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MEDIATED DESIRE
Third-Party Involvements in the Love Relationships of Proust’s À la recherche du temps perdu

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Ph.D. Thesis

Trinity College, Dublin

January 2011
I declare that this thesis has not been previously submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and that it is entirely my own work. The Library may lend or copy the thesis upon request.
For AH and KM
First and foremost, I wish to thank Professor Johnnie Gratton for his patience, guidance and unwavering interest in this project. Many thanks are also due to Professor David Scott for his support and lively encouragement throughout.

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Lastly, I wish to express my profound gratitude to my mother Angela and sisters Roisin and Karen.
Abbreviations

References to À la recherche du temps perdu are to the standard Pléiade edition in four volumes, edited by Jean-Yves Tadié (Paris: Gallimard, 1987-89) and are incorporated in the text in the form of a roman numeral indicating the volume, followed by arabic numerals indicating the page numbers.
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INTRODUCTION

When it comes to desire and love in Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*, the traditional critical emphasis has been on the interiority, verging on solipsism, which seems to characterize these states.¹ This is no great surprise. Within Proust’s novel, statements about the self’s isolation, the ‘lisère de contingences’ (IV, 553) separating us from other people, invariably find their illustrative paradigm in the themes of sexual and romantic love. ‘Certains philosophes’, states the narrator, ‘disent que le monde extérieur n’existe pas et que c’est en nous-même que nous développons notre vie. Quoi qu’il en soit, l’amour, même en ses plus humbles commencements, est un exemple frappant du peu qu’est la réalité pour nous’ (IV, 146). However, against the frequency with which the Proustian narrator underlines love as a subjective state and the adventure of an individual mind, we find a novelistic treatment of love that shows it to be open to suggestion, incorporative of third parties, channelled, managed and reinforced as much by human interaction as by the solitary imagination. The aim of this thesis is to present that alternative view of desire in Proust’s novel, not with any pretensions of replacing the idea of Proustian love as a highly imaginative and subjective experience, but rather in an attempt to give voice to an aspect of desire in the novel which has often been neglected. The overriding objective linking these chapters on third-party involvement is, therefore, an elucidation of the interactive elements of Proustian passion.

¹ This can be seen in many of the psychoanalytical readings cited below but also in much of the general criticism and introductory literature. Roger Shattuck, for example writes that ‘Proust extends to the verge of solipsism what Stendhal and Nerval knew about the imaginary subjective nature of love’. *Proust* (London: Fontana, 1974), p. 86.
In speaking of ‘desire’ in this thesis, I largely indicate romantic and sexual relations, although it will become obvious that at times too I make ample use of the semantic breadth of the term in order to draw parallels between physical, social, intellectual and aesthetic longings. In this, I can only echo Leo Bersani’s statement at the beginning of his work on character and desire in literature and ‘freely admit to a certain blurring of conceptual boundaries’.²

I here set out to explore those apparently insignificant or merely contingent human involvements strewn along the periphery of the greater drama of lovers’ attempts, and failures, to interact with the objects of their desires. In one important respect, therefore, this study is singular: it does not take the object of desire into account. As an analysis of sexual and romantic relations in the Recherche, such an omission might be deemed a grave negligence, or at the very least be seen to recreate the narrator’s male-centred focus, in which lovers are mostly men and the objects opaque females, about whom it is virtually impossible to state anything with certainty and who, in their capacity as subjects of desire themselves, are at their most mysterious. While I am aware that this might be thought a limitation of the argument, I have consciously sought to apply focus to the workings of desire outside of the traditional subject-object relation. The rationale behind this choice is a wish to refute the assumption that Proust’s refusal to give precedence to the subject-object relation necessarily entails a negative or defensive outlook on all forms of otherness. Indeed, the premise of the thesis as a whole is entirely dependent upon an idea carefully woven into the very fabric of the novel—sexual desire in À la recherche du temps perdu is never simply a question of two people.

Through an analysis of the use of intermediary figures from rivals to messengers, and chaperones to spies, I argue that desiring subjects tap into a placental border area between the self and society. Subjects of desire may fail to achieve true communication with the loved one, but in the process of trying they sound out various other trails of human cause and effect. These transactions, seemingly irrelevant and fleeting, have, in actual fact, an impact on both the desiring self and the structure of the novel. Third parties are present at each stage of the desiring process, from its inception and in the needy demands of first infatuations, right through to the lovers’ attempts to manage affairs of which they have grown weary. The Proustian narrator, indeed, makes of himself a third party in the desiring relations of others in his recurrent stints as eavesdropper and voyeur. What is charted in this study is thus the movement of desire, the externalizing and appropriating impulses of the desiring individual and the impact these have on the novel’s structure and aesthetic. For, if the leisurely pace of the Recherche and the narrator’s propensity to digress are early indications that goal-directedness will not be the most interesting part of this work for its readership, the same can certainly be said of desire within the work. We may know little of the object of desire whose image, filtered through the doubt and confusion of the lover, always emerges as sketchy and elusive. But of the movement of desire we are told a great deal.

There has been no critical work to date on the functions and relevance of third-party figures in Proust’s novel of the type and range explored here. Studies on jealousy in the Recherche have tended to touch on the notion of the rival in a merely tangential
fashion (with the exception of Girard, discussed below), while considerations of the Proustian narrator’s eavesdropping and voyeurism have been located in the broader context of visual, filmic or gender studies. Surprisingly, nothing at all has been written on the Proustian narrator’s use of chaperones, messengers and go-betweens or on that aspect of the narrator’s sexuality that demands outside stimulus. For the idea of an exploration of the figure of the ‘third’, the novelistic importance of the rival in love, and the notion of mediation, however, I am clearly indebted to René Girard’s original and perennially relevant *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*. In it, the author puts forward his thesis of ‘mimetic desire’. Desire, and for Girard this includes social desire or snobbery, is not spontaneous but is rather taken up after the suggestion of models or mediators. Dealing exclusively with the novelistic form, Girard holds that there are two types of work: those that reflect the mediator’s presence without revealing it (romantique), and those that actively reveal the mediation at work (romanesque). Proust’s novel is amongst the latter. Although Girard’s work proved an indispensable theoretical trigger for this study, I diverge from his arguments early on. These differences will be outlined in the first chapter. In particular, the conclusions of my thesis contrast entirely with Girard’s general tenet that mediation is a destructive force and, indeed, that self-realization, artistic

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transcendence or originality of any kind demand that it be given up after a painful
learning curve which forms the plot of the fictions Girard takes interest in.

In its specific focus then, this thesis is an attempt at a critical inroad which
has not—aside from Girard’s very different study—been travelled before. On the
broader issues in which my exploration is contextualized, however, the road is well-
paved. Two principal critical threads have allowed me to build the present
investigation: firstly, studies on desire, love and sexuality in Proust’s work and,
secondly, studies on the social aspects of Proust’s fiction.

‘Desire’ as a concept has for some time been viewed as useful, and perhaps
also fashionable, in literary criticism as a way of exploring social and literary
structures simultaneously in the wake of psychoanalysis. As Malcolm Bowie, with
typical incisiveness, puts it at the beginning of his own piece of the desire pie,
‘desire’, both within and outside the academy, in a shared cultural consciousness, has
become the ‘major conceptual nostrum of the age, a terminological tribute paid by
the bourgeoisie to its own purportedly new and self-aware sexuality’. In sheepish
recognition of the undoubted truth of this remark, I can only put forward the
argument that, within Proust’s own work, desire as concept as well as a word is so
recurrent as to warrant the large numbers of investigations that have been carried out
into it. The great majority of these have been psychoanalytic studies of Proust, his
work, or both. With these studies my thesis merges only in a brief comparison of

6 Jay Clayton presents a good short overview of the topic at the point when influential literary critics
were actively taking hold of desire as a narrative concept: ‘Narrative and Theories of Desire’, Critical
8 One of the earliest Freudian readers was Proust’s publisher and correspondent Jacques Rivière,
*Quelques progrès dans l’étude du cœur humain* (Paris: Librairie de France, 1926). There have since
been numerous such critical works, including, in the 1970s, Ghislaine Florival’s, *Le Désir chez
Proust: À la recherche du sens* (Louvain: Nauwelaerts, 1971), Serge Doubrovsky’s daring *La Place
de la madeleine: Écriture et fantasme chez Proust* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1974) and J. -Francis
notably, Randolph Splitter’s *Proust’s Recherche: A psychoanalytic Interpretation* (Boston:
Freud's Oedipal configuration to the young narrator's jealousy. Although I am convinced that Proust's own mapping of desire in many ways resists a stringent application of psychoanalytic theory, no discussion of desire can rightfully proceed without reference to Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, which to a large degree inaugurated desire as a critical concept. In this thesis, I have felt free to employ the ideas of libido, sublimation and the economy of desire, even if only to later reject them, without, however, undertaking a properly psychoanalytic reading of *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Indeed, such a reading could only hamper the illustration of the desiring patterns I detect in Proust's work and which, precisely, involve interactions beyond the workings of the solitary mind.

Other works that pay a considerable amount of attention to the question of desire in *À la recherche du temps perdu* and are informed, rather than clearly directed, by psychoanalytic approaches, have arguably contributed the most original insights into this field of Proust studies. Leo Bersani's *Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and Art*, explores desire in order to ask questions about the possibility of gaining knowledge of the world. Bersani charts a kind of circular path in his analysis, highlighting the ambiguity of the Proustian narrator's project as at once an attempt to represent an external world and make this world bend to a fantasy, an extension of his own personality. Many of the issues on selfhood that arise in Bersani's treatment of Proustian desire will be touched on at various points throughout this

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study and particularly in Chapter 5. For Bersani, ultimately, Proustian desire outlines the loss of self for which ‘some new form of self-assertion becomes necessary’. Bersani thus views the unitary self posited at the end of the *Recherche* as both an aesthetic and psychological solution to the onslaught on the self’s fragmentation in life. My thesis, in contrast, attempts to demonstrate that the loss of self and the often deliberately blurred divisions between self and other are precisely what are needed for the execution of the creative work.

Malcolm Bowie’s writings on Proust are also important points of reference for my analysis. Bowie’s section entitled ‘Proust, Jealousy, Knowledge’ in his 1987 book *Freud, Proust and Lacan*, in many ways continues and deepens Bersani’s explorations of the interface between sexual and intellectual drives, positing Proustian jealousy as a quest for ‘knowledge’. In my first chapter I use this notion to explore desiring subjects’ relation to the rival in love and the idea of jealousy as a mode of narrative production. Where I diverge from Bowie is in my argument that the curiosity driving both the narrator and Swann’s jealousy, rather than a thirst for knowledge per se, is a curiosity about what the rival, in his capacity as ‘other’, sees in the beloved and is able to tell about her. Proustian jealousy, by this conception, becomes a desire for full narrative rights over the object as well as a consuming preoccupation with how other people view the world. On the more general theme of desire, Bowie’s wonderful *Proust Among the Stars* contains among its set-pieces a section on ‘Sex’ that expertly anatomizes the infiltration of desire into all aspects of Proust’s endeavour in the *Recherche*, particularly at the micro-level of the sentence. In this respect, *Proust Among the Stars* shares a common aim with Jean-Pierre Richard’s *Proust et le monde sensible* and Julia Kristeva’s *Le Temps sensible*: Proust

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et l'expérience littéraire; works separated by twenty years but which both endeavour to reveal the sensorial and sensual nature of Proust's use of language. 12 Along with Richard and Kristeva's work, Bowie's book reinforces desire and sexuality as themes central to the Recherche, deserving of the same attention as self, time, art, politics, morality and death: 'Eros is within touching distance of everything else that the book contains. It is the base camp to which all upwardly striving spiritual and artistic adventures regularly return'. 13

In 1980 J. E. Rivers produced the first sustained exploration of sexuality in Proust's life and fiction. 14 In his Proust and the Art of Love, Rivers rejects psychoanalytic theory out of hand to produce a more liberated account of Proust's portrayal of homosexuality. In so doing, he opened up the Recherche to more thorough-going investigations from the stance of queer theory. 15 Although an investigation into homosexuality in À la recherche du temps perdu is both beyond the scope of this study and unnecessary given that the use of third parties in relations of desire occurs across the spectrum of sexual persuasions, these works are nevertheless of interest here.

Charting the way this thesis might fit into the area of sociological studies on Proust proves altogether more problematic. This is not a sociology of À la recherche du temps perdu. In too many respects it stops short. I do not analyse the class implications of desire in Proust's work, nor do I broach the way desire intersects with

the broader sociological issues of nationhood and politics. At best, certain aspects of the investigation might be said to be concerned with microsocial interactions. But inasmuch as I touch on themes such as imitation, contagion, public space, the family and the individual’s relation to others and the social world, my study has benefitted from research in this area.

Richard Terdiman’s *The Dialectics of Isolation: Self and Society in the French Novel from the Realists to Proust* traces the growing trend towards internalization from the nineteenth-century Realists to what he sees as its apogee in Proust. His thesis is that the literature of the post-revolutionary period is in crisis mode. Terdiman expertly explores the self and world dialectic alive in the fictions he analyses and, to this extent, many of my concerns here overlap with his analytic focus on Proust. His conclusions on Proust’s work, however, differ fundamentally from those I come to here. Terdiman sees Proust’s enterprise as a slow shutting down, a retreat into the only available arena of freedom—consciousness. My thesis proposes, on the contrary, that oft-ignored small transactions between desiring subjects and other people carve out a relational concept of self and of literature. Desiring dynamics map out the road to an artistic endeavour which is an opening

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onto the world rather than a rejection of it. Both interpretations of À la recherche du temps perdu are possible, I believe, for, overall, Proust expresses a somewhat ambivalent attitude on this point. One of the major strengths of Terdiman’s work, as far as I am concerned, is that despite his conclusion, he manages in the course of his study to give due recognition to this ambivalence: ‘there is too much insistence on the world in which the dialectic plays itself out for Proust’s meaning to be encompassed in the world where the dialectic has ceased to operate, the realm in which it is irrelevant’.18

Vincent Descombes’s stimulating Proust: philosophie du roman, while more interested in addressing the philosophical rigour of the narrative and essay-style portions of the fiction, is valuable from a literary-sociological perspective inasmuch as it effects a careful dismantling of the doctrine of pure subjectivism to be found in Proust’s ‘theoretical’ statements, showing the latter to be incompatible with the novelistic form. Descombes’s assertion that the true ‘philosophie du roman’ is to be found not in the speculative passages of Proust’s work but rather in the thick of the narrative—‘Proust romancier est plus hardi que Proust théoricien’19—will be constantly re-echoed throughout this study.

This thesis is divided into five chapters. The study of the rival in love offers a natural starting point to the exploration of third parties. In Chapter 1, I examine the areas of overlap and difference that Proust’s novel displays in relation to two key theories of triangular desire: Freud’s Oedipus complex and René Girard’s theory of mimetic desire. Here, I put forward the argument that the rival acts as a catalyst of desire and is judged by the lover to possess an enviable ability to perceive the ‘mystery’ of the

beloved. The lover’s jealousy is, ultimately, revealed to be a desire to see as others do, to look through other eyes. In this respect, jealousy is discovered to share an underlying link with Proust’s evaluation of the aims and achievements of art.

Chapter 2 turns its focus to the various go-betweens figured in the *Recherche*. Where Chapter 1 had concentrated on the crystallization of desire, I now assess how messengers, servants, friends and chaperones are employed in the work and management of already-established love affairs and infatuations. Interest in the rival was shown up as an attempted movement outwards; the use of mediators by desiring subjects takes this tendency towards externalization one step further. Notions of the circulation and contagious properties of desire, indeed of the plotting of desire in the social world of the novel, are explored. The analysis of the chaperone in particular aims to highlight how the use of such figures acts as a link between the subjective and social strains of Proust’s novel, thus contributing to its overall structure.

In the third chapter, I attempt to redress the one-sided nature of most of the critical discussion on the topic of sexual experience in *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Acknowledging that Proust’s depiction often focuses on solitary sexual acts such as masturbation, I argue that there is another side to the portrayal of sexual experience which nevertheless deserves attention. The idea of public ‘jouissance’ is explored under the themes of the outdoors, the public gaze, spoken language and the family unit. Desiring subjects, particularly the narrator, frequently solicit outside involvement, though not necessarily that of the designated ‘object’ of desire, in order to achieve ultimate sexual satisfaction. Characters who desire are thus seen to spend a great deal of their energy trying, precisely, to divest their desire of its private quality.
Chapter 4 is the last of the chapters to deal specifically with the idea of third parties. Where the previous chapters largely traced the movements of desire towards the wider world and other people, this chapter concentrates on the inverse movement: the subject’s appropriation of extra-personal material into the fabric of his desires. It differs from preceding chapters also in that I here turn to look at the narrator himself as a third party in desiring configurations of other couples. This approach involves a consideration of the ways in which Swann’s love story is incorporated into the narrator’s own desiring narrative before moving on to a detailed analysis of three scenes of eavesdropping and voyeurism in which the Proustian narrator figures as a third. Here, my analyses trace the way the hero’s position as a third party invokes a slippage into third-person narration in these scenes and thus a heightened level of complicity in what is being witnessed. Finally, the chapter considers the way the memories of these witnessed sexual encounters reverberate throughout the narrator’s experience of his relationship with Albertine. The reader is encouraged to see the Proustian subject’s desire as being continually overwritten by the desiring stories of others.

Building on Chapter 4, the short final chapter represents a synthesis of the issues of self and other that have surfaced throughout the thesis. Questioning the dualistic system set up by the narrator between an authentic and a social self, this concluding chapter seeks to reinforce the idea that the narrator’s social, especially his desiring, interactions have served to problematize the idea of a pure creative individuality. The self that claims the impossibility of knowing others is, in fact, a composite entity defined by and comprised of its relations to other people.

What I hope to demonstrate in these readings is the way the sharing of desires serves to blur divisions between self and other, affecting not only the structure of the
Recherche but acting also as a vital template for creative processes. I attempt to illustrate, in short, that romantic and sexual desire is a force very different from the 'false scent' of long-prevailing interpretations.²⁰

²⁰ Roger Shattuck identifies three such false scents in the novel—'mondanité', love and artistic idolatry. See Proust, pp. 84-110.
During the investigation which follows, it will be useful to keep in mind Roland Barthes’s question and auto-response concerning the scope and nature of Proustian love: ‘Le narrateur proustien [...] est-il seulement amoureux? Il n’est que jaloux’.21 The depiction of love in À la recherche du temps perdu is acknowledged as deep, penetrating, unsettling. Yet few would suggest that it is well-rounded, or, despite the author’s proclivity for universalizing, collectively valid. This discussion will be concerned, then, with the obsessive, jealous passion which is Proust’s equivalent of romantic love in the Recherche, and more particularly, it will seek to determine the importance of the rival in the dynamics of Proustian desire.

Although the notion of a third party or rival is implicit in the concept of jealousy, studies of jealousy in the Recherche tend to overlook the figure of the rival and concentrate instead on the psychological workings of the jealous mind. This is largely understandable. Long tracts of the novel are given over to the depiction of jealousy as an intense solitary experience or as pathological illness. Against the penetrating analyses of the processes of the jealous mind, the figure of the rival traces a flimsy, forgettable image. For the most part nameless and faceless, the rivals of the Recherche could hardly be called characters of substance. Indeed, doubt is cast over their existence to such an extent that they seem no more than the hook on which

to hang the subject’s paranoid world of amorous obsession. Without endeavouring to
demonstrate that the depiction of rivals in the novel is anything other than sketchy, or
trying to graft onto these figures a solidity which is blatantly absent, I hope to
illustrate that the rival is more significant than his or her vagueness of character
might at first suggest. What is important is that the subject attributes to this figure,
whether real or imagined, desires and intentions which have a profound influence on
the subject’s own desires. Jealousy, as well as playing out in the imagination, is at
the same time an attempted interaction with the exterior world, a movement
outwards.

The type of reading of Proust which I aim to undertake here will use selected
aspects of the theories of both Freud and René Girard in order to draw attention to
characteristics of the initial stages of Proustian love. It is making no claim to be
either a Freudian or Girardian interpretation of Proust. One of the common problems
inherent in the activity of ‘applying’ theory to literary texts is the implied assumption
of superiority of one text over another in virtue of one being ‘theory’ and the other
‘fiction’. The approach of the discussion which follows is an attempt to avoid placing
the texts in a restrictive relationship in which all the explanatory task lies on one side
and all the character of being elucidated on the other. This said, I hope that a
selective comparative reading of certain fragments of Freud’s and Girard’s ideas with
those to be found in the Recherche will help bring the concepts of desire in the novel
to the fore, unhindered by a preordained theoretical framework. The use of theory
here could therefore perhaps be better considered as that of a launching pad for a
journey into independent insights.

The theories of Freud and Girard display sufficient similarities to Proust’s
conception of desire to allow the insights drawn from their differences to be of value.
It will become apparent that this discussion often reposes on, and gleans its momentum from, some chief contrasts, particularly in the case of Proust and Freud. But firstly, the principal similarity forming the motivation behind this argument must be addressed. The connection between Freud, Girard and Proust underpinning this chapter is the basic triangular configuration which each either implicitly (as in the case of Proust) or explicitly (as in the case of Freud and Girard) accredits as being decisively important in his conception of how desire functions. In Freud, of course, we find the ultimate referential love triangle of modern times. In infancy, the male child develops an Oedipus complex in which he struggles for the love of the mother in competition with, as he sees it, the father. In *À la recherche du temps perdu*, the floating, inclusive and harmonious desire, which, if we borrow Freudian terminology, exists before cathexis onto any one object, is transformed into anxious passion only when the subject becomes jealous. For René Girard, all desire is triangular or mimetic. Starkly put, Girard contends that there would be no desire were it not for the third party.

