and in Chapter III of Part II of *Cities of the Plain*. In Chapter II one finds the conversation and thoughts of the guests of Mme. Verdurin, who has a salon in Paris where she entertains philosophers, sculptors, artists, musicians, scientists, authors, aristocrats, scholars of various types, "all the very best people," on her famous Wednesdays. These are described by a well-known medical doctor, a scientist and professor, by the name of Cottard, proud to be one of her guests. Train trips back and forth to her country home by the sea in Normandy as well as dinner parties and teas allow for discussion of names as some of the guests pass different spots or talk of numerous places and persons.

A Polish sculptor, called Ski, for example, expresses interest in a book by a former curé about the place-names of the district through which they are passing, stating that he is interested in etymologies. A scholarly Academician by the name of Brichot is familiar with the book and points out that it is a "mass of error." In so doing he explains the origin of numerous names. He cites the word *bricq* (47), which the cleric says comes from *Briga*, "a height, a fortified place," finds it in the Celtic sources Latobriges and Nemetobriges and traces it down to such names as Briand and Brion. The place-names in the district Bricquebose, Bricqueville, and Bricquebec would then mean respectively "wood on

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the height," "habitation on the height," and "the height by the stream." The Academician shows that *bricq* is also an old Norse word, meaning "bridge," which the Northmen brought with them in settling what is now Normandy, named for the conquerors of the region.

He also points out how the priest connects *fleur* with the Scandinavian *floi*, *flo* in one place and in another with the Irish *ae* or *aer*, whereas he states that it is undoubtedly the *fjord* (47) of the Danes, meaning "harbor," as in the names Fiquefleur, Honfleur, Flers, Barfleur, Harfleur, etc. (338).

The next error of the curé that Brichot considers is the name Saint-Mars-le-Vêtu (47), which the cleric thinks means Saint-Martin-le-Vieux (from *vetus*). The Academician asserts that unquestionably the word *vieux* has played a large part in the toponymy of that region, but that generally it comes from *vadum*, meaning "a passage," as at the spot named les Vieux (47), similar to the English term "ford," as in Oxford. Here, however, he states that Vêtu is derived not from *vetus*, but from *vastatus*, "a place that is devastated and bare," as in other nearby names: Sottevast, "the vast of Setold," and Brillevast, "the vast of Berold." Then he points out that earlier names of Saint-Mars-le-Vêtu were Saint-Mars-du-Gast and Saint-Mars-de-Terregate. Next he points out that *v* and *g* in these words are interchangeable, for the French say *dévaster*, but also *gâcher*, that *jâchères*, "untilled land" and *gâtines* (from High German *Wastinna*) have the same meaning and that Terregate is therefore *terra vasta*. Then he states that Saint-Mars was formerly Saint-Merd (48), which was Saint-Medardus, appearing variously as Saint-Médard, Saint-Mard, Saint-Marc, Cinq-Mars, and even Dammas. He also thinks that the places bearing the names of Mars were of pagan origin, referring to the god Mars. He likewise points out that the curé has called *Loctudy* (48) a barbarian name, whereas he says that it derives from *Locus Sancti Tudenii*. He also adds that the cleric did not realize that another name, *Sammareoles*, is derived from *Sanctus Martialis* (48).

Brichot next shows that the priest had erred in deriving the well-known terminations *bon*, *home*, *holm*, as seen in la Houlme, Engohomme, Tahoume, Robehomme, Néhomme, Quettehon, from the word *holl* (*hollus*), "hill" (48), whereas they come from the Norse *holm*, "island," found in the name Stockholm. He points out that Néhomme is the island or peninsula of the famous Viscount Nigel, whose name has also survived in Néville (49).

In his discussion of these names he incidentally tosses in that the name Amfreville-la-Bigot (49) was formed from the names of two

successive lords of a manor. The discussion then turns to Carquethuit and Chitourps. Brichot points out that *carque* is a church, the German *Kirche*, found also in the name Querqueville and in Dunkerque (49). He stops to discuss the Celtic *Dun*, meaning "high ground," found all over France, illustrated by a number of Dunevilles, Châteaudun, Dun-le-Roi in the Cher, Duneau in the Sarthe, Dun in the Ariège, Dune-les-Places in the Nièvre, and many others (49). This discussion leads to the history of Douville, originally Doville, *Eudomis villa*, "the village of Eudes," formerly called Escalecliff, "the steps up the cliff." He then tells the story of Eudes le Bouteiller, Lord of Escalecliff, who, about the year 1233, set out for the Holy Land and on the eve of his departure made over the church to the Abbey of Blanchelande, and in return the village took his name, thus becoming Douville today.

After giving the origin of Douville, Brichot returns to the name of certain famous springs near Douville, Carquethuit, to point out that the second element *thuit*, is derived from the Scandinavian *thveit*, meaning "the clearing, the reclaimed land" (50), seen also in Braquetuit, le Thuit, Regnetuit, and other such names. Incidentally, he shows also that the Scandinavian *toft*, "a building," is found in the place-names Cricquetot, Ectot, and Yvetot (50).