**Freud, Girard and Proust: The Question of the Spontaneity of Desire**

Let us turn, firstly, to psychoanalysis and the Oedipal model. It is a peculiarity of Freud’s writing that it is often difficult to find definitive explanations of the terms he uses. Freud’s earliest known account of the significance of Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex* appears in a personal letter to Fliess of 1897 and the first published account of the relevance of the drama is contained in *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900. However, the actual term ‘Oedipus complex’ does not appear until his essay on ‘A

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Special Type of Object Choice’, 1910 and for an adequate definition of the Oedipus complex we must resort to an even later description provided in *The Ego and the Id* (1923):

At a very early age, the little boy develops an object cathexis for his mother [...] the boy deals with his father by identifying with him. For a time these two relationships proceed side by side, until the boy’s sexual wishes in regard to his mother become more intense and his father is perceived as an obstacle to them; from this the Oedipus complex originates. His identification with his father then takes on a hostile colouring and changes into a wish to get rid of his father in order to take his place. 24

This is one of the most commonly applied aspects of Freudian thought when it comes to Proust’s novel and has resulted, indeed, in a substantial number of interpretations. 25 For my own purposes, however, I will refrain from drawing comparisons between the admittedly similar depictions of the child’s love for his mother in ‘Combray’ and Freud’s theory of first object cathexis as the mother in his Oedipal model, and will instead concentrate on the structure being put forward, and more particularly on the order of events depicted therein. In the above passage, we are given to understand that the male child desires his mother and that it is only after the intensification of this desire that he apprehends the father’s presence as that of a rival in his mother’s affections. Admittedly, this is a chronology with precarious foundations, given that Freud does not state explicitly that one event occurs before the other. Yet if, in true Freudian spirit, we pay close attention to the order of the clauses in this text, the implication seems clear: ‘the boy’s sexual wishes in regard to his mother become more intense and his father is perceived as an obstacle to them’. The text implies two things which it will be important to keep in mind during this discussion: firstly, that this intensification of desire is an inevitable and spontaneous occurrence, a natural phenomenon of the early stirrings of the sex drive and,

25 For a list of the most notable psychoanalytic readings of Proust’s work, see the thesis introduction, note 8.
secondly, that just as in the layout of the text, this intensification takes place before the apprehension of the father as rival.

A close reading of the love relationships in À la recherche du temps perdu unveils something of a contrast in the temporal ‘sequence’ or course that desire takes. In Proust, every case confirms that the notion of the rival precedes the awakening of strong desire or love. As early as the drame du coucher, arguably the portion of Proust’s text which has been most fruitfully subjected to Freudian readings, this order is noticeable. Although it would be folly to suggest that the child’s love for his mother is only established after the apprehension of rivals, this intensification, or transformation of love into anxiety (which in Proust is synonymous with passionate, amorous love in any case) is awakened by the thought that she is indulging in secret pleasures with others. And it is this anxiety that becomes inextricably tied up with passionate love ‘auquel elle est en quelque sorte prédestinée, par lequel elle sera accaparée, spécialisée’ (I, 30). All that is required is a slight readjustment of the terms. In the drame du coucher, the pivotal moment is the point at which filial love becomes anxiety; in the subsequent love affairs, it is the point at which a ‘désir errant’ becomes an exclusive and all-consuming amour-jalousie.

In later affairs this sequence of events is less clouded and less open to ambiguity: the rival is the catalyst of a particularly Proustian kind of ‘crystallisation’. The importance of the rival in Proustian love cannot be underestimated. This figure is not merely an incidental and irritating presence who appears after the fact, but a necessary component for the birth and endurance of Proustian passion, and, most importantly, the party who attributes value to the beloved object. The magnitude of
the rival's role in the dynamics of desire is stated in no uncertain terms towards the end of the novel:

En amour, notre rival heureux, autant dire notre ennemi, est notre bienfaiteur. À un être qui n’excitait en nous qu’un insignifiant désir physique il ajoute aussitôt une valeur immense, étrangère, mais que nous confondons avec lui. Si nous n’avions pas de rivaux, le plaisir ne se transformerait pas en amour. Si nous n’en avions pas, ou si nous ne croyions pas en avoir. Car il n’est pas nécessaire qu’ils existent réellement. Suffisante pour notre bien est cette vie illusoire que donnent à des rivaux inexistants notre soupçon, notre jalousie. (IV, 484, my emphasis)

In this respect, René Girard seems more attuned than Freud to certain aspects of desire as illustrated by Proust. His theory of ‘triangular desire’, expounded in his 1961 work, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, provides a broader analysis of desire as it is mediated through a third party. The work challenges the notion that desire forms a straight line between desiring subject and the object of desire, underlining instead the ‘mimetic’ quality of all desire. It is Girard’s belief that we do not choose the objects of our desire but rather choose a model or mediator who in turn indicates this object to us. That desire is spontaneous is therefore an illusion. According to this theory, there would be no desire for the object were it not for the third party. By the same token, the value of an object is determined solely by the extent to which he or she is desired by others. What Girard points out, is that the rival may be seen as coming *after* the desire, but that this is a distortion. In reality the subject chooses an object who is apt to make him jealous:

Nous prenons toujours sur la jalousie le point de vue du jalous lui-même […] celui-ci se persuade aisément que son désir est spontané, c’est-à-dire qu’il s’enracine dans l’objet et dans cet objet seulement. Le jalous soutient toujours, par conséquent, que son désir a précédé l’intervention du médiateur. Il nous présente celui-ci comme un intrus, un flâneux, un terzo incommodo qui vient interrompre un délicieux tête-à-tête. La jalousie se ramènerait donc à l’irritation que nous éprouvons tous lorsqu’un de nos désirs est accidentellement contrarié. La véritable jalousie est infiniment plus riche et plus complexe que cela. Elle comporte toujours un élément de fascination à l’égard du rival insolent. Ce sont d’ailleurs toujours les mêmes êtres qui souffrent de jalousie. Devons-nous croire qu’ils sont tous les victimes d’un hasard malheureux? Serait-ce le destin qui leur suscite tant de rivaux et qui multiplie les obstacles au travers de leurs désirs? Nous ne le croyons pas nous-mêmes puisque, devant ces victimes chroniques de la jalousie nous parlons de ‘tempérament jaloux’ […] Que
The full force of the affinity between Proustian love and Girard’s description of jealousy above will hopefully become progressively apparent. The role of frustration and jealousy in augmenting amorous passion has long been the stuff of literature and the *Recherche* undoubtedly plays its part in this tradition. However, to stop here is to fall short of pinpointing what seems to be most significant and original in Proust’s portrayal of jealousy. It is not enough merely to state that Proustian jealousy reinforces love—it does, of course. But Proust also goes to great lengths to underline that the rival, as well as being an enhancer, is also, and more importantly, a catalyst of love. As if to better emphasize this fact, the most entrenched obsessions of the novel are brought forth out of a backdrop of indifference. Swann’s relationship with Odette de Crécy is at first a liaison based largely on contingency. The initial steps of their affair are executed in a perfunctory manner by Swann who, furthermore, carries on other affairs simultaneously. It is thus against a background of near indifference that jealousy surprises the subject and awakens that passion which is known in the novel as love. Odette’s absence from the Verdurin salon on a night when Swann complacently expects to find her there is typically held to be the turning point in the affair. It must be noted, by way of clarification, however, that absence is never merely absence in the *Recherche*, it includes the idea of the beloved’s possible infidelity; it is always absence with the related and underlying belief in space opened up to the advantage of rivalrous third parties. Of at least equal importance to the

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26 René Girard, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, p. 26. Although Girard uses Proust’s fiction, amongst that of other novelists, in the exposition of his theory, his analysis of Proust’s novel, found principally in the chapter ‘Les mondes proustiens’ (pp. 221-58), concentrates on the social form of desire (snobbery), principally the workings of the community in Combray as well as the Guermantes and Verdurin salons. The theme of sexual desire and the passages I consider here are not touched on by Girard.
night on which Swann searches the streets of Paris in the hope of finding Odette is
his realization that she is capable of inspiring desire in other men:

Certes Swann avait souvent pensé qu’Odette n’était à aucun degré une femme remarquable, et la suprématie qu’il exerçait sur un être qui lui était si inférieur n’avait rien qui dût lui paraître si flatteur [...] mais depuis qu’il s’était aperçu qu’à beaucoup d’hommes Odette semblait une femme ravissante et désirable, le charme qu’avait pour eux son corps avait éveillé en lui un besoin douloureux de la maîtriser entièrement dans les moindres parties de son cœur. (I, 267)

The transformation depicted above could very well form the subject matter for an entire novel. Indeed, on other occasions, a similar metamorphosis is stretched over lengthy portions of the text, perhaps with the result that the overarching effect and meaning are somewhat diluted. In this one sentence, however, Proust provides the reader with a striking gem of condensation. At either end of this quotation we find diametrically opposed subjective attitudes. In the opening, what is rendered is not merely Swann’s indifference, but his complete denial of the value of a being. The vocabulary here is undeniably the vocabulary of negation. We are told that to Swann Odette is ‘à aucun degré [...] remarquable’, indeed, she is classed as ‘inférieur[e]’.

At the latter end of the sentence we find, on the contrary, the vocabulary of unbounded need with the emphatic: ‘besoin douloureux de la maîtriser entièrement’.

What lies between these two poles is nothing other than the presumed desire of other men. The reader is forced to recognize, aided by this potent abridgement, the blatant dissolution of the idea that desire is spontaneous or autonomous. Even when, much later in the novel, Gilberte’s marriage to Saint-Loup is reflected upon, we are told that: ‘C’est d’avoir cru Robert aimé, si longtemps aimé, par Rachel, qui le lui avait fait désirer, l’avait fait renoncer pour lui à des partis plus beaux’ (IV, 262).

Analogous circumstances mark the transformation of the protagonist’s vague and inclusive desire for the petite bande into an exclusive desire for the person of
Albertine. It is, again, a moment of jealousy, the sudden realization that Albertine is capable of awakening desire in others:

Quant à l'harmonieuse cohésion où se neutralisaient depuis quelque temps, par la résistance que chacune apportait à l'expansion des autres, les diverses ondes sentimentales propageées en moi par ces jeunes filles, elle fut rompue en faveur d'Albertine, une après-midi que nous jouions au furet [...] je regardais avec envie le voisin d'Albertine, un jeune homme, en me disant que si j'avais eu sa place j'aurais pu toucher les mains de mon amie pendant ces minutes inespérées qui ne reviendraient peut-être pas et eussent pu me conduire très loin. (II, 271)

Albertine stands out from the crowd not because of her beauty or impudence—each of the girls seems to possess these attributes. If she is singled out in this moment, it is due to the narrator's sudden realization that Albertine may form the focal point of the desire of another person, an insight which is impressed upon him in a moment of unprepared calm. Again we see that, far from being a lengthy process over time, the birth of an exclusive desire can be pinned down to a fairly precise moment, 'une après-midi'. The birth of Proustian passion is less a process than a sudden alteration and sudden alterations require a trigger. The trigger here is unequivocally 'le voisin d'Albertine, un jeune homme'. The work of the imagination in endowing the object with added value is what will pick up the baton after this initial shock. Stimulated by this primary jolt, in which the object is for the first time perceived as desired and, therefore, desirable, the Proustian lover commences the aesthetic layering which transfigures the object of desire beyond recognition. Thus, in the budding obsession, are to be found the base, indeed the sole, ingredients of every nuance of romantic passion in the pages of the novel: jealousy and imaginative poeticization. The means by which these components interact are infinitely variable, and yet it must be stressed that at the inception of exclusive desire we consistently find the figure of the rival.

The narrator's associations of Albertine with Balbec and the sea are what reinforce and romanticize his love, but it is the presumed desire of others which ignites it to begin with and frequently breathes new life into it each time it nears extinction. That
love is born from the apprehension of the desire of others finds affirmation and reinforcement in the fact that it is the suspected desire of others alone which is capable of bringing a dying love back from the brink. The see-sawing of the narrator’s emotions with regard to Albertine in *La Prisonnière* is dependent on the waxing and waning of his jealousy. Boredom and indifference when he believes Albertine to be loyal alternate with an abrupt re-establishment of passionate desire when he suspects unfaithfulness:

\[\text{D’Albertine} \ldots \text{je n’avais plus rien à apprendre. Chaque jour, elle me semblait moins jolie. Seul le désir qu’elle excitait chez les autres, quand l’apprenant je recommençais à souffrir et voulais la leur disputer, la hissait à mes yeux sur un haut pavois. (III, 537-8)}\]

The Proustian lover is repeatedly torn between niggling doubts that the object of his affections is in no way special and, on the other hand, the confusing refutation of such doubts by the value countless other desiring eyes place on her. Harold Bloom goes some way towards summarizing the dialectical complexity of Proustian passion when he writes: ‘If Freudian love is the overestimation of the object, then Proustian jealousy [...] is at once the underestimation of the object and the lunatic hyperbolization of her appeal for everyone else’.\(^{27}\) It is her presumed appeal for everyone else which assigns the beloved new value in the eyes of the subject and acts as the foundation for the building of colossal obsessions. What the rival facilitates, in addition, is this state of desire-sustaining limbo in which the possibility of satisfaction (and importantly also of disappointment) is kept at an alluring arm’s-length. The rival in this respect becomes the embodiment of the Proustian paradox for he or she is at once the indication that there is *something* to be attained and simultaneously a symbol of the unattainable quality of that *something* (keeping in mind that in Proustian terms ‘unattainable’ designates all that is worthy of pursuit).

Proust had established this conception of desire long before he undertook the writing of his masterpiece. The story *La Fin de la Jalousie*, which appeared in 1896 in the collection *Les Plaisirs et les jours*, illuminates in a similar fashion how the presumed desire of others effects an emulative desire in the subject. The protagonist, Honoré, feels that his love for Françoise, with whom he is having a secret affair, has become more fraternal than sexual or romantic. He nevertheless prays to God that it will endure and that he will avoid causing Françoise any suffering. At the same time, he is watchful for possibilities of another affair in which he hopes to indulge without Françoise's knowledge. On the way home from a society gathering one evening, Honoré asks a friend, whom he is accompanying, about the possibilities of an easy fling. To his astonishment, the friend is able to mention only one woman whose easy morals and renowned sexual proclivities single her out as a possible conquest: Mme Seuame—Françoise. The friend alludes in particular to her connection with a certain M. de Gouvres. Immediately thoughts of Françoise and her possible lovers become Honoré's sole preoccupation and the passion of his life. He resolves to spend every hour in the presence of his mistress and the name 'de Gouvres' pursues him even to his death-bed.  

In Proust, therefore, the intensification of desire which Freud speaks of as a spontaneous phenomenon is the very opposite of a case of spontaneous occurrence: it is an event dependent upon the presumptive desire of a threatening third party. What does this order of events imply for the motivating forces at the base of Proust's novelistic depiction of love? In the first place, this emphasis on the rival renders the role of sexual and physical attraction in affairs of the heart problematic. If Proust's text tells us anything, it is surely that the aesthetic preferences of the subject have

little to do with his 'choice' of object. Nowhere is this more evident than in Swann's relations with Odette. Swann is not particularly in thrall to Odette on the basis of her charms alone and at times, indeed, finds her attractions negligible. As we have seen, his desire grows in direct proportion to his jealousy. The Swann before Odette, the debonair Swann, glimpsed merely for a few pages at the beginning of the section devoted to him, is one who, we are told, 'ne cherchait pas à trouver jolies les femmes avec qui il passait son temps, mais à passer son temps avec les femmes qu’il avait d’abord trouvées jolies' (I, 189). In the expression of his routine sexuality, Swann displays an easy comfort and freedom in the following of instinctive sensual preferences. On first meeting the woman for whom he will develop an all-consuming passion, however, he is not in the least attracted to her, indeed quite the opposite: 'Elle était apparue à Swann non pas certes sans beauté, mais d’un genre de beauté qui lui était indifférent, qui ne lui inspirait aucun désir, lui causait même une sorte de répulsion physique' (I, 192-3).

This lack of an initial sexual impulse does not of course preclude the object later being endowed with a kind of intellectualized aesthetic beauty, which is the product of imaginative associations on the part of the lover. In the case of Swann, Odette becomes irretrievably associated with both Botticelli's Zephora and Vinteuil's petite phrase and, in this way, his initial repulsion is all but forgotten. It is only after Swann re-emerges from his experience of love and sees Odette in a dream again as he first did, with vision unclouded by jealousy, that he is able to reaffirm the absurdity of his passion which had no basis in its supposed object: 'Dire que j’ai gâché des années de ma vie, que j’ai voulu mourir, que j’ai eu mon plus grand amour, pour une femme qui ne me plaisait pas, qui n’était pas mon genre!' (I, 375).
Nor is the narrator's preference for Albertine one initially based on his physical attraction to her: 'Que connaissais-je d'Albertine? Un ou deux profils sur la mer, moins beaux assurément que ceux des femmes de Véronèse que j'aurais dû, si j'avais obéi à des raisons purement esthétiques, lui préférer' (II, 213). Indeed, of all the jealous love affairs of the *Recherche*, it is only in the case of Charlus for Morel that we see some indication of physical attraction, although one-sided, as contributing to the subject's first movement towards the object. Here, then, another important contrast between the ideas of Freud and Proust is beginning to emerge. Whereas Freud's ideas on love are linked to psycho-sexual development, Proust, on the other hand, does not seem to grant sexuality any great role in his conception of love.

In the same way that physical desire is not enough to bring love into being, satisfaction of the sex drive does not seem to be the ultimate aim of the Proustian subject's desire. If anything, the movement from an initial lukewarm desire to that of *amour-jalousie* sees a depreciation of the sexual element. During the period of the narrator's most intense obsession with Albertine, which leads him to sequester the young woman in his parents' apartment, there seems to be a distinct deflation of the pleasure afforded by sexual intimacy. The more intense his desire to possess Albertine, the less likely this desire is to be satiated by the physical act of lovemaking: 'Chez moi aimer charnellement, c'était tout de même pour moi *jouir d'un triomphe sur tant de concurrents*. Je ne le redirai jamais assez, c'était un apaisement plus que tout' (III, 585, my emphasis). Albertine gets not a mention in this assessment of the sexual aim. Although at first one might be tempted, by the affinity of language, into thinking there are similarities between Proust's 'apaisement' and Freud's idea of physical love as a release culminating in a state of non-tension, the
comparison would be an erroneous one. The satisfaction the Proustian subject feels is a satisfaction in relation to real or imaginary rivals rather than a satisfaction resulting from a reduction of libidinal energy. And any meagre satisfaction, even of this kind, is momentary because the rival can be a rival at any point in time, past, present, or future. In addition, due to the fact that, in both the case of Swann and the narrator, the beloved’s sexuality is open to doubt, the rival could be anyone, male or female. The Proustian rival is legion. The pitiable lover has the whole of the object’s existence to consider and every person with whom she has ever, or may ever, come into contact. This diaspora of the being of the beloved through time ensures that any physical act of intimacy will of course prove insufficient and supremely disappointing as an ultimate aim. Sexual love is revealingly and unfavourably referred to as ‘l’acte de la possession physique—où d’ailleurs l’on ne possède rien’ (I, 230).

This is not to say that Proust’s text lacks a depiction of sexual energy, or that the Recherche illustrates an overall depreciation of sexuality in general. Quite the contrary. Proust is equal to Freud in his enquiry into the various forms and routes of sexual energy and his treatment of sexuality is expansive. Paradoxically, it is only in love, or in the particularly impassioned form of jealousy which constitutes Proust’s idea of love, that sexuality seems to take a back seat. And this downgrading of the sexual element in favour of something indeterminate is inextricably linked to the figure of the other, to the presumed desire of the other. If physical ‘possession’ of the desired object is disappointing, then there is the underlying idea that this was surely not the ultimate aim. Indeed, the disappointment crowning each success, small or great, in the course of passionate desire for another being, is a constant refrain
communicating the suspicion that ‘l’amour le plus exclusif pour une personne est toujours l’amour d’autre chose’ (II, 189).

What the Rival Sees

If, as I have been suggesting, Proustian amour-jalousie does not spring from spontaneous physical desire or aesthetic preference for the object and is, in turn, not satisfied by physical possession, then what is the aim of this desire and what exactly does it have to do with rivals, real or imagined?

For this we will once again have brief recourse to Girard. We recall that for Girard desire is imitative. Objects of desire are indicated to us by models who are at once mediators of this desire and rivals bidding for the same object. But why, according to this theory, are we prone to copying the desires of others? For Girard, imitative desire is a predominantly, though not exclusively, modern predicament, one which is exacerbated by the principles upon which modern Western ideology is founded. God is dead, man must replace him, ‘les hommes seront les dieux les uns pour les autres’.29 According to the author of Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque, the aim of those who are subject to mediated desire is therefore transcendence. In a highly reflexive take on the popular idea of ‘keeping up with the Jones’s’, Girard argues that the subject of triangular desire feels that, being nothing by himself, he will become something through the suggestion offered to him by his mediator.30 It is the mediator alone who confers value on the object. In following the suggestion of the mediator the subject hopes to achieve transcendence. Girard seems to skirt over the issue of exactly how the model-rival is ‘chosen’ but he does stipulate

29 This is the title of the second chapter of Girard’s Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque.
30 Girard’s theory shows certain affinities with early American theories of consumerism, in particular Thorstein Veblen’s idea of ‘conspicuous consumption’, expounded in his The Theory of the Leisure Class (Fairfield, New Jersey: Kelley, 1899).
that the subject fervently admires, even worships, the mediator to such an extent that he or she wishes to appropriate the being of the mediator: ‘le sujet désirant veut devenir son médiateur; il veut lui voler son être’. 31

Now, it may not at first seem that Girard’s account of the mediator fits the bill at all with the Proustian rival. Firstly, in Proust the rival is not ‘chosen’. Secondly, rivals in À la recherche du temps perdu are, more often than not, vague, indeterminate figures, an idea which pursues the lover, but which remains unperceived in any concrete way, and this very vagueness would seem to preclude any opportunity for admiration. With the pointed exception of Gilberte, who styles herself after the model of her husband’s mistress, Rachel, the rival is only rarely considered in individual terms. Even in the instances in which the subject does have cause to suspect a certain individual, the rival is stripped of his or her individualizing traits. If we think of the case of Swann and his rival Forcheville, can we really say that Forcheville is a long-term and god-like model for Swann in the way that Girard describes the mediator? Is he not, rather, a kind of vessel, a type, the embodiment of the idea of Odette’s suitor? It would appear that in the Recherche, the rival is an interchangeable entity. Swann’s suspicions float over a whole variety of possible lovers for Odette, including his own closest friends.

Yet, the Girardian idea of the model is not so far from the Proustian rival as one might at first assume. If the Proustian lover does not, in general, revere the mediator-rival in all the individualizing facets of his or her being, he does, at least, admire the rival’s quality of being ‘other’ than himself. The rival of the Recherche conforms to Girard’s model in this important aspect, that it is she or he who is seen as both indicating an inherent value in, and conferring an added value on, the object

31 René Girard, Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque, p. 70.
of desire. Ultimately, it is an uncertainty as to the value of things, combined with, and reinforced by, the desire to believe in 'objective', 'inherent' worth, that leads the Proustian subject to desire only when he is jealous. Swann may not truly believe that Forcheville is superior to him in any discernible way, and yet, Forcheville's apparent desire for Odette is able to prompt a mimetic reaction in Swann. Significantly, it is around the time of Forcheville's appearance as a guest at the Verdurin salon that Swann begins, quite literally, to re-evaluate Odette:

Depuis qu'il s'était aperçu qu'à beaucoup d'hommes Odette semblait [...] désirable [...] il avait commencé d'attacher un prix inestimable à ces moments passés chez elle le soir, où il l'asseyait sur ses genoux, lui faisait dire ce qu'elle pensait d'une chose, d'une autre, où il recensait les seuls biens à la possession desquels il tint maintenant sur terre. (I, 267)

The vocabulary of worth is striking in this passage, which is essentially Swann's appraisal of Odette: the verb 'recenser', and the terms 'un prix inestimable', 'biens', and 'possession', all contribute to the impression of Odette as a rare and sought-after commodity. Indeed Swann takes on the comic colouring of an Harpagon, counting and recounting all that he treasures. Although here the value of the object suggested by the desire of third parties is communicated via monetary allusions, such value is more often connoted by the word 'mystery' in the Recherche. Indeed, 'mystery' and 'value' are virtually synonymous in this work. The figure of the rival acts as a kind of red light indicating something of mysterious significance, suggesting that a certain object is worthy of desire. To penetrate the inherent 'mystery' or value of things would be to gain access to a closed world, a higher plane of being. In Paul Gifford's estimation, the term 'mystery' achieves a distended meaning in the Proustian world, connoting some transcendent potential enclosed in the object:

Many things in the world remain opaque or quite unknown to us, without arousing the intensely fascinated and compulsively specialised curiosity connoted by this Proustian term. Mystery for Proust always implies a desired contact of penetration, initiation and fusion with something of immense significance that is felt to be hidden or concealed in the mytho-poetic object. It measures a 'differential of transcendence':
that is, the distance by which the object is felt to be more and other than the desiring subject, the extent to which it stands higher in the order of being, closer to the ontological mystery as such.  

What Gifford describes in this passage is certainly very close to the Proustian hero’s youthful, outside-looking-in attitude to the things he most desires, be they social or sexual objects. Gifford’s formulation of desire/love as a will to transcendence also shares much with Girard’s conception of desire. However, it is not only in *Le Temps retrouvé* that the narrator comes to the realization that ‘seule la perception grossière et erronée place tout dans l’objet, quand tout est dans l’esprit’ (IV, 491), this takes place with each occurrence of romantic disappointment along the way. The narrator’s acknowledgement of the role of the imagination in desire is present from the beginning, and the association of ideas which links the beloved to names, places and works of art is equally dissected en route. What is more tentatively and subtly revealed, is the exact nature of the interest taken in the rival. René Girard perhaps comes closest to Proust’s incremental revelations concerning the rival when he states that, ‘le héros [...] rêve d’absorber, d’assimiler l’être du médiateur’. If the desiring subjects of the *Recherche* are not necessarily in thrall to the particularities of the rival’s personality, they do exhibit a fascination for the question of what the rival, in virtue of his or her being ‘other’, *sees*. What the rival sees is thought to be some temptingly indeterminate value which the subject is unable to perceive alone and which comprises the possibility of transcendence. The Proustian lover, disappointed in the object of his affection as soon as it comes within his reach, but aware, or convinced, that this object is desired by others, seems not merely to say ‘I do not know what these others see in him/her?’ but rather takes this as the starting point for

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33 René Girard, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, p. 70.
the formulation of a new desire which could be summarized as ‘I desire to see what they see’.

In fact, the refrain of subjectivity and psychological interiority which is seen as characteristic of the tone of the *Recherche* is more often than not counterbalanced by an acute absorption in the opinions and vision of other people: ‘contrairement à ce que j’avais toujours cru et affirmé, j’étais très sensible à l’opinion des autres’ (II, 209). The young narrator’s fascination with the duchesse de Guermantes could be better described as a consuming curiosity about what others find so fascinating in her. He tells himself ‘que si j’avais été reçu chez Mme de Guermantes, si j’étais de ses amis, si je pénétrais dans son existence, je connaîtrais ce que sous son enveloppe orangée et brillante son nom enfermait réellement, objectivement, *pour les autres*’ (II, 330).

Evidence of this is to be found everywhere in the *Recherche* and often beyond the confines of solely amorous desire. Indeed, the presumption that others are made privy to mysteries from which the subject alone is excluded is present in every form of desire. When, after long months of longing, the narrator is granted permission to go and see the lauded Berma in her most famed role as Phèdre, his disappointment with her performance is acute. In fact, his admiration for the actress is only aroused upon perceiving the admiration others award her: ‘Enfin éclata mon premier sentiment d’admiration: il fut provoqué par les applaudissements frénétiques des spectateurs’ (I, 441-2). Our hero subsequently depends on Norpois to tell him why he should have appreciated La Berma: ‘M. de Norpois, mille fois plus intelligent que moi, devait détenir cette vérité que je n’avais pas su extraire du jeu de la Berma, il allait me la découvrir’ (I, 448).
In similar fashion, the narrator hopes that a third party will illuminate some worthwhile intrinsic value when it comes to his love life. Just as others seem better able to perceive the 'intrinsic' worth of a work of art or particular social milieu, the rival in love is taken to have an ability to perceive that which is mistakenly taken for 'objectively' desirable and valuable in the beloved. The naïve and gullible nature of this trust in the judgement of others over and above recourse to one's own powers of discernment will be shed in the course of the hero's bildungsroman. However, the interest in the vision of others, rather than being cast aside in a final self-dependence by the time of the novel's close—part of the redemptive view encouraged by canonical readings of the text and, indeed, by Girard's interpretation—not only persists but, I shall argue in subsequent chapters, forms an integral part of the aesthetic that the narrator goes on to elaborate.

The interest in what the rival sees effects an extraordinary transformation in the intellect of the agent. Upon apprehension or mere suspicion of a rival, the apathetic subject experiences an overwhelming surge of mental activity. Indeed, it can be said without exaggeration that the rival awakens, or more appropriately, re-awakens an inquisitiveness which seemed to die with childhood. This awakening of curiosity is all the more noticeable due to the contrast provided by the negation and boredom which reign before jealousy. Swann's relationship with Odette de Crécy is an affair begun mechanically, with little initiatory movement on Swann's part and a minimal investment of mental energy in its early stages:

Il n'allait chez elle que le soir, et il ne savait rien de l'emploi de son temps pendant le jour, pas plus que de son passé, au point qu'il lui manquait même ce petit renseignement initial qui, en nous permettant de nous imaginer ce que nous ne
If jealousy could be called an insane curiosity, it is not yet alive in Swann. All the terms above are expressed negatively and this dearth of curiosity provides an extreme counterbalance to the over-production of possibilities to which the reader is later treated. Swann will have to await the advent of something which communicates to him the notion that Odette is noticed by others, that she could possibly be the object of desire for others, before he himself takes an interest in the minutiae of her day to day existence. Swann’s devouring passion to know the possible past, present, and future actions of a rather mediocre young woman has its germ in the throwaway remarks of friends:

Parfois, dans un coin de cette vie que Swann voyait toute vide, si même son esprit lui disait qu’elle ne l’était pas, parce qu’il ne pouvait pas l’imaginer, quelque ami, qui, se doutant qu’ils s’aimaient, ne se fût pas risqué à lui rien dire d’elle que d’insignifiant, lui décrivait la silhouette d’Odette, qu’il avait aperçue, le matin même, montant à pied la rue Abbatucci dans une ‘visite’ garnie de skunks, sous un chapeau ‘à la Rembrandt’ et un bouquet de violettes à son corsage. Ce simple croquis bouleversait Swann parce qu’il lui faisait tout d’un coup apercevoir qu’Odette avait une vie qui n’était pas toute entière à lui; il voulait savoir à qui elle avait cherché à plaire par cette toilette qu’il ne lui connaissait pas; il se promettait de lui demander où elle allait à ce moment-là. (I, 236-7)

The detail involved in the description of Odette betrays a desiring eye and Swann senses this truth in what might otherwise have been a banal comment. This account of Odette, strikingly attired, as seen through the medium of another male gaze, serves to stir Swann’s interest. The recounted sighting is doubly effective in that Swann not only detects a potential rival in the friend who describes Odette, he also fears a rival in whomever it is that Odette is taking such pains to please in such an elaborate get-up. It is thus the rival who gets the imagination going and inspires passion. Where the mechanical lover is unimaginative, the jealous lover is ingeniously creative, original and poetic.
The uneasy truth that Proust would appear to be underlining is that minds are not ‘naturally’ inquisitive but await the promptings of some external factor. In the same way, then, that desire is not spontaneous but prompted by a rival, so inquisitiveness and a thirst for knowledge also seem to be prompted by rivals:

Nous ne cherchons la vérité que quand nous sommes déterminés à le faire en fonction d’une situation concrète, quand nous subissons une sorte de violence qui nous pousse à cette recherche. Qui cherche la vérité? C’est le jaloux [...] Le tort de la philosophie, c’est de présupposer en nous une bonne volonté de penser, un désir, un amour naturel du vrai.  

We know that Swann has ability, but we are also told that his various projects languish in a state of incompletion. His jealousy, given constant new life by the parade of suspected rivals who come to dominate his thoughts, could be said to be the only thing that Swann follows through until its natural end. To this effect, the rival not only inspires passion where only indifference existed, he or she inspires work, industriousness and exertion where only apathy, lethargy and indolence prevailed before. The depiction of jealousy in *Un Amour de Swann* is undeniably concerned with the pain and suffering of the jealous state of mind. However, alongside this pain is the unrelenting idea of jealousy as an awakening from the hibernation which is incuriosity: ‘cette curiosité qu’il sentait s’éveiller en lui à l’égard des moindres occupations d’une femme, c’était celle qu’il avait eue autrefois pour l’Histoire’ (I, 269-270). For Swann, we are told that, due to his rebirth as Odette’s lover, ‘sa vie lui paraissait plus intéressante’ (I, 225), and that ‘les choses avaient repris pour lui un peu de l’intérêt délicieux qu’il leur trouvait autrefois’ (I, 269). It is the looming figure of the rival which causes the subject’s imagination to stand to attention. The perceived interest of others lends symbolic girth to the object, creating a greater surface area for the feeding of obsession, which, without this,

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would have been meagre: as Bouillaguet states 'la jalousie donne à l’amour de Swann la consistance qui lui faisait défaut'.

The case of the narrator in *La Prisonnière* is remarkably similar. Lethargic to the point of illness, his jealousy alone is capable of getting him out of bed or through the front door. Indeed, throughout these stagnant pages of inactivity the suspicion of the rival stands out as the only *force de vie*. As with Swann, the threatening third party is the catalyst who brings back to life a curiosity which seemed to die along with childhood. Periods of lull, in which Albertine is virtually under house arrest, are periods of indifference, spilling over into irritation with her presence. All-pervading boredom alternates with plans to commence new projects which are quickly abandoned due to lack of energy and will power. This state of boredom is only broken with the suspicion of another rival which sends the speculative power of the mind into over-drive.

In the Albertine sequence all the hero’s senses seem to be heightened. The reader is privy to the most incisive of analytical skills. Information, down to the most miscellaneous bits of trivia, is expertly stored and documented. The voracious analyst describes with a kind of ludicrous pride the minute and intricate motions of his research:

> Tel adverbe [...] jailli dans une conflagration par le rapprochement involontaire, parfois périlleux, de deux idées que l’interlocuteur n’exprimait pas, et duquel par telles méthodes d’analyse ou d’électrolysé appropriées, je pouvais les extraire, m’en disait plus qu’un discours. Albertine laissait parfois trainer dans ses propos tel ou tel de ces précieux amalgames que je me hâtais de ‘traiter’ pour les transformer en idées claires. (III, 596)

The over-activity of the protagonist’s mind is shown in full relief against the inactivity of his body during the period of jealousy which is depicted in *La Prisonnière*. Our unfettered searcher after Truth barely leaves his apartment during

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the course of this volume: ‘Je consacrais souvent à imaginer la promenade d’Albertine les forces que je n’employais pas à la faire’ (III, 533). He is, as Moss so aptly puts it, ‘a scientist in a dressing gown’ who ‘watches over a laboratory of falsehoods’.  

This inactive and unproductive valetudinarian is at one and the same time a worker bee of inventive story-telling. Ironically, amorous jealousy is as close to novelistic creation as the Proustian hero comes before *Le Temps retrouvé*. Malcolm Bowie deals expertly with this role of jealousy as ‘a stimulus to the making of fictions’. Indeed, it must be recognized that jealousy becomes a rich source of inventive inspiration for those afflicted with it in the *Recherche*. The narrator spends numerous pages pontificating on his inability to create, on his non-existent observational skills, only to become a machine of fiction, an analyst of finite information and of his own psyche, but solely in the limited domain of Albertine’s actions. Revealingly, the narrator is wont to compare his jealous inventions to the work of a writer. Upon receiving certain new and unexpected information about Albertine, he laments: ‘Je regardais une flambee brûler d’un seul coup un roman que j’avais mis des millions de minutes à écrire’ (III, 852).

In the body of the beloved, in all the places and people she has touched, what the subject finds imperiously irritating and jealous of is the *untold*. He needs and wants to fill in the gaps. This is precisely what his jealous fictions attempt to do. However, the frustration and pain of jealousy lie mainly in the fact that the curiosity awakened by the rival cannot be assuaged by the subject’s thwarted attempts at

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38 In one of Proust’s letters to Reynaldo Hahn we find the expression of an identical wish: ‘en épiant une figure, ou en rapprochant des noms, en reconstituant une scène j’essaie de combler les lacunes d’une vie qui m’est plus chère que tout mais qui sera pour moi la cause du trouble le plus triste tant que dans ses parties les plus innocentes elles-mêmes je ne la connaîtrai pas’: *Correspondance de Marcel Proust*, ed. Philip Kolb. 21 vols. (Paris: Plon, 1970-93), II, 97 (juillet-août 1896).
fiction making. His narration, his attempt to fill in the gaps, is always incomplete or subject to perpetual re-evaluation. His novel-in-progress is forever going up in flames since he has no control over its content, no real power to narrate.

The Rival-Narrator

The rival, on the other hand, is seen to possess a coveted capacity for narration, of which the lover’s jealous imaginings are an inadequate emulation. The fascination with what the rival sees is accompanied by a fascination with what the rival may be able to recount. Swann may have his suspicions about the nature of the acquaintance between Odette and Forcheville, and yet, far from exemplifying the clichéd cuckold who wishes to exact revenge, Swann’s true desires are disclosed in daydream fantasies of recruiting Forcheville as a possible narrator of Odette’s activities: ‘Parfois, au risque de la fâcher, il se promettait de chercher à savoir où elle était allée, il rêvait d’une alliance avec Forcheville qui peut-être aurait pu le renseigner’ (I, 310). This strange feeling of complicity with the rival is by no means rare and seems to exist in tandem with the fear that the threat of the rival inspires. In one of his fragments on amorous discourse, Roland Barthes teases out this idea of complicity with the rival in love (under the heading ‘La connivence’), revealing, in his epigrammatic way, the textual, psychological and semiotic riches that this triangular relation contains:

Celui/celle avec qui je peux bien parler de l’être aimé, c’est celui/celle qui l’aime autant que moi, comme moi: mon symétrique, mon rival, mon concurrent (la rivalité est une question de place). Je peux alors enfin commenter l’autre avec qui s’y connaît; il se produit une égalité de savoir, une jouissance d’inclusion; dans ce commentaire-là, l’objet n’est ni éloigné ni déchiré; il reste intérieur au discours duel, protégé par lui. Je coïncide en même temps avec l’Image et avec ce second miroir qui reflète ce que je suis (sur le visage rival, c’est ma peur, c’est ma jalousie que je lis). 39

39 Roland Barthes, *Fragments d’un discours amoureux*, p. 79.
In a similar fashion the narrator encourages Andrée, suspected on many counts of sexual ‘deviation’ in partnership with Albertine, to recount stories after the latter’s death and even goes as far as preferring the company of the person he has suspected as a rival. The reasons for this preference are made plain: ‘J’étais plus heureux d’avoir auprès de moi Andrée que je ne l’aurais été d’avoir Albertine miraculeusement retrouvée. Car Andrée pouvait me dire plus de choses sur Albertine que ne m’en avait dit Albertine elle-même’ (IV, 178). Not only does the rival suggest the direction of desire, then, but he or she is seen as having a greater power of divulgence, a heightened ability, or lowered resistance, to delivering up the existence of the beloved than had the beloved herself.

The very fact that this fascination with rivals survives the object of desire is in itself telling. Even after Albertine’s death, Marcel sends Aimé to conduct research ‘sur place’ in Balbec, in the hope of finding out more about Albertine’s possible illicit associations at the resort (IV, 73). The interest in what can be told about the beloved is undeniably the most durable part of the love for her. This wish to interrogate the rival, to tap his or her value as raconteur, is the particular manifestation of a more generalized desire expressed in the following kernel of extremely revealing text:

Les romanciers prétendent souvent dans une introduction qu’en voyageant dans un pays ils ont rencontré quelqu’un qui leur a raconté la vie d’une personne […] Combien nous voudrions quand nous aimons, c’est-à-dire quand l’existence d’une autre personne nous semble mystérieuse, trouver un tel narrateur informé! (IV, 131)

This one overriding fantasy of desire divulges the ultimate meaning of the procession of so many rivals in the Recherche. Who is this potential ‘narrateur informé’ if not the rival? What does this fascination with the rival betray if not a fascination with the power to recount? In following the direction of the rival, the amorous subject wants
at once to discover the mystery the rival indicates, to see what the rival sees and, ultimately, to accede to the rival’s ability to tell.

Finally, we get to the significance of the rival for the subject and what we find is that the shadow of the rival has been the shadow of the future narrator all along. For the jealous subject, threat is constant and rivals ubiquitous. In the case of the narrator, however, this notion of the omnipresence of the rival seems less a proof of paranoia than the projection of a sensed, yet veiled, vocation. Earlier in this chapter I defined the two basic components of Proustian love as jealousy and the poeticization of the object. It seems to me that few would argue with this textually evident fact. I stressed that the process of aesthetic layering common to both the protagonist and the dress-rehearsal counterpart we find of him in Swann, is induced by the sudden realization that the object is desired and thus desirable. Now, the processes of Proustian obsession and desire are seen as being highly suggestive of the creative artist’s work. In the artistic telos of À la recherche du temps perdu, love has ever been accorded the role of a ‘false route’, whose divagations and disappointments ultimately deliver the protagonist onto the way of his artistic vocation, albeit through disenchantment and suffering. However, although the transformative powers of the protagonist’s imagination are widely recognized as playing a preparatory role in the making of an artist, the apprehension of the rival seems, through critical neglect, to have been severed of its equally powerful claims to influence in Proust’s depiction of the formation of the artistic mind. If the romantic lover’s poeticization of the object is to be equated with the aesthetic and spiritual sensitivity required of the de-romanticized artist, then why neglect the role of the rival, whose persistent presence alone should
be sufficient to alert us to his or her greater novelistic significance? The perceived stance or position of the rival in relation to the desired object is very obviously a coveted one and one equated, by the hero at least, with both the appeal of alien outlooks on the world and also with the power of narration.

The Proustian narrator constantly comments on the barrier between the self and the external world. In the lover’s wish to see what the presumed rival sees, to penetrate the mystery that the rival indicates, we sense the more general wish to see the world through the eyes of another. This desire may be seen as having, at its motivational core, links to art, which is the communication to humanity at large of an individual viewpoint:

Le style pour l’écrivain aussi bien que la couleur pour le peintre est une question non de technique mais de vision. Il est la révélation, qui serait impossible par des moyens directs et conscients, de la différence qualitative qu’il y a dans la façon dont nous apparaît le monde, différence qui, s’il n’y avait pas l’art, resterait le secret éternel de chacun. Par l’art seulement nous pouvons sortir de nous, savoir ce que voit un autre de cet univers qui n’est pas le même que le nôtre et dont les paysages nous seraient restés aussi inconnus que ceux qu’il peut y avoir dans la lune. (IV, 474)

Equally, in the rival’s presumed capacity for narration we find the subject’s own wish to narrate. We have seen that the desiring subject envies the rival’s alleged ability to ‘fill in the gaps’, to tell the full story. The complexity of the rival as both ‘ennemi’ and ‘bienfaiteur’ is perhaps brought to its most extreme point in the figure of Mlle Vinteuil’s friend, nameless throughout, and whom we never meet, who represents not only the utmost mysterious threat but is also a chief actor in making joy accessible through art. Having been the torment of Vinteuil’s life through her association with his beloved daughter, she becomes the decipherer of his music, the instrument of his immortality, the supreme ‘filler-in-of-gaps’. Mlle Vinteuil’s friend encapsulates and buttresses the idea that the ominous threat of the rival is at once a calling.
By the end of the novel, the Proustian hero is on the verge of fulfilling both the wish to communicate an individual vision through art and the wish to assume the power of narration—two threads of the same desire, as it transpires. Ultimately, he achieves this through a recognition of the ‘otherness’ within: ‘Narrative is generated from a primary and primordial self-reflexive disjunction whereby the self can view itself from the outside, whereby the self being told becomes a strange object, a curious thing, for the self doing the telling’. The narrator recognizes his own vision as being worthy of recounting and creates a triangular structure of the substance of his life, the ‘I’ who lives it, and the ‘I’ who tells it. The figure of the rival has, then, been a precursor suggesting the splitting of the self. The Proustian hero does not, therefore, leave behind the triangular structure which has throughout been discernible in his desire. Rather he transposes it in such a way that his desire is no longer, in Girard’s words ‘le désir selon l’Autre’.