Similarly, he finds the Scandinavian *thorp*, "village," in the aforementioned Clitourps and states that the first element comes from *cliff*, "a precipice" (51), and not from *clivus*, "a slope," as declared by the priest.

Next he considers other nearby places Montmartin, Montmartin-sur-Mèr, and Montmartin-en-Graignes (51), and agrees with the curé that Graignes derives from Latin *grania* and Greek *krene*, meaning "ponds, marshes," but disagrees with the priest that these names were given to parishes dedicated to Saint Martin. He points out the fact that Martin was canonized after the names were given and that one would, no doubt, say Mont-Saint-Martin as one says Mont-Saint-Michel, if it were a question of Saint Martin. He believes that Montmartin refers to temples consecrated to the god Mars, especially since these names are found in the neighborhood of vast Roman camps.

Someone inquires of Brichot how he knew that famous waters were in the vicinity. He refers immediately to the name of the next station, Fervaches, meaning "hot springs," derived from *Fervidae aquae* (55). The last stop for the guests is at Douville-Féterne, so called, he declares, because it was more or less equidistant from the villages of Féterne and Douville (57). There they are met and driven to the home of Mme.

Verdurin. On the way they drive through the village of Englesqueville, formerly *Engleberty villa* (62), according to Brichot.

Proust's understanding of what happens to names is summed up in the description by one guest of Mme. Verdurin of another's ugliness in the following remark: "One was reminded, on examining his faulty features, which one would have liked to correct, of those names of little Norman towns as to the etymology of which my friend the curé was mistaken because the peasants, mispronouncing the names, or having misunderstood the Latin or Norman words that underlay them, have finally fixed in a barbarism to be found already in the cartularies, as Brichot would have said, a wrong meaning and a fault of pronunciation" (82-83).

Onomastic knowledge also appears from time to time, as evidenced at the dinner party of the Verdurins when the host asks one of the guests "Do you shoot much, Sir?" to which the guest replies "I shoot mostly in the forest of Chantepie" (93). Immediately Brichot, with his interest in onomastics, interjects "Does it deserve its name?" to which the guest admits that he does not understand the question. Brichot then replies, "I mean to say: do many pies sing in it?" The guest then admits that he has been shooting for 15 years in the forest of Chantepie, but had never thought of what the name meant (95). As the conversation at the table continues, Mme. Verdurin, the great hostess that she is, asks the question "You are sure that Chantepie means the singing magpie?" (96), thus bringing out the real meaning of the name. Brichot continues the conversation by pointing out that many forest regions take their names from the animals that inhabit them and that next to the forest of Chantepie one finds the wood Chantereine (98). A guest replies "I don't know who the queen may be, but you are not very polite to her," to which Brichot replies: "*reine*, in this instance, is not the wife of a king, but a frog. It is the name that the frog has retained in this district, as is shown by the station, Renneville, which ought to be spelled Reineville."

The guest then refers to the book of the curé that takes up the name of a little place which he formerly owned, called Pont-à-Coulevre (99). He adds that he never saw the beastly serpents implied in this name. Brichot admits that he knows the book but states that other sources exist. He then refers to the research of one of his learned friends, who found that the place in question was named Pont-à-Quileuvre and that in delving further into the name he was led to a Latin text in which the bridge, supposedly infested with serpents, is styled *Pons cui aperit*, "a closed bridge that was opened only upon due payment" (99).

The guest later says to Brichot, "You mean to say that wooded places always take their names from animals?" to which he replies, "Not at all," and, proud to display his learning, he continues: "We have only to consider how often, even in the names of people, a tree is preserved, like a fern in a piece of coal. One of our Conscript Fathers is called M. de Saulces de Freycinet, which means, if I be not mistaken, a spot planted with willows and ashes, *Salix et fraxinetum*; his nephew M. de Selves combines more trees still, since he is named de Selves, *de sylvis*" (105).

A Norwegian philosopher at the dinner wants to know from Brichot whether there were any other trees in the nomenclature of his beautiful French-Latin-Norman tongue, to which he gladly pointed out that Houssaye was a place planted with hollies; that in the name of a diplomat, d'Ormesson, one finds the elm, the *ulmus* beloved of Virgil, which gives its name to the town of Ulm; in M. d'Aunay, the alder (*aune*); in M. de la Boulaye, the birch (*bouleau*); in M. de Buisnière, the box (*buis*); in M. Albaret, the sapwood (*aubier*); in M. de Cholet, the cabbage (*chou*); in M. de la Pommeraye, the apple (*pommier*) (107). Then the philosopher asks if the name of the station he passed, Saint-Frichoux, also came from *chou*, to which Brichot replies "No" and points out that Saint-Frichoux is derived from *Sanctus Fructuosus* (107), as Saint-Fargeau is from *Sanctus Ferreolus* (107, 194), neither of which is Norman. Both are Latin. Another name containing a tree, he explains, is Saint-Martin-du-Chene, "Saint Martin of the oak," coming from *Sanctus Martinus juxta quercum* (109).