To understand the importance of the rival, it is necessary to apprehend the true nature of Proustian love as a desire for escape from the confines of the self, or, as the narrator states, a desire for ‘ce prolongement, cette multiplication possible de soi-même, qui est le bonheur’ (II, 152). The attempt to reach out, to gain transcendence through total possession of another being is, of course, a doomed enterprise. Nothing is to be gained through the direct emulation of the supposed desires of others. On the other hand, the wishes of the desiring subject whose love is predicated on jealousy reveal a great deal about the nature of desire itself as a need to outstrip the self. If the mystery the rival seems to indicate is barren and illusory, this figure is at least suggestive of a liberating structure. In the case of Swann, the memory of his jealousy merely recedes into the background of his life, he achieves

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41 Girard uses this term throughout his study on triangular desire.
no prolongement of the self which was suggested and temptingly held up by the string of rivals which for a time pre-occupied him. However, there is no doubt that we are supposed to see Swann as a failed artist, which the narrator might have become had he not taken pains to plumb the depths of the desire inspired in him by jealousy.

One might argue that other, numerous forms of exclusion come into play in the designation of an object as an ‘être de fuite’: there is the absence of the beloved, her social inaccessibility, her indifference, to name but a few. Yet, throughout Proust’s variegated display of all that ‘fuite’ may entail, it is arguable that some form of jealousy, some suspicion (or coveted position) of the other in relation to the object, is inevitably involved. The beloved’s absence divorced from the fear of her possible infidelity, as occurs when the subject has her chaperoned, is experienced as a calming reprieve rather than anxiety. There is no instance of a perceived indifference on the part of the beloved which is not also a suspicion of her preference for the company of others. There is no example of despair due to her social inaccessibility which is not also a profound angst caused by the subject’s exclusion from the circle of the elect which surrounds her. Also, unlike the disembodied ideas of absence and inaccessibility, rivals are capable of dramatic interaction and have the added dimension of mobility through time in the text. As such, they connect and tie up elements of the novel in a way that ideas, left merely to be experienced as repetition, cannot. Each character in the Recherche, without exception, has his or her place in at least one but, more often than not, multiple triangular structures of desire, with each structure overlapping another. In a novel which depends on the slow unraveling of connections, these overlapping links between characters are precisely
what constitute the 'plot' itself. In Chapter 2, I shall deal more fully with this idea of human networks.

What I hope to have demonstrated here is the highly relative and interactive quality of the desire depicted in the *Recherche*. In this view, the figure of the rival may be seen anew as that of prompter of desire, of curiosity and of fiction making, the figure who betrays the need, the will and, ultimately, suggests the ability to transcend the confines of the self. The rival is an impetus and a master of suggestion for the mind straining against its own subjectivity.
Go-betweens, Mediators and Chaperones

If the notion of the rival is embedded in desire at the point of its crystallization, other types of third party in *À la recherche du temps perdu* are implicated in desire's everyday mechanics. These figures, more actively present in the text and more firmly associated with what I will term the 'work' of desire, will form the central focus of the present chapter. That they have not been the subject of critical attention, despite their extraordinarily frequent involvement in the principal relationships of the novel, is perhaps due to the fact that these go-betweens, messengers and chaperones are at the same time prominent characters in their own right, merely moonlighting in an intermediary capacity. But the most important reason undoubtedly springs from the leanings of the *Recherche* itself. The Proustian narrator is wont to emphasize his subjectivity, his own imaginative input into his desires, rather than the way they are plotted in the social world of the novel. Critical emphasis has, quite understandably, tended to follow suit. There is in literary convention, some might say, something about go-between figures and the novelistic situations which result from their deployment, which is denotative of intrigue and an action-centred narrative; not things that are readily associated with Proust's novelistic practice.

The following discussion seeks to demonstrate, however, that the use of these mediators serves other conceptual and narrative functions in the Proustian text. The
broad aims of the exploration are threefold: first, it is quite simply an exercise in emphasis which, by bringing together textual instances of this type of mediation, attempts to underline the range and frequency of the lovers' tendency to involve others with their desires. Secondly, it seeks to demonstrate how the desiring individual both hopes to influence and 'know' the object of desire through this process as well as aspiring to various reconstructions of the self. Thirdly, the chapter aims to uncover how this practice of involving others in deeply personal experience acts as a kind of umbilical cord between the subjective and the social strains of the novel and, as such, contributes to its overall structure.

Reference to two distinctive episodes of the *Recherche* will here serve as introduction. The one gives some preliminary indication of the variety of attitude and tone to be found in the novelistic treatment of go-betweens. The other illustrates the rootedness of the lover's tendency to involve others and offers an example of the mode by which such tendencies are transformed into features of the social narrative (as opposed to being confined within the introspective or monological threads of the novel). The first scene is the well-known meditation on the 'Demoiselles du téléphone', which springs up in earlier writings before being included in the *Recherche*. The meditation occurs in the context of the narrator's visit to Doncières, during which Saint-Loup organizes a scheduled telephone call between the narrator and his grandmother:

N'ayant pas eu ma communication immédiatement, la seule pensée que j'eus, ce fut que c'était bien long, bien incommode, et presque l'intention de dresser une plainte: comme nous tous maintenant, je ne trouvais pas assez rapide à mon gré, dans ses brusques changements, l'admirable fée à laquelle quelques instants suffisent pour

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qu’apparaisse près de nous, invisible mais présent, l’être à qui nous voulions parler et qui, restant à sa table, dans la ville qu’il habite [...] sous un ciel différent du nôtre, par un temps qui n’est pas forcément le même, au milieu de circonstances et de préoccupations que nous ignorons et que cet être va nous dire, se trouve tout à coup transporté à des centaines de lieues (lui et toute l’ambiance où il reste plongé) près de notre oreille, au moment où notre caprice l’a ordonné. Et nous sommes comme le personnage du conte à qui une magicienne sur le souhait qu’il en exprime, fait apparaître, dans une clarté surnaturelle, sa grand-mère ou sa fiancée en train de feuilleter un livre, de verser des larmes, de cueillir des fleurs, tout près du spectateur et pourtant très loin, à l’endroit même où elle se trouve réellement. Nous n’avons, pour que ce miracle s’accomplisse, qu’à approcher nos lèvres de la planchette magique et à appeler [...] les Vierges Vigilantes dont nous entendons chaque jour la voix sans jamais connaître le visage, [...] les Toutes-Puissantes par qui les absents surgissent à notre côté [...], les Demoiselles du téléphone! (II, 431-32)

The telephone operators accomplish here what the subject hopes to achieve through all his uses of third parties: the elimination of a boundary between himself and the object of his desire. Of particular interest is the contrast the fragment establishes between two kinds of reaction towards the intermediary. The emphasis of the passage moves through the narrator’s impatience, characterized by the clipped beginning, and onwards into an expanding narrative of effusive poetic appreciation and blossoming generosity. At the outset the narrator underlines the frustrations of the mechanical; his concern is with questions of speed, efficacy and service as he awaits impatiently the accomplishment of the act. Indeed, a sense of entitlement is betrayed in the impulse to ‘dresser une plainte’. Then, as the meditation unfolds and wonderment is reinstated, a vocabulary of the magical takes over; the operation is no longer a mere service, but is a gift, a wish granted; the operator is genie, conjurer, ‘féerie’ and ‘magicienne’, and what she accomplishes is in the order of the ‘surnaturel[le]’, no less than a ‘miracle’.

This juxtaposition of the mechanical and the féerique is worth noting because in the textual presentation of the use of third parties we find a spectrum of attitudes ranging between two similar extremes to those presented here; at one end a rather cynical focusing on the practical utility, the serviceability of intermediary figures, at
the other, a highly poetic evaluation, with spiritual overtones, of what can be accomplished or granted through the third party. Often both attitudes are apparent in any one passage relating to third parties. This also generally applies to the nature of the ‘functions’ the subject expects or wishes the third party to fulfil, themselves ranging from the mechanical to the highly abstract.

The second segment in question is the celebrated episode of *Le Temps retrouvé* in which the narrator inadvertently stumbles across Jupien’s male brothel while wandering around a wartime Paris that has the atmospheric quality of the *Mille et une Nuits*. The episode has been the subject of much critical attention not least because, by offering a noticeable change in the novelistic atmosphere, it stands, as do other key episodes, like a beacon for readerly navigation. The *mondain* Paris of salon society, backdrop to the narrator’s precipitous social rise, has been replaced by an apocalyptic version of the city during war. This new city is more menacing but strangely more liberated, as people and places subject to impending doom frequently are, and it sheds an accentuating light on the mores and practices of its nervous inhabitants. It is within this context that the brothel scene depicts in bawdy microcosm the precariousness of a hierarchical social system which has been showing its cracks all along. Between its walls aristocrats are whipped, working-class soldiers supplement their income in moments of reprieve between the more serious business of war and entrepreneurship presides at the helm in the form of Jupien himself. But the scene is metonymic from a sexual as well as from a social perspective and we are encouraged to draw parallels between what takes place in the brothel and what is happening, albeit in a more protracted fashion, in the ‘world’ at large. In an analogous mirroring of the crowded nature of the homosexual community in the work, for example, the brothel is the only building which is lighted.
and bustling with human traffic amongst the darkened, silent streets of the narrator’s trajectory. Once inside, the gamut of sexual behaviour noted by the narrator and unravelling here in condensed and theatrical form has already been exhibited to varying degrees in each of the desiring relationships of the previous volumes: prostitution, fetishism, masochism, sadism, not to mention the voyeuristic activity of the narrator himself. But there is one point of comparison between this episode and the overall novelistic conception of desire which is of special significance to this study; it concerns Jupien’s account of how his establishment came to be. At the end of the narrator’s tour, Jupien confides that he acquired the brothel ‘uniquement pour rendre service au baron et distraire ses vieux jours’ (IV, 409). The fact of the brothel’s existence is rooted in the nature of the relationship between Charlus and Jupien (whom the narrator terms Charlus’s ‘factotum’ (IV, 396)). And this, probably one of the most enduring and steadfast of relationships in the novel, is not primarily that which exists between lovers, but is rather a relationship of desiring individual to the mediator, facilitator and confidant of all his desires. In fact, from the time of their first meeting Charlus makes of Jupien his go-between in all affairs of the heart. In Sodome et Gomorrhe, following their first encounter and sexual liaison, Charlus steps into the courtyard outside Jupien’s boutique and immediately quizzes him about the ‘possibilities’ offered by the quartier: ‘le marchand de marrons du coin’, ‘le pharmacien’ who employs ‘un cycliste très gentil qui porte ses médicaments’ (III, 11). This relationship of desiring master and scout is the one which will prevail (at least up until the very end of the novel, at which point we find Jupien transformed into the elderly baron’s nurse and carer). So much so that, by the time we reach Le Temps retrouvé, the maison de passe is in fact merely a concrete manifestation of a service that Jupien has long been providing for the baron. Not only has Jupien’s role
as procurer of desirable young contacts to Charlus been transformed over time into a business but, in counterpoint to the often intense subjectivism of desire, the secret and 'deviant' desires of many individuals have here been given a social space, have come to be played out in a quasi-public context.

The episode as a whole is one of theatricality, of framed images and actions, an episode which is first and foremost visual and therefore instantly impactive. By contrast, Jupien's few words, 'uniquement pour rendre service au baron', despite coming at the end and thus crowning the series of tableaux which the brothel scene offers up as an exhibitive panorama of sexuality, find their full force only as part of a cumulative narrative exposition. But as such, Jupien's words become an exemplary incidence of the fact that desire in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, far from being an exclusively solitary affair, provokes quite an extraordinary canvassing and deployment of human resources.

**Reverence and Poeticism in the Childhood Use of Intermediaries**

That the impulse to involve others is a deep-seated one is revealed perhaps most powerfully in the fact of its early manifestation. There is something about the mix of ingenuity and precocity in the narrator's childhood attempts to recruit others to his amorous causes that shows up his fantasies of otherness and self-transformation with a transparency that is unmatched in later behaviour. The very fact of youth plays a significant role in initiating the narrator into awareness of the mediating potentiality of those around him. Childhood and adolescence are rich in desires but disproportionately meagre in autonomy to act upon them. So it is that the potential go-between comes to be viewed as a means of contravening the external laws which are at this point seen as the principal obstacles to the fulfilment of desires. It is very
early on indeed that the Proustian narrator grasps the potential worth of a good go-
between and apprehends that the use of third parties may become invaluable to him
in later life. When family talk alerts the young hero to the fact that his great uncle
Adolphe is intimately connected with a host of actresses and cocottes (‘que je ne
distinguais pas nettement des actrices’ (I, 74)), all the narrator’s hope and
anticipation comes to rest on a possible future of desires mediated and facilitated
through this uncle. We are here given the foundations upon which all his subsequent
use of outsiders is based:

Je pensais que le stage que peut-être pendant des années des hommes importants
faisaient inutilement à la porte de telle femme qui ne répondait pas à leurs lettres et
les faisait chasser par le concierge de son hôtel, mon oncle aurait pu en dispenser un
gamin comme moi en le présentant chez lui à l’actrice, inapprochable à tant d’autres,
qui était pour lui une intime amie. (I, 74)

To the young hero’s mind, what separates an inapproachable being from one who is
within reach is the acquaintance of a well-connected third party. This realization of
his uncle’s value has the quality of a revelation for the Proustian hero. His attitude, as
it is here transcribed by the mature narrator, is meant to seem comically precocious,
but beneath the humour is the avowal of something which will become entrenched.
His basic understanding of desire and seduction will remain largely unchanged
throughout the novel as he seeks to harness the powers of access and influence
attributed to various intermediaries.

Where the subject’s own possibilities for positive action are restricted, and
for the young narrator this is invariably the case, the third party who mitigates the
pain of this situation is celebrated as achieving something in the order of the occult.
This is highlighted to powerful effect in suggestions that a cooperative mediator will
allow for the subject to be present in the beloved’s forbidden sphere. Earlier still in
Combray the narrator’s mother, engaged in conversation with the family guest
Swann, fails to pay her son the usual attention of bestowing on him his nightly kiss. The young hero endeavours to employ Françoise as a go-between to deliver a letter to her at the dinner table, imagining that through the use of a third party he will in some way be present to his mother and succeed in forcing himself upon her consciousness. When Françoise finally agrees to pass the letter on his anguish is at once dispelled:

Aussitôt mon anxiété tomba; maintenant ce n’était plus comme tout à l’heure pour jusqu’à demain que j’avais quitté ma mère, puisque mon petit mot allait [...] me faire du moins entrer invisible et ravi dans la même pièce qu’elle, allait lui parler de moi à l’oreille [...] allait faire jaillir, projeter jusqu’à mon cœur enviré l’attention de maman. (I, 29-30)

Successful ‘colonization’ of the loved one’s attention depends on arrogating the freedom that others exercise in relation to her and which social and familial custom deny the child. And if the subject can profit vicariously from the freedom of others, then why not too from their prestige? The special reverence the young hero develops for those who are acquainted with the object of desire, or who have some degree of influence over her, is magnified during his juvenile infatuation with Gilberte Swann and her family. When the hero discovers that an associate of his father’s, M. de Norpois, is on friendly terms with the Swanns, often dining at their table, he makes the following exuberant confession:

[J’] aurais jeté dans les fenêtres des Swann une pierre si j’avais pu écrire sur elle que je connaissais M. de Norpois; j’étais persuadé qu’un tel message même transmis d’une façon aussi brutale, m’eût donné beaucoup plus de prestige aux yeux de la maîtresse de la maison qu’il ne l’eût indisposée contre moi. (I, 471)

Personal comportment is here deemed to be of considerably less weight in the battle for reciprocation than is a connection with a prestigious third party. When Norpois does agree to mention the narrator’s name to Mme Swann, it sends him into such an effusive expression of gratitude that he fears the diplomat might question his motives and reconsider. It is the delicious and forbidden insinuation of the self into the
sanctified enclosure of the Swanns' private family life that the narrator aspires to in
this mere mention of his name by Norpois:

Ce qui me permettrait, comme une divinité de l'Olympe qui a pris la fluidité d'un
souffle ou plutôt l'aspect du vieillard dont Minerve emprunte les traits, de pénétrer
moi-même, invisible, dans le salon de Mme Swann, d'attirer son attention, d'occuper
sa pensée, d'exciter sa reconnaissance pour mon admiration, de lui apparaître comme
l'ami d'un homme important, de lui sembler à l'avenir digne d'être invité par elle et
d'entrer dans l'intimité de sa famille. (I, 468)

The dry and imposing diplomat is here re-imagined as an unlikely fairy godmother.
Norpois will speak the narrator's presence, will project him into the room, will
suggest and, through this mere verbalization, seem to advocate future acquaintance;
or at least this is how the story unfolds in the narrator's wishful imaginings. The
imagery in both the episode of the note sent via Françoise and the dream of
transmutation through Norpois suggests that it is the compliant go-between who
allows for a symbolic transformation in the subject, a transformation which will
make him acceptable where his own real presence is unwanted or impossible, one
which will permit him inconspicuous and non-intrusive entry through the back door
of the beloved's consciousness. In other words, and rather peculiarly, it is through
the involvement of an outsider that the hero believes he will achieve the heightened
feats of intimacy of which he dreams.

At this point, the overriding aim of the young narrator is to make his presence
felt at any cost. The recurring preoccupation with invisibility, personal fluidity and
secret penetration should thus here be understood as a desire for the victory of
presence over absence, an imaginative answer to the enforced 'elsewhere' of the self.
The evaluation of the desirability of presence over absence will later undergo an
interesting realignment but for the moment it is enough to stress that the employment
of third parties is viewed as the best recourse in restrictive circumstances rather than
an unhindered choice.
To return to the above quotations, by stressing the idea of a transmutable self Proust links the attractiveness of mediating figures to the mythic imagination of his narrator. The appeal of the Metamorphoses as a tale of transformations must have been compelling for Proust. Transformation, whether fantastical, physical, social or sexual is, after all, a key motif in the Recherche and one which enfolds the narrative. The first page of the novel finds the narrator in a sleep-suspended universe in which he is successively the agent of his dreams and their content. At the opposite end of the work is the powerful, pageant-like evocation of the transformations wrought by time on once-familiar faces. Sexual disclosures too have a knack of transforming the characters in question, turning them inside out, revealing the woman within the man and vice-versa. And, of course, the social world is peopled with characters who show a chameleon-like adaptability in the face of change. The above reference to classical mythology, then, with its abundance of strange couplings between divinities and mortals in which disguise and transformation form the basis of successful seduction, not only brings to the passage an eroticism which the hero’s young age at this point might otherwise have precluded, but, more than this, it betrays a fantasy which will prove to be recurring, a fantasy of the self processed through otherness, repackaged in and as otherness, and willed out into the world.

This dream of transformation and borrowed otherness will persist even after the poetic embellishments of youth have fallen off. And it does not take long. As the

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44 Je n’avais pas cessé en dormant de faire des réflexions sur ce que je venais de lire […] il me semblait que j’étais moi-même ce dont parlait l’ouvrage: une église, un quatuor, la rivalité de François Ier et de Charles Quint’ (I, 3).
use of intermediaries becomes customary practice, deference gives way to exploitation. Relationships with prospective go-betweens come to be described in ever more Machiavellian terms and it is no longer the third parties’ magical influence, their fairy-like goodness, which is alluded to but rather their ‘serviceability’.

**Saint-Loup**

The narrator’s use of Saint-Loup as third party in his affairs is perhaps the most strikingly cynical of the novel. This friendship is subject to constant re-evaluation in the light of the narrator’s amorous desires, increasing in worth in proportion to Saint-Loup’s esteemed power of influence. When his fascination with the duchesse de Guermantes turns into a full-blown obsession, the narrator re-appraises his friendship with her aristocratic nephew: ‘L’amitié, l’admiration que Saint-Loup avait pour moi, me semblaient imméritées et m’étaient restées indifférentes. Tout d’un coup j’y attachai du prix, j’aurais voulu qu’il les révélât à Mme de Guermantes, j’aurais été capable de lui demander de le faire’ (II, 369). Similar references to ‘cette chose importante que je ne comprenais toujours pas mais qui m’importait maintenant, notre amitié’ (II, 370) are solely attributable to Saint-Loup’s link of kinship with the object of desire. Here, the obstacles to the beloved, though no longer primarily parental, are still seen as external and are located in social convention. Overtures to Mme de Guermantes cannot be made on a spontaneous whim. Indeed the narrator cannot speak to her without the preliminary of an introduction, a custom all the more infringible due to the differences in social class that exist between them. To this extent, Saint-Loup is a tool for circumventing social protocol.
The cynical twist is doubly emphasized as the narrator, accustomed to labouring his shyness and his reluctance to sing his own praises to others, proves himself capable of some quite excruciating feats of immodesty. During a visit to Saint-Loup at Doncières, for example, the narrator asks Saint-Loup to speak highly of him to the Duchess:

‘Vous savez que je ne tiens pas du tout en général à ce que vous publiez les bons sentiments que vous avez pour moi, car je n’ai pas d’amour propre […] Mais pour Mme de Guermantes, si vous pouviez lui faire savoir, même avec un peu d’exagération, ce que vous pensez de moi, vous me feriez un grand plaisir.’ (II, 399-400)

When the narrator asks Saint-Loup for Oriane’s photograph and encounters reticence and suspicion, his categorization of the nature of their relationship is made explicit: ‘Je compris qu’il avait une arrière-pensée, qu’il m’en prêtait une, qu’il ne servirait mon amour qu’à moitié, sous la réserve de certains principes de moralité, et je le détestai’ (II, 402). Saint-Loup has potential value only as a ‘serviteur’ of the hero’s love, without this role his value is negligible, and in contravening the hero’s wishes he is worse than insignificant, he is an enemy. Ironically, much later in the novel, after the narrator’s infatuation with Mme de Guermantes has subsided, he will come to think of this once-desired woman in terms of her own utility in the context of his relationship with Albertine. Traversing the courtyard in order to ask Mme de Guermantes’s advice on some articles of fashion he means to purchase for the jeune fille, the narrator states: ‘Il était extraordinaire que, chez cette mystérieuse Mme de Guermantes de mon enfance, j’allasse uniquement afin d’user d’elle pour une simple commodité pratique, comme on fait du téléphone’ (III, 541).
The Artist as Mediator

Artists are no more immune to being implicated in the exteriorizing impulse of the subject’s desires than are his ‘friends’. Of course art and the construction of desires are very much interlinked in *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Works of art lend an aesthetic frame within which the lover can more easily possess the beloved, or at least simulate possession. Swann, for instance, adds aesthetic clout to his desire for a woman he does not find attractive by assimilating her with the image of Botticelli’s sad-eyed Zephora, just as he adds pathos and artistic appeal to their relationship by making Vinteuil’s *petite phrase* the anthem of their love. Mediation of desire through such art objects is rife. This practice serves to raise the object of desire in esteem by his or her connection with art and all the ‘higher’ and transcendent value that art is so often denoted as possessing in *À la recherche*.

The *Recherche* itself has, over the years, served its own role as desired attributor of cultural worth, with pop-cultural illusions to its idiosyncrasies and length being particularly profuse. The marketing of the humble madeleine as both symbol of, and muse for, Proust’s literary endeavour, the promotion of Illiers-Combray, even the Monty Python ‘Summarize Proust Competition’ and the self-help format of Alain de Botton’s *How Proust Can Change Your Life*[^45] all contribute to what Margaret Gray has termed the ‘kitschification’ of Proust’s work[^46]. Alluding to this popular, commoditizing treatment of Proust and his work, Malcolm Bowie, in the chapter devoted to art of his *Proust Among the Stars*, states that ‘For some of Proust’s admirers such an idea will seem impious. They will see in *À la recherche du temps perdu* a triumph of the aesthetic over the merely useful, and wish to protect

Proust's good name from the taint of commerce or cookery. There is something about the transforming energy of Proust's style, they will perhaps claim, that belongs unashamedly to high art'. But, he tempers, 'Proust's narrator sees things very differently'. And without a doubt, Proust's narrator is often more irreverent about art and artists than many of Proust's admirers would allow themselves to be. For within À la recherche the transcendent and redemptive view of art is forever vying for space with that vein of the novel which tinkers in the commercial, commoditizing and practical aspects of art's reception. In this light, then, it is perhaps less surprising that the use of the artist in the dynamics of desire strikes a very different chord from that of the elevating use of the artwork in the same realm. If anything, the artist as mediator is relegated to a universal plane where he stands shoulder to shoulder with all other people with whom he shares the human ability to speak and gesture, to open his mouth to make an introduction or proffer an invitation. This 'sameness' of the artist in his mediating potentiality stands in contrast to the terms in which we, as readers, are frequently encouraged to think of the artists of the novel; namely those of 'uniqueness' and 'individuality'. The raising up of the artist as a provider of glimpses into otherwise unfathomable universes through his individual style is but half of the story. The other half trucks, precisely, in the 'merely useful'.

The clearest confirmation of the opportunistic use to which even the artists of the novel are put for the cause of desire comes in the form of Elstir. The narrator, having met Elstir at Balbec and been invited to his studio, has, we are told, continually put this visit off for fear of missing seeing the group of jeunes filles along the beach. When he eventually, and with much reluctance, pays the long overdue visit, Albertine passes by on her bicycle and greets Elstir with a friendly smile: 'un

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47 Malcolm Bowie, Proust Among the Stars, p. 68.
salut souriant d’amie, arc-en-ciel qui unit pour moi notre monde teraqué à des
régions que j’avais jugées jusque-là inaccessibles’ (II, 199). In a comic twist, the
same kind of poetry which is habitually reserved for the transcendent effect of art is
here applied to the artist’s networking ability. The artist, in this instance, is seen not
as the key-holder to a glorious world of his own making but as a mere porter with
accidental access to a world of amorous pleasure. A different value system is at work
in which talent, in and of itself, counts for little:

Elstir tout en peignant me parlait de botanique, mais je ne l’écoutais guère, il ne
suffisait plus à lui-même, il n’était plus que l’intermédiaire nécessaire entre ces
jeunes filles et moi; le prestige que quelques instants encore auparavant lui donnait
pour moi son talent, ne valait plus qu’en tant qu’il m’en conférait un peu à moi-
même aux yeux de la petite bande à qui je serais présenté par lui. (II, 203)

At the very most the artist is prized for the prestige that he, as a talented individual,
might confer on those with whom he is seen to associate. The artist, then, is dragged
back into the mundane and social world via the lens of the hero’s desire. Proustian
desire seems to operate this effect all around it, elevating those we are encouraged to
suspect as having little right of elevation, deposing others who have some claim to
distinction. All hierarchical landscapes, in fact, prove susceptible to disruption
through desire.

Swann

This enterprising spirit with which relations are put at the service of desire is not the
monopoly of the narrator. From the outset we find in Swann’s love story a use of
intermediaries which is socially panoramic and daringly unscrupulous. Having at his
disposal all kinds of influential friends, he is in a strong position to manipulate the
highest ties in French society:

Que de fois son crédit auprès d’une duchesse, fait du désir accumulé depuis des
années que celle-ci avait eu de lui être agréable sans en avoir trouvé l’occasion, il
s’en était défait d’un seul coup en réclamant d’elle par une indiscrète dépêche une 
recommandation télégraphique qui le mit en relation, sur l’heure, avec un de ses 
intendants dont il avait remarqué la fille à la campagne, comme ferait un affamé qui 
troquerait un diamant contre un morceau de pain. (I, 190)

Here, relations garnered from a lifetime of hard-won social success are seen as just 
so much bankable influence or ‘crédit’, to be squandered at will. Many similar local 
instances which chart the Machiavellian use of friends in the pursuit of sexual aims 
perform the combined task of undermining the value of human relations in general 
and emphasizing the foolhardiness of those who pour effort into love affairs in 
particular. But to take the use of third parties as just another proof of the 
superficiality of friendship and the misguided nature of love would be to give in too 
easily to the strain of Proust’s novel that pedals its own unifying telos, and to 
overlook a whole deeper current at play.\footnote{Alison Finch points out that Proust’s statements on love and friendship ‘provoke us to extract them from 
their fictional contexts and to erect them into a system. This system appears internally coherent 
and, more important, supports the widest and most dramatic structure of the novel: that which makes it a progress through painful illusions to some sort of “Open Sesame”’. She outlines that, as a 
consequence, some such end-focused criticism has resulted in interpretative blind-spots: ‘The problem 
of Proust criticism of the first four or five decades [...] was not so much its ‘explanations’ of Proust’s 
‘system’ of love, sexuality and friendship as the large areas it overlooked or played down in its urge to 
stress the ‘goal-directedness’ of A la recherche’: ‘Love, sexuality and friendship’ in The Cambridge 
Companion to Proust, pp. 168-182 (pp.168-169).}
Proust, as is his wont, is furnishing the 
idea, familiar throughout the novel, of the bassesses to which love and desire reduce 
the characters, but he is also taking some pleasure here in Swann’s scandalous 
disregard for social position and drawing playful analogies between ‘inner’ and 
‘outer’ topographies. Desire is forging new and different human maps. It is as if the 
upheaval caused by desire in psychological space produces, in its own limited way, a 
parallel confusion in the social order, allowing the accepted social hierarchy to be 
momentarily destabilized as the value of individuals is determined instead within the 
narrower spectrum of the subject’s desires. As Edward Hughes has stated, although 
‘Swann is clearly a sexual predator rather than a social revolutionary [...] the model 
of migration across class boundaries that he provides anticipates the impermanence
of a social caste system and exemplifies the power of desire to alter the social landscape.\textsuperscript{49} The above passage is, then, as much a reflection on the interface between the subjective and the social as it is a commentary on the value of friendship.

Furthermore, amid even the most trenchant cynicism is to be found an underlying but profoundly significant idea, one that professes the incorporation of others as a dependency as well as an opportunistic choice:

Swann has made the use of friends and acquaintances in his love affairs \textit{a matter of form}. The involvement of other people is placed firmly at the centre of the desiring impulse as a rare constant in a lifetime of fickle amorous affections. Emphasis is here placed on the permanence of this behaviour as a backdrop behind so much else which is impermanent: time, changing amorous preferences, indeed the very inconstancy of the self, all of which seem glued and made coherent because of this one impulse to socialize one's desire, to reach the object through others, to fix her, indeed, in the web of one's relations.

Equally interesting is the type of behaviour which the passage outlines as serving to reveal this 'permanence'. In a move that entails a curious reversal of notions we have come to accept, post-Freud, regarding the interpretation of behaviour, this excerpt points towards Swann's 'habileté diplomatique' rather than his 'maladroitesse' as a revelatory symptom of his underlying motives. No trained

\textsuperscript{49} Edward J. Hughes, 'Proust and social spaces' in \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Proust}, pp. 151-167 (p.156).
tapping of the unconscious is necessary in order to discover the recurring patterns of Swann’s desires; these are made explicit in his social behaviour, in his dealings with other people. It would seem, then, that desire entails its own, specifically social, expression. To divorce Proustian desire from the background of interpersonal negotiations against which it is played out inevitably produces a distorted picture.

The transparency of thought that occasions knowing remarks on the part of Swann’s friends and acquaintances might seem to confute what many accept as a staple of Proustian philosophy—the unknowability of other people. But this supposed ‘unknowability’ is worth examining, for it is in fact an area of many discrepancies in the novel. Repeated assertions of the impossibility of truly knowing another person sit in uneasy company with the fact that the narrator seems to ‘know’ other people, or at least human nature, very well. Jean-François Revel makes an excellent point when he argues, quite against the grain, that it is not that others are fundamentally incomprehensible in the Proustian world, ‘Ce n’est pas leur caractère, ce ne sont pas leurs sentiments, leurs motifs, leurs passions, leurs pensées qui sont inconnaissables, c’est leur emploi du temps. Personne ne croit moins que Proust au mystère du dedans’. Indeed, it is the very fact of an acute knowledge of human nature combined with ignorance of the specifics that forms the sensitive and painful core of jealous love:

C’est du reste une des choses les plus terribles pour l’amoureux que, si les faits particuliers—que seuls l’expérience, l’espionnage, entre tant de réalisations possibles, feraient connaître—sont si difficile à trouver, la vérité en revanche, est si facile à percer ou seulement à pressentir. (III, 596)

Revel’s point finds further affirmation in a multitude of comments in the Recherche, and seems to be particularly laboured in the Albertine cycle. It is in the last few volumes of the novel especially that intensifying focus comes to be applied to this

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apparently unworthy, at least unlofty, curiosity about the actions of people when we cannot see what they are getting up to. In one such instance the narrator qualifies his continued attachment to Albertine thus; ‘Sans me sentir le moins du monde amoureux d’Albertine, sans me faire figurer au nombre des plaisirs les moments que nous passions ensemble, j’étais resté préoccupé de l’emploi de son temps’ (III, 531, my emphasis). The very humanity of the beloved is lost sight of in the lover’s treatment of her as a moving mass of events and facts in historical time. Thus we are told at a certain point that: ‘Albertine […] était entrée pour moi dans cette période lamentable où un être, disséminé dans l’espace et dans le temps, n’est plus pour nous une femme, mais une suite d’événements sur lesquels nous ne pouvons faire la lumière’ (III, 612). In this way, desire becomes the obsessive search for the elucidation of units of time: hours, days and years. When the narrator discovers that Albertine was left to roam freely in Versailles, he comments tellingly: ‘elle aurait passé sept heures sur lesquelles je ne saurais jamais rien’ (III, 639). The subject therefore desires like an historian rather than a lover. Indeed the analogy could hardly be made more explicit than in Swann’s passion for Odette, qualified as ‘celle qu’il avait eue autrefois pour l’Histoire’ (I, 269-70).

The Recherche, then, has a habit of reversing the most commonly held notions of the order of things. When it comes to the question of knowledge, it is the fact-based world of social, spatial and temporal reality which eludes the lover and not what we might rather vaguely call the ‘higher’ truths: ‘le monde des astres est moins difficile à connaître que les actions réelles des êtres, surtout des êtres que nous aimons’ (III, 696, my emphasis). The distinction is an important one for this investigation because the type of knowledge sought by the lover lies very much at the heart of the role that others are called upon to play. The lover cannot transport
himself to the scene of the ‘real action’ which excites his curiosity. His research, again like that of the historian, must instead be conducted through intermediary routes, indeed, it is dependent on them.

**Delegating the Work of Desire: Chaperones**

It would be misleading to deny that in the *Recherche* a great part of the action of desire is played out in interiority. But, there is a common misconception, I think, involving the supposed ‘complacency’ of the Proustian subject’s interiority, one that propagates an image of the subject narrating longingly and lovingly on the internal workings of his own mind. Contrary to this image, the intense interiority of Proust’s narrator is by no means complacent. In fact, the involvement of others in the dynamics of desire begins, like so much else in this novel, with a profound unease about the self.

In order to understand how the subject comes to involve others not merely in gaining access to the object of his desires but in the very management of his love affairs, it is first necessary to highlight a turning point in the progression of the love relationships. In the opening sections of the novel, during the narrator’s childhood and early adolescence, the restrictions which keep him from being present with the object of his affections are still viewed as being ‘in the world’, imposed by exterior forces, by familial or social law. We see this in the narrator’s youthful infatuations with Mme de Guermantes and Mme Swann. All of his fantasies about the beloved revolve around the idea of a bringing to bear of his presence in her social sphere, in her home, amongst her acquaintances, within the intimacy of her private life. Now, interestingly, when it is a case no longer of longing from a distance but of the more fully-fledged relationships (those of the narrator with Albertine and Swann with
Odette), there is a mounting awareness that the restrictions the lover wishes to overcome are all in himself; in the very fact of loving. From this point onwards, the barrier to the beloved is no longer expressed as the failure to get an introduction or an invitation to dinner, and is instead presented in terms of the lover’s too conspicuous desire, his too palpable thirst for knowledge, as the following confession serves to illustrate:

Je me souvenais, j’avais connu une première Albertine, puis brusquement elle avait été changée en une autre, l’actuelle. Et le changement, je n’en pouvais rendre responsable que moi-même. Tout ce qu’elle m’eût avoué facilement, puis volontiers, quand nous étions de bons camarades, avait cessé de s’épandre dès qu’elle avait cru que je l’aimais, ou, sans peut-être se dire le nom de l’Amour, avait deviné un sentiment inquisitorial qui veut savoir, souffre pourtant de savoir, et cherche à apprendre davantage. Depuis ce jour-là elle m’avait tout caché. (III, 565-66)

More than any other force, it is desire which initiates a crisis of self. The subject’s attempt to stabilize the imbalance created by desire focuses on two crucial points of interest which would appear to be mutually exclusive. In the first place is the lover’s concern with the image of self he wishes to project onto the world (that of a non-desiring, self-assured being). In the second place are his personal desires (seeking actively to collect and collate all possible information about the beloved, through any means available), the fulfilment of which would invariably give the lie to the self-constructed image he would like to transmit. Above all else the Proustian lover wants to know. And it is, Proust repeatedly tells us, this very desire to know, as conspicuously apparent in the lover as if he had been physically tarred and feathered, that prevents his coming to knowledge. What constitutes the tragic, or often the tragi-comic, element of this quest is that only the one who desires is deprived of this knowledge whilst others who are indifferent accede to it without difficulty, expenditure of labour, or any particularly lively interest. At the Verdurin soirée of La Prisonnière, some time after the death of Swann, the hero listens with some sadness to the baron de Charlus as the latter enumerates, in a tone resonating with the matter-
of-fact, a list of all Odette’s lovers whom Swann never suspected. Everything in
Charlus’s mode of delivery leads us to believe that the list is common knowledge. In
a pithy summary of the lover’s predicament we are told that ‘c’est pour les étrangers
que la chronique des adulères prend la précision de l’histoire, et s’allonge en listes’
(III, 804).

The questions of presence and absence which have been alluded to
throughout continue here to dominate, but a balance has been tipped. At a certain
point, the wish to be in the presence of the object of desire—at the same dinner table,
the same gathering, or part of the same circle of social acquaintances—becomes an
altogether more nuanced, more conflicted wish. The fascination which earlier pooled
around a dreamed-of presence gravitates increasingly towards the idea of a quasi-
absence. That is to say that there is now a heightened awareness of, and attraction to,
those elements of space and time from which the subject is excluded due to the very
specificity of being a desiring individual in the world. This difficulty is further
illustrated in Du côté de chez Swann when the narrator tellingly refers to ‘cette chose
effrayante et délicieuse à laquelle il [Swann] pensait sans cesse sans pouvoir bien se
la représenter, une heure de la vraie vie d’Odette, de la vie d’Odette quand il n’était
pas là’ (I, 294, my emphasis). With the sensitivity of an anthropologist who must
account for his own distorting presence in any observation, the Proustian lover is
painfully aware of the self-defeating nature of his attempts to gain first-hand
knowledge of the beloved. One cannot be in two places at once, both present and
absent. And the ‘vraie vie’ of the beloved, the only part of her life which exerts any
power over the lover, is precisely that part of it that is hidden from him, the part that
unfolds in his absence.
This existential conundrum is dramatized, and to some extent alleviated, by the narrator’s delegation of the work of desire, by his use of chaperones and spies. So pervasive is their use, indeed, that it is this kind of vicarious act which forms a sizeable part of the plot of the novel in its entirety. In fact, it is a widely applicable truth about those who love in À la recherche du temps perdu that they do not so much ‘act’ on their desires as deploy others to do so. Both the narrator and Swann have chaperones of preference, hand-picked for optimal complicity, who will provide an unstinted account of the beloved’s most mundane activities. Swann favours the use of Charlus to supervise Odette because of the zero risk he represents as a homosexual and the moral laxity he displays in not being averse to a certain looseness of the tongue:

Il était heureux toutes les fois où M. de Charlus était avec Odette. Entre M. de Charlus et elle, Swann savait qu’il ne pouvait rien se passer, que quand M. de Charlus sortait avec elle c’était par amitié pour lui et qu’il ne ferait pas difficulté à lui raconter ce qu’elle avait fait. (I, 310)

The importance of a narrated account of the beloved’s activities has been outlined in the previous chapter and it is interesting to note that the satiety that such accounts afford the subject greatly surpasses any feeling of fulfilment which can be achieved through being with the object of desire. In fact, dealing with the beloved at one remove imparts no short list of advantages. As far as the lover is concerned, the intermediary figure hides the shameful ‘énergie’ of desire, the embarrassing and detectable ‘sentiment inquisitorial’ which dooms him to ignorance. To act without seeming to, to indulge the need to be involved while preserving a façade of complete indifference is the all-consuming passion of the subject, vying even with the need to know the specifics of the beloved’s occupations. We see this mechanism at work when, after Albertine’s unannounced departure, the narrator sends Saint-Loup on a mission to bring about her return:
Je pourrais être d’autant plus énergique dans les moyens de la faire revenir que personnellement j’aurais l’air d’avoir renoncé à elle [...] Je me proposais d’écrire à Albertine une lettre d’adieux où je considérererais son départ comme définitif, tandis que j’enverrais Saint-Loup exercer sur Mme Bontemps, et comme à mon insu, la pression la plus brutale pour qu’Albertine revienne au plus vite. (IV, 19)

At best, the obliging third party offers the subject not only an extension of agency in space (going where the lover cannot) but also the alluring possibility of duality of selves in time (the simultaneous presentation of one face to the beloved while carrying out his true wishes through the agency of another).\(^{51}\)

Initially at least, the ‘cover’ that the third party provides allows the lover to exercise his passion for action in the world. So it is that, despite the increased dependency upon the agency of other people, desire remains a hard-working force, one of remarkable organizational and planning skills, one that thinks ahead, prepares for all eventualities, fills all gaps, and is alive to all possible points of entry. Take Swann’s quick-fire catalogue of instructions to Charlus on how to manage the elusive Odette on his behalf. In its register and pace the list sounds comically like that an executive might dictate to his personal assistant, the convenient extension of himself and executor of his wishes:

‘Tâchez de la distraire et aussi de lui parler raison. Si vous pouviez arranger quelque chose pour demain qui lui plaise et que nous pourrions faire tous les trois ensemble ... Tâchez aussi de poser des jalons pour cet été, si elle avait envie de quelque chose, d’une croisière que nous ferions tous les trois, que sais-je? Quant à ce soir, je ne compte pas la voir, maintenant si elle le désirait ou si vous trouviez un joint, vous n’avez qu’à m’envoyer un mot chez Mme de Saint-Euverte.’ (I, 317)

The intermediary figure of the chaperone here acts as a sounding board, absorbing the energy of desire in all its shameful overabundance, transforming it into something more civil, and, the lover hopes, more acceptable to the beloved. The

\(^{51}\) L. A. Bisson writes of Proust: ‘His friends were not only called upon to perform the errands and services which bulk so large in his public correspondence; they became an essential extension of his personality, his experience and his observation’: ‘Marcel Proust: Friends and Friendship’, in *Essays presented to C. M. Girdlestone*, ed. E. T. Dubois (Newcastle upon Tyne: University of Durham, 1960), p. 29.
secretarial role imposed on Charlus is highlighted in the strong imperative thrust of the excerpt; what is a grammatical imperative, after all, if not the insistence that one person’s desire be translated into another’s action? Influence is the intention behind the speech here, and the question of influence also dominates the speech’s content. It is noteworthy also that ‘tous les trois’ appears twice in the extract. Time and again the configuration of three is shown up in the love relationships not to denote superfluity but rather as the precondition for any kind of relation at all.