Later in the conversation Brichot discusses the name Bec (112), which he explains is a "stream" in Norman, illustrated in the Abbey of Bec. He points out that Mobec means "the stream from the marsh," for Mor or Mer meant "a marsh," as in Morville, or in Bricquemar, Alvimare, Cambremer. He adds that Bricquebec means "stream from the high ground," coming from "Briga, a fortified place, as in Bricqueville, Bricquebose, le Bric, Briand or indeed Brice, 'bridge,' which is the same as *bruck* in German (Innsbruck), and as the English *bridge*, which ends so many placenames (Cambridge, for instance)" (115-116). He points to many other instances of *bec* in Normandy: Candebec, Bolbec, le Robec, le Bec-Hellouin, Becquerel, stating that it is the Norman form of the German *bach*, as in Offenbach and Anspach. He notes one more name ending in *bec*: Varaguebec, showing that the first element is from the old word *varaigne*, equivalent to *warren*, "preserved woods or ponds" (116).

Next he considers Dal, a form of German *thal*, "a valley," as in Darnetal, Rosendal, Becdal (116). Then he thinks of the picturesque town of Falaise, the meaning of which is "cliff" (*fels* in German), for from standing on a height he gets a delightful view of the river which gave its name to Balbec (116).

Other place-names mentioned in *Cities of the Plain* (Chapter III, Part II) with their derivations are Parville, derived from *Paterni villa* (207); Maineville from *Media villa* (307), and Eglaville from *Aquilae villa* (354). Along with the place-names the origin of the surname of one of the passengers on the train, de Chevreigny, is tossed in as meaning "a place where goats assemble" (321). Brichot also explains the element *boeuf* appearing at the end of place-names as in Bricque-boeuf and Elbeuf. He points out that it does not mean "beef" as some think, but comes from the Norman *budb*, meaning "a hut" (338). The element *pen* in the name Pennedepie is likewise shown to be the Gallic *pen* meaning "mountain," found also in other names, such as Pennemarck (338).

Brichot also traces the origin of Marcouville l'Orgueilleuse, "Marcouville the proud" (338), first to the Cartulary of the Bishop of Bayeux, *Marcouville superba*, and then to the older form, more akin to the Norman, *Marcuplinvilla superba*, meaning "the village, the domain of Merculph." He then adds that Harmenonville goes back to the illustrious Nordic Herimund (*Herimundivilla*), that Incarville is the village of Wiscar, and that Tourville is the village of Turoid (339). He likewise shows that the Germans (Alemanni) came into Normandy, evidenced in the name Aumenancourt from *Alemainecurtis*; that the Saxons were there, as proved by the springs of Sissonne; that the Goths came in, traced to Gourville, from *Gothorunvilla*; that the Moors came up from Africa, as seen in Mortagne, which comes from *Mauretania*; and that some vestige of the Latins subsists in Lagny (*Latiniacum*) (339).

He then explains Thorpehomme, made up of two words in the Norman language: *thorpe*, "village," and *holm*, "a small island" (340). Next he discusses names that are those of ancient lords, beginning with Orgeville, which, according to the Charter of Robert I, was *Otgervilla*, "the domain of Otger" (340). He continues with Octeville, la Venelle, pointing out that la Venelle is a corruption of l'Avenel, the Avenels being a family of repute in the Middle Ages. He follows with Bourgue-nolles, originally written Bourg de Môles, for the village belonged in the eleventh century to Baudoin de Môles, as did la Chaise-Baudoin (340). He ends with the military town of Doncières, which he states is precise-

ly the same as Saint-Cyr, *Dominus Cyriacus*, and that there are numerous names of towns in which *Sanctus* and *Sancta* are replaced by *Dominus* and *Domina* (340).

The discussion of names next turns to the name la Commanderie, in which it is pointed out that all the places or properties under that name were built or owned by the Knights of the Order of Malta, as the places called Temple or Cavalerie were built or owned by the Templars (346-47). Brichot explains also that the Rue du Temple in Paris was first known as Rue de la Chevalerie-du-Temple, "Street of the Knighthood of the Templars," and before that as the Rue Barre-du-Bac, because the Abbey of Bac in Normandy had its Bar of Justice at that spot in Paris (348).

Marcel Proust, through the conversations of the characters in *Cities of the Plain*, the fourth of the seven volumes of his life's work, *Remembrance of Things Past*, shows his great interest in names, particularly in Normandy, where he spent his holidays as a child. He shows that many of the place-names in that district were brought in by the Norsemen, conquerors of that region.

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