The narrator’s use of Andrée as a chaperone for Albertine rounds in on a similar possibility of achieving a gratifying ‘extraction’ from (and an application of pressure upon) the beloved. The narrator singles out ‘ce prestige d’Andrée d’être une des filles de la petite bande [qui] me donnait confiance qu’elle obtiendrait tout ce que je voudrais d’Albertine’ (III, 529). It is certainly true that the narrative ability attributed to the chaperone has a lot to do with his or her power of infiltration; they are ‘insiders’ as opposed to the subject’s ‘outsiderness’. But their general appeal also arises from a belief in their ability precisely to transgress such boundaries. As the chaperone fulfils the rightful role of the lover in all but name, escorting, entertaining and spending leisure time with the beloved, a particular sort of play ensues in which notions of self and other become increasingly fluid. The narrator’s enquiry into the motives behind his choice of Andrée as chaperone uncovers comically telling parallelisms. He states initially: ‘mon choix d’Andrée […] comme guide de mon amie avait tenu à ce qu’Albertine me raconta de l’affection que son amie avait eu pour moi à Balbec’ (III, 529). The statement is immediately followed up by a transcription of Albertine’s words, which render the narrator’s qualification of what ‘affection’ entails as singular to say the least:

‘Vous n’avez pas remarqué qu’elle s’était mise à prendre vos manières de parler, de raisonner? Surtout quand elle venait de vous quitter, c’était frappant. Elle n’avait pas
besoin de nous dire si elle vous avait vu. Quand elle arrivait, si elle venait d’après
de vous, cela se voyait à la première seconde. Nous nous regardions entre nous et
nous rions. Elle était comme un charbonnier qui voudrait faire croire qu’il n’est pas
charbonnier, il est tout noir. Un meunier n’a pas besoin de dire qu’il est meunier, on
voit bien toute la farine qu’il a sur lui, il y a encore la place des sacs qu’il a portés.
Andrée, c’était la même chose, elle tournait ses sourcils comme vous, et puis son
grand cou, enfin je ne peux pas vous dire.’ (III, 530)

The concepts of influence and self-extension are here given ostensible expression in
Andrée’s speech and mannerisms. Interestingly, the colloquial metaphors with which
Albertine choses to communicate the way Andrée has been affected by influence are
lifted from scenes of labour. Millers, coalmen; this is work which marks. A fact that
proves subsequently enlightening. When the narrator later summons Andrée in an
attempt to glean information after Albertine’s death, it is a physical resemblance
which strikes him:

À ce moment je m’aperçus dans la glace; je fus frappé d’une certaine ressemblance
entre moi et Andrée. Si je n’avais pas cessé depuis longtemps de raser ma moustache
et si je n’avais eu qu’une ombre, cette ressemblance eût été presque complète. (IV,
129)

Andrée not only transgresses gender boundaries after the manner of Odette
‘travestie’ in Elstir’s portrait ‘Miss Sacripant’52 but is revealed to be both other and
self, an uncanny reflection of the narrator, made morphologically similar by dint of
shared or imputed desiring tasks. It transpires then that the compliant chaperone not
only acts in the interests of the subject but is a strange extension of the empire of the
self, helping the subject to fulfil his wish for both distance and intimate knowledge.

A similar nod to the contagious property of desire is manifest in the case of
Charlus who equally manages the affairs of the heart through a dedicated team of
personnel. Indeed, his desire to know what Morel is up to at all times of the day and

52 ‘Le long des lignes du visage, le sexe avait l’air d’être sur le point d’avouer qu’il était celui d’une
fille un peu garçonnère, s’évanouissait, et plus loin se retrouvait, suggérant plutôt l’idée d’un jeune
efféminé vicieux et songeur, puis fuyait encore, restait insaisissable’ (II, 205).
night mobilizes an even greater force of enterprising energy, and often also of confusion, in those who live closest to him:

La surveillance qu'il [Charlus] chargeait un vieux domestique de faire exercer par une agence sur Morel était si peu discrète, que les valets de pied se croyaient fils et qu'une femme de chambre ne vivait plus, n'osait plus sortir dans la rue, croyant toujours avoir un policier à ses trousses. Et le vieux serviteur: "Elle peut bien faire ce qu'elle veut! On irait perdre son temps et son argent à la pister! Comme si sa conduite nous intéressait en quelque chose!" s'écriait-il ironiquement, car il était si passionnément attaché à son maître que, bien que ne partageant nullement les goûts du baron, il finissait, tant il mettait de chaleureuse ardeur à les servir, par en parler comme s'ils avaient été siens. (Ill, 722, my emphasis)

Desires, far from inhabiting an airtight slot of pure and impenetrable individuality, circulate in the social world and have knock-on effects. They may be cradled in the imagination but they are also liable to be transferred into energy outside of the self, to collect others in their wake. The concept of contagion which was at the heart of the preceding analysis of the rival resurfaces here, this time in the inverse direction, in the lover's power to influence outsiders. Crucial to the understanding of 'contagion' are the concomitant notions of self, of non-self and of the blurred boundaries between the two. Readings of the Recherche force us to concede that alongside Proust's picture of monadic and incommunicable desire (we need only think of the narrator's inability to comprehend Saint-Loup's desire for Rachel and Saint-Loup's equally astounded incomprehension of the narrator's passion for Albertine), room must be made to accommodate the paradoxical notion that desire is also frequently communicable on a subconscious level that forgoes all notions of leaning, sexual preference and subjective ideas of beauty.

The Freudian idea of an economy of desire, of desire's power of transformation and redirection proceeding from a quantitative given, also springs to mind in relation to the above passage. And yet it is lacking. For, to fully appreciate Proust's nuanced portrait of desire, we would need to enlarge the theory, allowing such an economy to work beyond the scope of the individual. There is certainly
evidence of such an economy at work within the Recherche, not simply in the way that individual desires impinge on others, but in the way also that the individual’s desire seems to diminish through such socialization. This marks the next stage in the ‘externalization’ of desire. For, if there is a point at which the involvement of others begins to sound like the extension of the realm of selfhood, there is equally a point, not far thence, at which the self becomes emptied through such externalization.

Externalization of Desire Leading to Alienation

It is the character of Albertine who is shepherded, chaperoned and spied upon more than any other character in the novel. By the time we reach La Prisonnière, the use of others has become such an intrinsic part of the narrator’s relationship with Albertine that their participation alone is enough to satisfy him. The third party has in fact graduated from being a forced necessity to being the preferred means of relation to the beloved:

Ètre avec elle m’importait peu, pour peu que je pusse empêcher “l’être de fuite” d’aller ici ou là. Pour l’en empêcher je m’en étais remis aux yeux, à la compagnie de ceux qui allaient avec elle et, pour peu qu’ils me fussent le soir un bon petit rapport bien rassurant, mes inquiétudes s’évanouissaient en bonne humeur. (IV, 18)

There is little room here for misinterpretation concerning the meagre appeal of affective communion with the ‘loved one’ and the value now placed on being present with her. Compliant supervisors seem not only to fulfil certain needs which cannot be met by the beloved, but furthermore to furnish the relationship to such an extent that it is made wholly sufficient, complete and satisfying for the hero despite the near elimination of Albertine from the equation.

What this avowal also highlights, is that there is a point beyond industriousness which sounds suspiciously like its opposite: ‘Bon petit rapport’, ‘bien
rassurant’, ‘bonne humeur’, there is something deficient in this vocabulary, a lack of vigour which translates the stultifying effect of the delegation of the work of desire. Vicarious experience has taken on a decidedly complacent feel, much in contrast to the energetic busyness which before proliferated behind its useful screen. In fact, this moment of rare and unprecedented relaxation perhaps comes the closest to satiety in the narrator’s relationship with Albertine. It feels, nevertheless, mockingly false. For a moment it is as if the narrative, which has habitually been kept in motion by neurotic suspicion and ever-receding goals, might grind to a halt, as if the narrator has been drugged by anodyne narrative.

As tiredness sets in, the third party becomes not merely a ‘concealer’ of the energy of desire but a ‘conserver’ of the lover’s diminishing resources. Thus Swann’s mounting lethargy causes him to think with gratitude and relief of those he endeavours to have carry the baton of his desire:

Tandis qu'il écrivait à un de ses amis pour lui demander de chercher à éclairer tel ou tel point, il éprouvait le repos de cesser de se poser ses questions sans réponses et de transférer à un autre la fatigue d’interroger. (I, 310)

Roland Barthes’s summation of this phenomenon from the point of view of the lover is laid out in characteristically thought-provoking terms:

Les situations, qui, par chance, ne m’imposent aucune responsabilité de conduite, si douloureuses soient-elles, sont reçues dans une sorte de paix; je souffre, mais du moins n’ai-je rien à décider; la machine amoureuse (imaginaire) marche ici toute seule, sans moi; comme un ouvrier de l’âge électronique, ou comme le cancre du fond de la classe, je n’ai qu’à être là: le karma (la machine, la classe) bruit devant moi, mais sans moi. Dans le malheur lui-même, je puis, un temps très bref, m’arranger un petit coin de paresse. 53

The affiliation of Barthes’s ‘ouvrier de l’âge électronique’ with Proust’s increasingly sedentary and parasitic hero should be obvious and his ‘petit coin de paresse’ sounds very like the passive comfort of the Proustian narrator extolling the virtues of his ‘bon petit rapport bien rassurant’. What we arrive at, especially in key moments of

53 Roland Barthes, Fragments d’un discours amoureux, p. 77.
the Albertine cycle, is the implication that desires can become so much a part of the external domain that the lover becomes alienated from his own desire. In his essay ‘Proust and the Art of Incompletion’, Leo Bersani points out that in order to ‘salvage the self from the dissipation it suffers at moments of passionate desire, Marcel, while he never really considers the renunciation of desire, is tempted by the possibility of satisfying desires by de-energizing them’. By allowing his desire to take the form of the actions of others, the narrator divests himself of both his desire and his jealousy, and along with them his critical and imaginative faculties. The price to be paid for such an offloading of the work of desire is ill-preparedness:

Je ne songeais pas que l’apathie qu’il y avait à se décharger ainsi sur Andrée ou sur le chauffeur du soin de calmer mon agitation en leur laissant le soin de surveiller Albertine, ankylosait en moi, rendait inertes tous ces mouvements imaginatifs de l’intelligence, toutes ces inspirations de la volonté qui aident à deviner, à empêcher ce que va faire une personne. (III, 533)

The medical term for arthritic stiffening is called up. We have arrived at one of those moments of extreme stasis with which *La Prisonnière* is relentlessly punctuated. Ankylosis, inertia—it seems that the mind-work which fed narration has been delegated away. But there is a peculiar circularity at work here, for, in the Proustian world, the letting down of one’s guard usually precedes a resurgence of the beloved’s liberty and thus of the lover’s jealousy. In this instance it is Albertine’s flight which provokes the narrator into imaginative activity once more and Saint-Loup is dispatched to spy and barter for the girl’s return.

**Desire Plotting**

From the energetic imposition of the self’s desires upon the outside world to a self evacuated of desire and back again, it seems the Proustian subject is constantly trying

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54 Leo Bersani, ‘Proust and the Art of Incompletion’, p. 126.
to rectify the instability of his desiring self through his relations with others. But quite apart from this internal self-management, the extensive outreach of the desiring subject necessarily has an impact on the kind of novel we have before us.

At the outset of this chapter, I spoke tentatively of the ‘plotting’ of desire in the social world of the novel. It is perhaps time to return to this point and to ask what it might mean in the context of Proust, in what ways his novelistic practice could be said to have redefined or reformulated the idea of plot and plotting, so central to the history and development of the novelistic form. Many, indeed, have found it problematic to speak of Proust’s work in terms of ‘plot’, as if this were essentially a nineteenth-century novelistic conceit which was overridden and rendered antiquated by Proust amongst others. Undoubtedly, Proust himself contributed to this view by his life-long ambivalence towards the realist fiction of the nineteenth century. Commenting on Proust’s repeated use of the word ‘vulgarity’ in his discussion of Balzac in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, Richard Terdiman states that the latter’s ‘view of the world as an arena for the working out of passions and desires—in ambition, in romantic love, and so on—is for Proust the root cause of this vulgarity’. Certainly, there is in *À la recherche* no pioneering heroism, no discernable assault of the subject’s desires on the world around him that we habitually associate with the fiction of the nineteenth century. However, this is not to say that all desire plotting has vanished, that desires do no more than circulate within individual psyches until they eventually peter out. But in what, then, does this ‘plotting’ consist?

Peter Brooks’s work on the relationship between desire and plot provides an aid for determining the differences that exist between Proust’s dramatization of desire and that of his realist forebears. In *Reading for the Plot*, Brooks speaks of

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desire and the forward propulsion of narrative in the nineteenth-century novel in the following terms:

The ambitious heroes of the nineteenth-century novel—those of Balzac for instance—may regularly be conceived as "desiring machines" whose presence in the text creates and sustains narrative movement through the forward march of desire, projecting the self unto the world through scenarios of desire imagined and then acted upon.\(^5\)

The difference between, for instance, Balzac's Rastignac and the Proustian narrator is not so much that one is a 'desiring machine' and the other is not—Proust's narrator desires with the best of them and sustains it over a greater number of pages—but rather has to do with what separates, interrupts or lies between the 'desire imagined' and the 'then acted upon' of Brooks's formulation.

It can hardly be denied that doing things at one remove lies very much at the heart of the *Recherche*, so much so that it not only characterizes the subject's relation to the object of desire but also to virtually all other persons and most types of emotional, sensory and even artistic experience. Repeatedly the narrator tells us of his inability to think about an object if it is immediately before him, as if the imagination cannot be activated until it has the possibility of some reconstructive work to do. The presence of people denies the thought processes the kind of scrutiny that distance and time alone allow. Hence, for instance, the peculiar enjoyment of Albertine while she sleeps:

Son sommeil réalisait, dans une certaine mesure, la possibilité de l'amour; [...] présente, je lui parlais, mais étais trop absent de moi-même pour pouvoir penser. Quand elle dormait, je n'avais plus à parler, je savais que je n'étais plus regardé par elle, je n'avais plus besoin de vivre à la surface de moi-même. (III, 578)

What is noteworthy, is that the very prospect of writing is likewise imagined as a drawing back in order to achieve greater intimacy—a process that might be

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summed up in the phrase *reculer pour mieux sauter*. Writing will be a way of at once holding people and social engagements off while entering ever more resolutely into hearts and minds. In the final volume of the *Recherche*, the narrator, now nearing his famous vocational resolve, reflects on future contact with friends:

Je me disais que, si l'état de ma santé continuait à s'aggraver et si je ne pouvais plus les voir, il serait agréable de continuer à écrire, pour avoir encore par là accès auprès d'eux, pour leur parler entre les lignes, les faire penser à mon gré, leur plaire, être reçu dans leur cœur. (IV, 152)

The word choice and general import of this extract echo so closely those early dreams of recruiting intermediaries that the analogy simply cannot be ignored. ‘Parler à l'oreille’ has become ‘parler entre les lignes’. The word ‘accès’ seems indeed to gather in its wake the whole history of the narrator’s penchant for mediation, and ‘les faire penser’, ‘leur plaire’, ‘être reçu’ resonate in each and every attempt to reach the beloved through indirect means. There is, then, an underlying obsession with mediation which goes beyond the scope of other characters’ agency and shows itself to be rooted in the niggling desire to withdraw and re-approach through writing. But it would be an error to attribute to the human factor of mediation a merely superficial reflection of this deep-seated motive, for the human factor has an influence on the narrative which is very much its own.

While the exteriorization of desire through intermediaries allows the subject greater scope for the workings of his imagination, the practice also results in a social and novelistic ‘mapping’ of sorts. The importance of the network for both the thematic content and the structure of the *Recherche* can hardly be overestimated. As we have repeatedly witnessed above, in the young narrator’s attempts to win the good opinion of Norpois and in his exploitation of his friendship with Saint-Loup,

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57 In an article entitled ‘Narrative and Textual Doubles in the Work of Samuel Beckett’, Sylvie Debevec Hennings writes that, ‘The creation of a work of art—even one based on self-recollection—remains always a form of self-alienation. The work is expelled from the writer; it stands away from him; it confronts him like a double’, *SubStance*, 9 (1980), 97-104 (p. 102).
there is a powerful driving idea that to be contained within a different network of relations is no less than to be reconfigured as *a different person*. The narrator tells us as much himself. In the gardens of the Champs-Elysées where he plays with Gilberte and her friends, there is a constant fixture in the form of an older woman, whom, the narrator says, he would gladly have sacrificed all of the future advantages of his life to know, ‘Car Gilberte allait tous les jours la saluer [...] et il me semblait que si je l’avais connue, j’aurais été pour Gilberte *quelqu’un de tout autre*, quelqu’un qui connaissait les relations de ses parents’ (I, 390, my emphasis). Such a repeated tendency to think in terms of human maps as inroads to the object of desire results in a mutable, kaleidoscopic, and yet extremely connected and relational, vision of both the self and the social entourage. As each lover forces others to act within the dynamics of his particular love affair, a subtle yet powerfully accumulative overlapping of intimacies comes into effect. Swann uses Charlus as a mediator. The latter in turn employs the narrator in his dealings with Morel. The narrator seeks to influence Swann during his infatuation with Swann’s daughter Gilberte, who, incidentally, will eventually marry Saint-Loup, whom the narrator makes great use of in his relationship with Albertine, and so on ad infinitum. The human topography of the novel is sketched out by and large through the desiring capability of the characters and more especially of the Proustian narrator. Desire plotting persists, then, as a *seepage* of individual desires into the external domain, a contagion of sorts, into the lives, speech and behaviour of other people, making of Proust’s desiring figures, and of the narrator in particular, what Jean-Yves Tadié describes as ‘[des] personnage[s] sans limites nettes’.58

There is no doubt that this type of plotting is less a question of cause and effect than a dream of expansion. As such, it can benefit from Georges Poulet’s theory of the Proustian narrative as ‘spatial’.\textsuperscript{59} Interestingly, in the sentence which immediately follows Brooks’s earlier statement concerning the ‘forward march’ of desire, he goes on to describe, whether intentionally or not, a very different kind of desire plotting:

Etymology may suggest that the self creates a circle—an ambitus—or aureola around itself, mainly in front of itself, attempting ever to move forward to the circumference of that circle and to widen it, to cast the nets of the self ever further.\textsuperscript{60}

In taking up the spatial meaning of ‘plot’, Brooks designates a kind of desire which corresponds much more closely to the Proustian model I have here been concerned with. Whereas the first sentence outlined a linear propulsion, a straightforward ambitiousness which implied minimal distance between the experiencing of a desire and the act which springs from it, the second draws up a much more graduated notion of desire, one in which it does not so much propel as suffuse the narrative (hence the use of the word ‘aureola’). A similar understanding of desire as a medium akin to light, capable of suffusing space, appears in the metaphorical style of the Recherche: ‘Quand on aime, l’amour est trop grand pour pouvoir être contenu tout entier en nous; il irradie vers la personne aimée’ (I, 598, my emphasis). And the net-casting of which Brooks speaks seems to take on tangible meaning in the missionary-like endeavours of those who desire in the Proustian world.

The determined involvement of others is, therefore, more than a method of self-management and more even than a wayward obsession manifested in a displaced fashion (although it is undoubtedly also both these things); it facilitates the parallel

\textsuperscript{59} ‘L’amour est essentiellement une activité qui se diffuse, qui prolifère, qui occupe progressivement un plus grand volume. Semblable à une fumée qui crée par tout le ciel sa propre atmosphère, l’amour se dilate et, en se dilatant, produit autour de lui son propre espace’, Georges Poulet, \textit{L’Espace proustien} (Paris: Gallimard, 1963, repr. 1982), p. 79.

\textsuperscript{60} Brooks, \textit{Reading for the Plot}, p. 40.
operation of the subjective and social narratives of which the Recherche is made up. Action needs to happen, but it needn’t always, nor even regularly, happen in the immediate vicinity of the central desiring consciousness. It is this working at one remove, this prizing of the indirect or vicarious act and the delegation and exteriorization of that which is most personal which leaves its imprint on the novel we have before us, giving to it its particularité as a ‘roman de l’entre-deux’, allowing unprecedented narrative subjectivity to coexist with the kind of social texturing for which the Recherche is known.

The salient features of Proust's depiction of sexual experience in *À la recherche*, or rather, those for which the author and his work are renowned, have long been the disappointments, failures and disillusionment that accompany the act of physical possession, 'ô où d’ailleurs l’on ne possède rien' (I, 230). Alison Finch has pointed out that up until fairly recently much Proust criticism 'stressed the anguish of desire at the expense of its ecstasy'. For J. E. Rivers, the problem with many of the early Freudian readings of the work was their tendency to consider Proust's image of love as emanating from his homosexuality. As the latter was routinely dealt with in terms denoting a negative pathology—narcissism, morbid jealousy, arrested development, passivity—the interpretation of desire in Proust's work rounded continuously on these themes. Since, there has been a more general acknowledgement that sexual experience in *À la recherche* is not exclusively disappointing, that Proust's work contains powerful evocations of sexual pleasure, indeed, that many passages treating of other-than-sexual experience are imbued with

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62 I have chosen to use the French word 'jouissance' here and elsewhere as it has a greater breadth of meaning than the restrictive English 'orgasm'. The notorious difficulty of translating 'jouir' and 'jouissance' into English is apparent on the level of register also; as Richard Howard points out in his preface to the English translation of Barthes's *Le Plaisir du texte*, 'The French have a vocabulary of eroticism, an amorous discourse which smells neither of the laboratory nor of the sewer, which just—attentively, scrupulously—puts the facts', Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1975), v.
a weighty sensuality. Yet the instances of jouissance which are recognized are seen as having one important thing in common—they are, on the whole, understood to be experiences of an extremely subjective nature, verging on the solipsistic, from which the desired other and other people more generally are excluded.

The passages which convey the strongest sense of this eroticism-in-solitude are amongst those most frequently chosen for critical exegesis. This is partly due to the fact that they might be considered to encapsulate the general tenor of sexual experience in the Proustian world, but partly also because of the utility of the images they present; each of these passages evinces the kind of self-probing broadly associated with modernist literature and, more specifically, they each conform in a satisfying way with the Proustian narrator’s comments on artistic practice as outlined in *Le Temps retrouvé*. Three such episodes spring easily to mind. Early on, before the narrative of the protagonist’s life really gets under way, we encounter the evocation of the narrator’s sleep patterns and within it an account of his recurring sexual dreams. The narrator describes how a simulacrum of otherness, in the form of a woman, brings him to the brink of climax:

> Quelquefois, comme Ève naquit d’une côte d’Adam, une femme naissait pendant mon sommeil d’une fausse position de ma cuisse. Formée du plaisir que j’étais sur le point de goûter, je m’imaginais que c’était elle qui me l’offrait. Mon corps qui sentait dans le sien ma propre chaleur voulait s’y rejoindre, je m’éveillais. (I, 4-5)

The dreamer not only begets an object of desire from his own body but imagines himself as a sort of Adam, as one existing at the beginning, before parentage, community and race, ‘united by no link to any other being in existence’. While the biblical Eve (as well as precipitating the fall from grace of humankind) is credited

65 In this category we can most notably include Jean-Pierre Richard, Julia Kristeva and Malcolm Bowie.
67 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (London: Everyman, 1994): ‘Like Adam, I was created apparently united by no link to any other being in existence’ (p. 108).
with bringing her companion into social and sexual relation, the narrator’s Eve is in contrast a mere figment of human relation, and the narrator himself is exposed as a Narcissus at the water’s edge. The dream also seems to unveil a sequence of things hinted at elsewhere in the narrator’s waking life, a sequence in which desire is born and an object only retroactively assigned to it. The dream world which dramatizes the loss of a conventional sense of self is at the same time a world which is entirely permeated with self. It would seem, then, that from the very outset, sexual pleasure is evoked as a matter of imaginative self-dispersal.

This rather surrealist opening is followed in ‘Combray’ by resonant allusions to the child-narrator’s daydreams involving the emergence of sexually receptive girls from woods or paths along the course of daily walks. It is, of course, unsurprising that, when the narrative of ‘Combray’ moves resolutely into the sphere of the narrator’s childhood, sexual experience is characterized by the whimsically imaginative and the auto-erotic. Yet one episode in particular in these early stages of the novel is viewed less as a phase in the narrator’s sexual development than as a benchmark of his lifelong sexual being. The masturbation scene in the ‘cabinet sentant l’iris’ necessarily occurs at a location removed from the hustle of family life below and sets the young protagonist up as a lone voyager or a desperate individual on the point of suicide. The activity of masturbating is described explicitly as a route inwards, a course of self-discovery: ‘je me frayais en moi-même une route inconnue et que je croyais mortelle’ (I, 156). Serge Doubrovsky draws heavily on this episode to support his thesis of the violent narcissism of the Proustian enterprise as a whole.

68 ‘Je n’avais pas cessé en dormant de faire des réflexions sur ce que je venais de lire […] il me semblait que j’étais moi-même ce dont parlait l’ouvrage: une église, un quatuor, la rivalité de François Ier et de Charles Quint’ (I, 3).
characterized, as he sees it, as an assimilation and negation of the existence of others (especially the mother).  

The narrator's fetishistic enjoyment, in *La Prisonnière*, of Albertine while she sleeps is an even more damning evocation of sexual solipsism, for, although actual bodies are brought into contact, Albertine is no more present to the narrator than are his imaginary women; indeed, she is in some ways even less so—they, at least, are imagined as animated and communicative. Evacuated of all humanizing traits and incapable of interaction, Albertine here becomes no more than an inanimate prop to sexual pleasure and it is in this state that she unwittingly provides the narrator with what is perhaps his most comfortable and satiating sexual experience of the novel. Letting his leg rest against that of Albertine, the narrator is helped along towards his climax by the rise-and-fall motion of her heavy-breathing body; but this movement is described in terms of the physical sensation one might experience from the wind or the sea, from lying on a beach. It is the impression of Albertine's body as insentient object that is pinpointed as the basis of pleasure: 'Il me semblait à ces moments-là que je venais de la posséder plus complètement, comme une chose inconsciente et sans résistance de la muette nature' (III, 581). It is easy to see how this episode might be taken as typical of the sexuality played out in *La Prisonnière* as a whole—as an instance of male spectatorship that is concerned with the image of a woman rather than with the couple's interactions and shared experiences, it certainly interconnects with many other scenes of the volume.

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69 Serge Doubrovsky, *La Place de la Madeleine: Écriture et fantasme chez Proust* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1974). Doubrovsky takes his cue from Philippe Lejeune's 'Écriture et sexualité', *Europe*, 49 (1971), 113-43. Both Lejeune and Doubrovsky use the more fully-wrought, precursory version of this episode that appears in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*. In associating the masturbatory scene with the madeleine episode of 'Combray', Doubrovsky links the whole of the novelistic enterprise with an auto-erotic, self-searching endeavour. As several reviewers have pointed out, one of the main 'flaws' of Doubrovsky's inventive and original reading is that it ignores the psycho-social dimension of the novel and the fact that language itself is a social object. On this point, the afterword by Paul Bové in the English translation of *La Place de la Madeleine* is informative; *Writing and Fantasy in Proust*, trans. by Carol Bové (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).
Attention to other moments of rapture has largely been given over to the jouissances of the narrator faced with some of the spectacles of nature and art. Descriptions of landscapes, architecture and even of the famous hinge-moments or ‘moments bienheureux’, in which a sensory experience unlocks various memory sequences, are strikingly eroticized. The lingering, sensual imagery of orality surrounding the Madeleine episode is an obvious example; but even the rather naive ‘Zut, zut, zut, zut’ (I, 153) enunciated by the young narrator to voice his appreciation of an ordinary scene of red roof-tiles reflected in a pond draws a parallel with sexual experience. Taking some exercise after a morning spent reading and immobile, the narrator’s first reference is to the accumulated energy contained in his body (‘qui s’était chargé sur place d’animation et de vitesse accumulées’ (I, 152)) which demands now to be discharged ‘comme une toupie qu’on lâche’ (ibid). Though this is a moment of raw appreciation, with later expressions of ‘ravissement’ being couched in more sophisticated terms, what it establishes is that link between the body and heightened perceptual sensitivity that all subsequent aesthetic epiphanies will retain.

In many ways these types of sexuality, the auto-erotic and the sublimated, seem especially attuned to the artistic task the narrator sets himself at the end of the novel—a digging deep within, a work of self-excavation that will lead to artistic transcendence. Critical focus on these forms of jouissance is therefore authoritatively reinforced from within the text, or at least from one powerful element of it, and it would not be an overstatement to suggest that Proustian desire and sexuality in general has, as a result, come to be understood as chiefly auto-erotic and sublimated. Yet, the nuances of certain passages are in danger of being neglected in such a
totalizing view of sexuality as irredeemably introverted. In the present chapter, I will argue that, although the moments of solitary *jouissance* form a large component of sexuality, they should neither be inflated to encompass the whole portrayal of sexual enjoyment in the work nor be made to stand for an overarching idea about Proust’s particular kind of artistic endeavour. For, if the focus on desire is often inward-looking, yet many passages of the novel demonstrate a fascination with the interpersonal and public ingredients which, when added to the mix, frequently heighten desire or bring it to climax. We saw in the previous chapter that the go-betweens and chaperones of the Proustian desiring dynamic are a means of influencing and controlling the beloved as well as vessels of continuing interaction and exchange between desiring individuals and the world around them. Here, I will turn my attention away from the issues of control and the daily management of love affairs and towards the subjects’ experience of desire, particularly where it tends towards climax. The chapter aims to explore how, even in this most intimate sphere, other people, or third points of reference, become welcome aids, and often unwitting spurs, in the pursuit of *jouissance*. The ‘others’ discussed here will not, however, always be specific individuals. We shall see, indeed, that it is often a collective other which is sought out and incorporated into the desiring configuration. Chapter 2 charted how, as specific others, mediating third parties were easily summoned to or dispatched from private living quarters. Scenarios in which the lover gave instructions from a bedroom or communicated with intermediaries through letter or telegram were, in these instances, the norm. All in all, the social ‘plotting’ of desire was thus seen to be carried out against a backdrop of isolated private space. In the present chapter, by contrast, we will be concerned with what takes place in public

70 From the outset, Proust’s ‘progress’ in both literary style and content has been viewed in the light of inward excavation. The title of Jacques Rivière’s early work serves as an example: *Quelques progrès dans l’étude du cœur humain.*
space, be it the salon, the urban outdoors, the shared space of language or that of the smallest unit of community, the family. More room shall also be allotted here to the public behaviour of desiring subjects other than the narrator for the simple reason that the public arenas in focus are often vistas of observation where the narrator’s own behaviour rests in the shadows. However, it will become apparent that what the narrator notes as forming the sexual fascinations, fantasies and impulses of other characters are, more often than not, revealed to be fantasies that belong equally to him in his capacity as desiring agent.

When it comes to the issue of sex, one of the most striking things about the *Recherche* is the course it treads between extremes of secrecy and exposure. Interest in these related, but often opposed, themes works on multiple levels of plot, structure and characterization. For one thing, it lends a momentum of sorts to the love stories of the novel, dictating the to-and-fro plot of both Swann’s relationship with Odette and the narrator’s relationship with Albertine, where hypotheses and revelation succeed each other in never-ending circularity. If we set aside the artistic teleology of the work, the mysteries of the novel are almost exclusively sexual, as are, indeed, its dramatic dénouements. While it is true that much of the discourse surrounding sexual revelations in the work centres on the epistemological perspective of (often jealous) observers, the idea, and the practice, of revealing proves also to have, for subjects of desire, a decidedly erotic dimension that stands apart from any epistemological concern.
The Great Outdoors

As is the case with its great nineteenth-century precursors, sexuality in the *Recherche* takes to the streets. For the Proustian narrator, enthralled as he is to the ‘être de fuite’, desire in an urban setting proves particularly tantalizing. Placing the object of desire in a transitory and fleeting environment from the very first means that to see or to remark that object is to see him or her fleeing. As Walter Benjamin has commented, speaking of Baudelaire’s ‘À une passante’: ‘The delight of the urban poet is love—not at first sight; but at last sight’. Swann’s careering search through the city for Odette, who is not where he expects to find her, is a case in point, as are the narrator’s ineffectual attempts to engage with shop girls and passers-by in both Paris and Venice. But it is not merely the usual sense of loss which is exemplified in Proust’s outdoor urban experience of desire. Another motif, one by no means rare in the work, is the sexual opportunity that comes with immersion in the social element. Outdoor Paris, like other locales in the work, as well as being ‘a place of fantasy representation, a bolster to dreaming’, is sometimes also a place of unexpected and highly charged tactile encounter with others.

When the narrator leaves Jupien’s brothel in *Le Temps retrouvé*, having been witness to the sado-masochistic activities of the clientele, one apocalyptic scene is replaced with another. The city is under threat from an air-raid, yet imminent doom has a liberating effect. Stragglers from the brothel descend into the darkened corridors of the metro, which now serve the dual function of bomb-shelter and locus of an impromptu orgy. In some respects the metro, it is clearly suggested, becomes an extension of the brothel; but the removal from a communal, but still exclusive and

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enclosed, space (Jupien's brothel), to an open one that serves a more explicitly public function also entails a difference in the sexual transactions taking place. Any demarcations between client and paid 'employee' that existed in the brothel are demolished. Indeed, there is no distinction between bodies at all as both the role-playing of paid-for relations and the conventional rules of courtship are abandoned:

'Dans l'obscurité, tout ce vieux jeu se trouve aboli, les mains, les lèvres, les corps peuvent entrer en jeu les premiers' (IV, 413). Twice the narrator refers to the 'élément nouveau' (ibid) in which these spontaneous and anonymous fondlings are taking place. The hospitable 'element' is, ostensibly, the darkness; but the dark alone hardly qualifies as the transformative medium described by the narrator. Rather, it is the specificity of a darkness that reigns in public, peopled space that has galvanized this outburst of shared sexual enjoyment.

In terms of literary precedent, representation of the Métropolitain was in some ways already primed for association with hidden forms of sexuality before Proust was around to write about it and, indeed, before the Métro itself came into existence. According to Christopher Prendergast, 'The association is vaguely there, for instance, in Balzac's representation of the underworld: through the character of Vautrin, both criminal and homosexual (referred to as 'tante' in Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes), the notion of the 'underworld' may well drift towards a realm of forbidden erotic desire associated with the image of the underground.'

Such an association is clearly employed in the orgy episode of Le Temps retrouvé, but Proust is also tapping the symbolic potential of the metro as network. Along with the network of streets that it emulates and underlies, the metro constitutes a system of

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73 Christopher Prendergast, Paris and the Nineteenth Century (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1992), p. 100. The entire chapter entitled 'Paris Underground' (pp. 74-101) is extremely useful for a consideration of the Parisian sewers and catacombs as represented in French literature of the nineteenth century.
relatedness and interchange. The concept of the network, and the erotic potential it so often evokes in the Recherche, will be more fully developed later, but it is surely noteworthy that, in a novel which relates more than its fair share of sexual arrangements, the only sexual act involving a group of people takes place not in a private dwelling but at the arterial heart of the city.

Being in public space without also being visible (and preoccupied with the fact) is an admittedly rare thing in Proust’s novel, for, here, places are categorized precisely according to whether they are ‘places to be seen’. Visibility in the city thus stands in complex relation to hierarchical affiliations. The bourgeoisie’s definition of certain places as fashionable or culturally privileged is a result of codes as stringent and baffling as those which define the aristocratic milieu. Odette’s pinpointing of ‘les endroits chics’, even if a little naive, is a case in point: ‘le dimanche matin, Avenue de l’Impératrice, à cinq heures le tour du Lac, le jeudi l’Éden Théâtre, le vendredi l’Hippodrome, les bals’ (I, 239). Proust shows that blood, money and fashion are factors that variously dictate circulation in social space but at the same time never allows us to lose sight of desire as an underlying presence in the most interesting of these movements. Odette is a social climber, but she is perhaps first and foremost a sexual being. Unlike Mme Verdurin, who conducts her social ascent through the artful management of her artistic salon, or Mme de Villeparisis who belongs solely in the exclusive salons of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, Odette is in her element in the open air of the bois de Boulogne. As she moves through the bois, noting every passer-by as a figure of past or future liaisons, she infuses the atmosphere with eroticism, here captured in the narrator’s allusion to her Mona Lisa-esque smile:

[Elle avait] aux lèvres un sourire ambigu où je ne voyais que la bienveillance d’une Majesté et où il y avait surtout la provocation de la cocotte, et qu’elle inclinait avec douceur sur les personnes qui la saluaient. Ce sourire en réalité disait aux uns: ‘Je me rappelle très bien, c’était exquis!’; à d’autres: ‘Comme j’aurais aimé! ç’a été la
Odette is, of course, all things to all desiring subjects, a canvas onto which the fantasies of others are projected, so that her imagined asides to passers-by are as revealing of their desires as of her own. She does, however, possess a keen sense of her own sexual magnetism and the fact that it is most potent when showcased in the fluid environment of the city's public spaces. That Elstir alone realizes the extent to which Odette's sexual power is intimately related to her 'fluidity' is evidenced by his highly ambiguous portrait of Odette, 'Miss Sacripant', in which not only her gender but every detail and facial feature seem mutable and vaguely indecipherable despite being, in reality, immobile and framed. Swann's 'framing' of Odette, for all his artistic sophistication, never achieves this kind of desirable paradox.

Odette's sexuality, then, plays on the arresting power of her high visibility in open space, but the city streets can suggest desire even to those who are isolated, held captive, or suffering under a self-imposed withdrawal from what the streets offer in terms of spectacle. Wetherill's comment on the 'claustrophobic obsession and room-locked fantasy which excludes the street sensed beyond the curtain' in Proust's novel, fails to recognize that desire in À la recherche is never so claustrophobic that it does not inhale some sustenance from outside. In fact, it is precisely at those points of the novel which are the most intensely closeted, notably in La Prisonnière, that the 'street sensed beyond the curtain' is brought into play. The cries of street-peddlers are a source of both pleasure and pain for the narrator, a sensuous penetration of the private sphere by the 'vie remuante' of the outdoors and a reminder of the dangers that it poses to his custodial possession of Albertine. For Albertine herself, the street cries, at once advertizing and sensualizing the most

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modest of foodstuffs (carrots, cabbages, leeks), set off a verbal outpouring that combines linguistic and erotic exuberance:

‘Mon Dieu, à l’hôtel Ritz je crains bien que vous ne trouviez des colonnes Vendôme de glace, de glace au chocolat, ou à la framboise, et alors il en faut plusieurs pour que cela ait l’air de colonnes votives ou de pylônes élevés dans une allée à la gloire de la Fraicheur. Ils font aussi des obélisques de framboise qui se dresseront de place en place dans le désert brûlant de ma soif et dont je ferai fondre le granit rose au fond de ma gorge qu’ils désaltéreront mieux que des oasis (et ici le rire profond éclata, soit de satisfaction de si bien parler, soit par moquerie d’elle-même de s’exprimer par images si suivies, soit, hélas! par volupté physique de sentir en elle quelque chose de si bon, de si frais, qui lui causait l’équivalent d’une jouissance). Ces pics de glace du Ritz ont quelquefois l’air du mont Rose […] Oui, tous ces monuments passeront de leur place de pierre dans ma poitrine où leur fraîcheur fondante palpite déjà.’ (III, 636-7)

Albertine’s breathless tour of edible phallic structures is the longest of her speeches; indeed, it is one of the few moments in the text when we hear directly from her and also quite arguably the nearest that she comes to outright sexual climax in the narrator’s presence. It is not only prompted by the incursion of the outdoor life of the city into the apartment, it is itself a public performance, a scripted jouissance, one meant for communication, which gains its very momentum from being listened to. This is attested to by the way Albertine frequently pauses to survey and enjoy the reaction produced in the narrator: ‘elle sentit que je trouvais que c’était bien dit et elle continuait en s’arrêtant un instant quand sa comparaison était réussie pour rire de son beau rire’ (III, 636). Albertine’s speech becomes an energetic, self-feeding machine, simultaneously gaining in eloquence as it gains in eroticism.

There has been much debate over the ‘ownership’ of Albertine’s words in this particular speech act. Ruminating on Albertine’s use of writerly forms, the narrator states: ‘sans moi elle ne parlerait pas ainsi, elle a subi profondément mon influence … elle est mon œuvre’ (III, 636). In her assessment of this episode of La

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75 Jean Milly, in his discussion of the changing Proustian text up until the point of publication, notes that late additions to this episode introduced a more nuanced perspective on Albertine’s sexual imagery and hence on her own sexual ambiguity. Where early versions of the text contained essentially masculine symbols, symbols linked to the female body were inserted later. ‘Cris de Paris et désir des glaces’, Proust dans le texte et l’avant-texte (Paris: Flammarion, 1985), p. 144.
Prisonnière, Margaret E. Gray pinpoints 'the assumptions of a critical tradition that has tended to repeat Marcel’s claims for mastery rather than question them'. Seeing in the interpretations of such critics as Gérard Genette, Emily Eells and Jean Milly, readings that equate Proust’s mastery of self-pastiche with the narrator’s mastery of Albertine, Gray detects a ‘persistent critical need to domesticate this passage’ and a resulting consensus which pays little attention to the irony and subversive nature of Albertine’s ‘use’ of the narrator’s style. Of course, that Albertine’s speech overturns any notions of the narrator’s mastery over her does not mean that we need dispense completely with the idea of influence as it emerges here. Patterns of influence, particularly linguistic influence, criss-cross the text, exempting no one, least of all the narrator, and do not seem to respect any dichotomous ideas of mastery and submission. In fact, it is arguable that the eroticism of Albertine’s speech emanates not so much from a sadistic inclination as from the very fact of her borrowing. Images of assimilation and permeability are just as prevalent in the speech on ices as are images of destruction and dismantling and, elsewhere in the novel, ‘borrowing’ frequently intersects with erotic experience (the narrator’s adoption of the mother’s discourse in his relationship with Albertine, for example).

In this view, then, the speech on ices emerges as being public, or at least socially interactive, on several levels: it is provoked by the outdoor street-calls, moved along by its own performativity and eroticized further still by the fact of its mimetic quality.

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76 Margaret E. Gray, Postmodern Proust, p. 95.
77 Margaret E. Gray, Postmodern Proust, p. 106.
78 The influence of other people’s behaviour and other people’s narratives on the narrator will be discussed at length in Chapter 4.
As far as the narrator himself is concerned, the task of keeping constant watch over Albertine prevents him from enjoying what he sees as the endless sexual opportunities and easy encounters provided by the urban outdoors:

Si le surcroît de joie, apporté par la vue des femmes impossible à imaginer a priori, me rendait plus désirables, plus dignes d’être explorés, la rue, la ville, le monde, il me donnait par là même la soif de guérir, de sortir et, sans Albertine, d’être libre. (III, 537)

It is thus what he most desires for himself which informs the narrator’s fears concerning Albertine; and when it is not a case of the narrator’s own desires but of hers, the exciting prospect of city life becomes ‘la dangereuse vie remuante au sein de laquelle je ne la laissais circuler que sous ma tutelle, dans un prolongement extérieur de la séquestration’ (III, 633). However, if Albertine’s speech on ices proves anything, it is the ultimate naivety of the narrator’s belief that he can make of the outside an extension of his interior prison, or, indeed, keep the outside from being imported.

The Public Gaze

In the area of homosexuality, the modes of concealment that are part-and-parcel of all sexuality in the Proustian world become particularly diverse and inventive. Here we find a whole gamut of masking and obfuscatory activity. Beyond the usual practices of lying or the construction of smokescreen lives (the majority of male homosexual characters have either been married, become so during the course of the novel or are involved in heterosexual relationships), there is the use of special language for designating affiliation and private gestural codes which allow communication in public spaces to remain private nonetheless. Yet many of the

79 ‘En être’ is famously understood by Charlus to designate homosexuality, not without comic results when ‘outsiders’ apply the term to their own ideas of belonging (for the Verdurins, ‘en être’ is a case
homosexual characters, at one point or another, demonstrate a taste for exposure which completely undermines all their cautious, dissembling work; momentarily at least, their desire is put on vibrant and carefree display. Furthermore, when this happens, it appears to do so less in the mode of a disinterested celebration of freedom than as an explicit solicitation of the public gaze. An example in point occurs at the Grand-Hôtel in Balbec, where Bloch’s sister’s exhibitionistic tendencies provoke something of a scandal:

La sœur de Bloch avait depuis quelque temps, avec une ancienne actrice, des relations secrètes qui bientôt ne leur suffirent plus. Étre vues leur semblait ajouter de la perversité à leur plaisir, elles voulaient faire baigner leurs dangereux ébats dans les regards de tous. Cela commença par des caresses, qu’on pouvait en somme attribuer à une intimité amicale, dans le salon de jeu, autour de la table de baccara. Puis elles s’enhardirent. Et enfin un soir, dans un coin pas même obscur de la grande salle de danse, sur un canapé, elles ne se gênèrent pas plus que si elles avaient été dans leur lit. (III, 236)

The spaces evoked here—‘salon de jeu’, ‘salle de danse’—are public rooms associated with specific socially sanctioned, ‘pleasurable’ interactions, activities which depend fully on engagement with the external world. The word choice in this passage is not without significance: ‘faire baigner’ evokes an all-encompassing gaze, one which will completely surround and define the actions of the young women.

Public outing of desire is therefore yet again comparable to immersion in another element. The juxtaposition of signs of intimacy with signs of society life and the mounting boldness of the girls combine to prepare the arresting image at the end of the passage: that of an occupied bed in the middle of the ‘grande salle’. The couple’s activities sharply recall the earlier Montjouvain episode related in ‘Combray’. In critical works, focus frequently centres on the sadistic activity of Mlle Vinteuil and her friend; the episode is rarely considered from the point of view of exhibitionism.

of belonging to their chosen aesthetic elite). Jarrod Hayes explores this along with the possible homosexual coding of the expression ‘prendre le thé’ in his ‘Proust in the Tearoom’, PMLA, 110 (1995), 992-1005.
However, Montjouvain is, above all else, a call for spectators, a dramatization of desire demanding input from an onlooking public. To this extent, the young women make themselves spectators in their own affair and call forth not only the dead father, whose portrait they play at profaning, but other, indiscriminate, third parties who may see them through the window (‘quand même on nous verrait ce n’en est que meilleur’ (I, 159)). The third party spectator may be hypothetical (in their eyes at least, we the readers know that he exists) but this figure invests the entire scene with its eroticism. A later anecdote reinforces the idea of erotic excitement that the public domain appears to lend to female trysts. Having met two friends along with their respective mistresses for dinner, the narrator remarks of the female company that, ‘dès le potage les pieds se cherchaient, trouvant souvent le mien’. Afterwards, the women are frequently to be seen in public together in renewed scenarios of their first meeting: ‘On peut dire qu’il n’y a pas de lieu, si public qu’il fût, où elles ne fissent ce qui est le plus secret’ (III, 853).

The same pleasure at the idea of revelation is detectable in the male homosexual relationships, though, it may be noted, in a considerably less judgemental tone. In Charlus’s relationship with Morel, the public airing of desire is likewise an actively sensual experience and one consciously sought out by the baron for the particular gratification that it provides. Evening gatherings at the Verdurins serve to showcase more than just Morel’s musical talent. The baron’s exuberance at their joint social undertaking, ostensibly that of patron to artist,

80 As Lucille Cairns remarks: ‘The word ‘vice’ in reference to male homosexuality tends […] to be evacuated of its condemnatory acceptation; but in relation to lesbianism it is used with full censorious force’. She attributes this difference in moral tone to the narrator’s phobic apprehension of lesbianism. The representation of lesbianism, she states, ‘is filtered through the consciousness of a narrator who constantly fears that the woman he loves, Albertine, might be tempted away from him by other women […] Lesbians are depicted as corrupt, licentious, menacing: but this negative depiction is generated by his paranoid jealousy’: ‘Homosexuality and Lesbianism in Proust’s Sodome et Gomorrhe’, pp. 53 and 50 respectively.
frequently bubbles over into exhibitionistic delight: '[Charius] s'éloigna avec Morel, sous prétexte de se faire expliquer ce qu'on allait jouer, trouvant surtout une grande douceur, tandis que Charlie lui montrait sa musique, à étaler ainsi publiquement leur intimité secrète' (III, 747). And later, when the baron and Morel pay the narrator a visit, he senses that 'faire des visites avec Morel était une immense satisfaction pour M. de Charlus, à qui cela donnait un instant l'illusion de s'être remarié' (IV, 178).

Mimicking the institutional forms by which desire is given 'legitimate' status in the social world, as Charlus does here, is an attempt to open the intimate sphere, to invite public perusal of personal life and in so doing to at once add to the pleasure to be had from sexual desire and prove the existence of one’s desire as a ‘real’ phenomenon in the social world. Indeed, over the course of the Recherche, Charlus tries out various domestic arrangements in relation to Morel in an attempt to hold the latter in a socially determined and binding network. His arranged marriage between Morel and Jupien’s niece is a source of erotic pleasure precisely because, as the baron tells himself, the young woman will become:

Un signe [...] de ce que j’avais presque oublié et qui est si sensible à mon cœur que pour tout le monde, pour ceux qui me verront les protéger, les loger, pour moi-même, Morel est mien. De cette évidence aux yeux des autres et aux siens, M. de Charlus était plus heureux que tout le reste. (III, 560, my emphases)

The display of sexual desires in public gatherings is documented with high frequency in the context of the homosexual relationships but is virtually absent from the heterosexual relationships of À la recherche du temps perdu. Yet, to ascribe to this exhibitionistic tendency an exclusively homosexual nature does not tally with the universal approach prevalent throughout the portrayal of desire and love in the novel. It is worth remembering that homosexuality, especially by the end of À la recherche, can in no way be considered a marginal or even a minority sexual orientation; indeed, to a large extent, the homosexual relationships are archetypal. As Gilles
Deleuze remarks, intersexual love-affairs in the *Recherche* ‘trouvent leur vérité dans l’homosexualité’. The reason for the absence of express solicitation of the public gaze in the heterosexual relationships has little to do with their introspective bent but can be explained, rather, by the inner logic of the narrative. The two principal subjects whose heterosexual relationships are recounted in the work—Swann and the narrator—are also those through whom Proust chooses to centre a detailed illustration of jealousy. Jealousy demands that desire, no less than its object, be *enclosed*—not *disclosed*. However, there are revelatory allusions to the reduction in pleasure that this brings about. In the Proustian world, when jealousy is acknowledged as a negative force, it is for reasons that have little to do with conventional ideas about the lack of trust that it betrays. Firstly, jealousy is self-defeating because it causes the lover to remove the beloved from the desiring gaze of others, thereby only serving to reduce her value, a value attributed precisely by the belief in her desirability for others (as we saw in Chapter 1). Secondly, in depriving the desiring subject of the possibility of exercising the exhibitive drive, jealousy robs the lover of a potentially rich source of erotic gratification. It is in *La Prisonnière* that we find a fairly explicit avowal of exactly what is forfeited in attempts to keep jealousy at bay:

> [L]a possession de ce qu’on aime est une joie plus grande encore que l’amour. Bien souvent ceux qui cachent à tous cette possession, ne le font que par la peur que l’objet chéri ne leur soit enlevé. Et leur bonheur, par cette prudence de se taire, en est diminué. (III, 560)

Margaret Topping points out that, in *La Prisonnière*, Proust employs the literary trope of the caged bird traditionally applied to inhabitants of a harem, but also rewrites it in repetitive allusions to Albertine’s charmlessness and loss of lustre during the period of her captivity: ‘Une fois captive chez moi l’oiseau que j’avais vu

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81 Gilles Deleuze, *Proust et les signes*, p. 17.
un soir marcher à pas comptés sur la digue [...] avait perdu toutes ses couleurs’ (III, 678). ‘This re-writing of the trope’, states Topping, ‘reinforces a key idea in Proust’s portrayal of love, namely that possession decreases desire’. In light of the narrator’s relationship with Albertine, we might add to this that it is hidden possession that really sounds the death knell for desire. If both the jealous and exhibitive impulses can really be said to exist simultaneously in Swann’s and the narrator’s affairs, we might ask how these competing drives are managed or reconciled, if at all? For this it is necessary to move away from the visual, so often associated with the beloved’s betrayal, and towards an exploration of aural externalizations of desire.

**Speaking Aloud**

In the degenerative stages of the ‘disease’ which is his love for Odette, Swann breaks a prolonged absence from society by attending an evening concert given by Mme de Saint-Euverte. It is on this evening that Swann is surprised by the petite phrase of Vinteuil’s sonata for the last time in the story of his love affair. But before the appearance of the petite phrase, we find a refrain in the text which is itself musical. With rhythmic persistence the episode returns to what is established as the emotional leitmotif of this soirée: Swann’s longing for an acoustic externalization of his love. Navigating his way around the rooms full of people, he feels ‘le même besoin de parler du chagrin qu’un assassin a de parler de son crime’ (I, 336). In each trite conversation he listens for some word which might touch on the only subject of interest to him. At one point, Mme des Laumes (the future Mme de Guermantes) approaches and makes a superficial remark about how awful life is (another guest has failed to appreciate her wit) and Swann experiences ‘la même douceur que si elle lui avait parlé d’Odette’ (I,

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336). Next, the général de Froberville, remarking on the charms of the recently-wed Mme de Cambremer, states 'j’aimerais mieux être le mari de cette femme-là que d’être massacré par les sauvages’ (I, 338). Swann, latching onto this phrasal connection of a woman with brutal death, taking even this flimsy talk as proof of sympathetic feeling, experiences a brusque need to continue the conversation and nudges talk onto a topic with such a slight connection to Odette that it goes entirely unnoticed by his interlocutor. Stating that many men have indeed died in this fashion, he mentions the navigator La Pérouse and, having done so, feels, again, ‘heureux comme s’il avait parlé d’Odette’ (I, 338), for ‘La Pérouse’ is the name of the street on which she lives.

Thus the evening proceeds in a fitful dance in which internal and social discourses remain categorically at odds. Nowhere is it clearer that the isolation of love springs not merely from the absence of the loved one, nor even from her indifference, but from the want of social acknowledgement and an outer space for desire:

Il souffrait de rester enfermé au milieu de ces gens dont la bêtise et les ridicules le frappaient d’autant plus douloureusement qu’ignorant son amour, incapables, s’ils l’avaient connu, de s’y intéresser et de faire autre chose que d’en sourire comme d’un enfantillage ou de le déplorer comme une folie, ils le lui faisaient apparaître sous l’aspect d’un état subjectif qui n’existait que pour lui, dont rien d’extérieur ne lui affirmait la réalité. (I, 339)

What the subject desperately wants, and what he wants others to confirm, is that his desire is a real phenomenon in the social world. On the rare occasions when Swann’s love is recognized by another person, the joy this gives him is intense. Soon after this incident, Mme Cottard, having bumped into Swann on the omnibus and eager to make conversation, launches into a lengthy monologue assuring him of Odette’s admiration for him, ‘Et Swann se sentit déborder de tendresse pour elle’ (I, 370), the ‘elle’ in question being Mme Cottard, voicer of desire, rather than Odette, its object. Returning to the evening in question, it is music that finally fulfils Swann’s dream of vocalization. Swann’s reception of Vinteuil’s phrase is strikingly reminiscent of the
narrator’s early fantasies concerning exemplary, super-human go-betweens. To a
certain extent, the phrase presents itself to Swann as an ideal intermediary to which
the human third parties of quotidian experience seem to have been playing the role of
platonic shadows. And yet the music continues to be celebrated here, and over the
following pages, in decidedly human terms:

Swann la sentait présente, comme une déesse protectrice et confidente de son amour,
et qui pour pouvoir arriver jusqu’à lui devant la foule et l’emmener à l’écart pour lui
parler, avait revêtu le déguisement de cette apparence sonore. Et tandis qu’elle
passait, légère, apaisante et murmurée comme un parfum, lui disant ce qu’elle avait à
dire et dont il scrutait tous les mots, regrettant de les voir s’envoler si vite, il
faisait involontairement avec ses lèvres le mouvement de baiser au passage le corps
harmonieux et fuyant. Il ne se sentait plus exilé et seul puisque, elle, qui s’adressait à
lui, lui parlait à mi-voix d’Odette. (I, 342, my emphases)

The metaphorical weight of this passage is borne predominantly by its verbs, the
majority of which denote oral expression: the phrase speaks, says, whispers,
murmurs. The phrase ends, but the sonata continues and so too does the analogy with
spoken language. The words ‘parole’, ‘parler’ and their various cognates are repeated
numerous times in the pages detailing Swann’s listening experience; indeed, the
phrase is alluded to as possessing ‘quelque chose d’humain’ (I, 344). Music is
conceptualized not in opposition to language, as we might expect, but rather as an
ideal language, speaking straight to the inexpressible emotional centre of Swann as
he listens. Piano and violin are engaged in a ‘dialogue’, and we are told that ‘la
suppression des mots humains, loin d’y laisser régner la fantaisie, comme on aurait
pu croire, l’en avait éliminée; jamais le langage parlé ne fut si inflexiblement
nécessité, ne connut à ce point la pertinence des questions, l’évidence des réponses’
(I, 346). What Vinteuil’s phrase offers is an articulateness so supreme in its
accomplishment that it effectively breaks down the perceived barrier between

83 In Jean-Jaques Nattiez’s work, Proust as musician, trans. by Derrick Puffett (Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 1989), he comments that the phrase ‘possesses all the qualities necessary
to play the role of mystical intermediary’, p. 55.
intimate inner experience and the outer world. Vinteuil’s music may not help Swann to outstrip his time-bound existence—his reception of the music is still too self-specific, still too determinately possessive for it to be an unadulterated appreciation of Vinteuil’s art—but it is full of the momentary joy of divesting desire and love of loneliness and proves eye-opening if not transformative. Swann now listens to what he has known but failed to admit about his own relationship: ‘À partir de cette soirée, Swann comprit que le sentiment qu’Odette avait eu pour lui ne renaitrait jamais, que ses espérances de bonheur ne se réaliseraient plus’ (I, 347). Later music will do more than ‘voice’ the concerns of desire, it will create new experiences in the more attentive and open listener that the narrator will become. For the moment, at this evening, it is the materialization of inner emotive states which is supremely gratifying. Indeed, what Swann does seem to hit on in his flawed reception of the music is its ability to create a collective emotional consciousness. The empathy and communication that Swann has been hankering for in relation to the real experience of desire and love in his life, the phrase now brings about. As the phrase reappears for the final time in the sonata, something extraordinary happens to the individual and disparate entities who are gathered together at this concert:

Ces charmes d’une tristesse intime, c’était eux qu’elle [la phrase] essayait d’imiter, de recréer, et jusqu’à leur essence qui est pourtant d’être incommunicables et de sembler frivoles à tout autre qu’à celui qui les éprouve, la petite phrase l’avait captée, rendue visible. Si bien qu’elle faisait confesser leur prix et goûter leur douceur divine, par tous ces mêmes assistants. (I, 343)

La parole ineffable d’un seul absent, peut-être d’un mort (Swann ne savait pas si Vinteuil vivait encore), s’exhalant au-dessus des rites de ces officiants, suffisait à tenir en échec l’attention de trois cents personnes, et faisait de cette estrade où une âme était ainsi évoquée un des plus nobles autels où put s’accomplir une cérémonie surnaturelle. (I, 347)

The collective and rapt attention of the guests, the ritualistic feel of the performance administered through the priest-musicians and the spiritual presence of a departed man all make for an experience which is religious in both personal and communal
effect. The believer’s reception of both music and religion, at its extreme edges, flirts with hysteria and can induce rapture, and what is here presented as spiritual devotion is also a type of orgiastic eroticism. In his recent book on Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Declan Kiberd writes thus of Bloom’s experience of the public performance of music in a Dublin pub:

> Music melts all listeners into a shared orgasmic flow, one that is more communal than individual and [Bloom] seems to like it that way. It is hardly surprising, then, that Molly is presented as a communal fantasy more than a distinct person. It may be that quality which attracted him to her in the first place, his desire for that which was already desired by other men.**"*

Comparable in many ways to Bloom, both Swann and the narrator are implicated in the homosocial desire broadly manifest in *À la recherche du temps perdu* and discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. Swann’s pleasure here is likewise provoked by the collective nature of this musical performance as well as what he sees as its exteriorizing power. This sharing of the intimate, described almost as a turning-inside-out (‘une tristesse intime […] rendue visible’) is frequently eroticized and aestheticized in the course of the novel. Swann’s listening is, then, a lesson in artistic development, for the power of art resides largely in its ability to link what is individual and universal in human experience. In the *Recherche*, those who scour the site of everyday communications in search of a more public forum for their intimate desires, far from being off-course, are in fact those whom the Proustian text encourages us to see as artistically nascent.

The link between sexuality and speech is something that the Proustian narrator understands intrinsically. It is this basic understanding that causes him to sift remembered snippets of Albertine’s speech for hints of infidelity or revelations of sexual orientation. More even than spying, eye-witness accounts and hearsay, it is

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Albertine’s speech that provides the narrator with his richest source of speculation. Her impulsive outburst in *La Prisonnière*, for example, in which she (almost) enunciates the explicitly sexual vulgarism ‘me faire casser [le pot]’ (III, 840), sends the narrator into interpretative overdrive. Despite her slips, her often self-incriminating explanations and the impression the narrator sometimes gives of her linguistic offhandedness, Albertine, as we have seen, is sensitive to language’s potential as a site of erotic enactment, knowing not only how to enrage and impassion the narrator through a suggestive use of language but also how to serve her own needs by the same, seemingly innocuous but really very powerful, public tool. But of all the practitioners of sex-tinged speech within the novel, Charlus is surely a virtuoso. Holding forth on all manner of subjects in polite salon society, Charlus’s speech is always a dramatic performance at once concealing and revealing his desires. For the narrator and the other characters, Charlus represents an object of contemplation and interpretation; he is, as Gilles Deleuze puts it, ‘le plus prodigieux émetteur de signes’, and, in Eve Sedgwick’s estimation, ‘the novel’s most ravishingly consumable product’. In this, his speech is chief amongst interpretive devices. The faithful of the Verdurin circle, highly suspicious at first, come to view his conversation as opening up views on a singular, exotic and monstrous world. Delighting in the possibilities of salacious interpretation that Charlus’s speech affords during trips to and from La Raspélire, the Verdurin clique reach the point that ‘si M. de Charlus ne venait pas, on était presque déçu de voyager seulement entre gens comme tout le monde’ (III, 429). Sedgwick points out that ‘the invert’ is ‘defined in Proust as that person over whom everyone else in the world has,

potentially, an absolute epistemological privilege. But there are moments, tucked into the text, in which Charlus is not merely an epistemological quarry but is allowed to fully inhabit the fiction as desiring subject. In these instances his speech becomes more important as an ‘organ’ of desire than as the surface of decipherability it often represents for onlookers and curious listeners. For example, upon Mme Verdurin’s suggestion that Morel spend the night as a guest at La Raspelière, Charlus speaks for the violinist:

‘Mais il ne peut pas, répondit M. de Charlus pour le joueur attentif qui n’avait pas entendu. Il n’a que la permission de minuit. Il faut qu’il rentre se coucher, comme un enfant bien obéissant, bien sage’, ajouta-t-il d’une voix complaisante, maniérée, insistante, comme s’il trouvait quelque sadique volupté à employer cette chaste comparaison et aussi à appuyer au passage sa voix sur ce qui concernait Morel, à le toucher, à défaut de la main avec des paroles qui semblaient le palper. (III, 355)

Words here replace physical contact. It is noteworthy that these words do not have the object of desire as their recipient—they are in no way sweet nothings—for Morel is not even within earshot of this particular exchange, but are rather injected into the social setting allowing Charlus to handle his beloved without fear of displeasing him and whilst remaining within the limits of the socially permissible.

Such resonant analogies of the linguistic with the tactile encourage the reader to think of speech as forming part of the sensory equipment brought into play in desire. Doing so allows us to read certain of Charlus’s verbal outpourings in the full erotic light that Proust intends. The narrator, at one point, compares the sounds of love-making to those of violent murder (‘j’aurais pu croire qu’une personne en égorgait une autre à côté de moi’ (III, 11)) and, certainly, the violence of some of Charlus’s tirades, directed at the narrator in his early acquaintance with the baron, are

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88 Elizabeth de Clermont-Tonnerre describes Proust’s voice as having a similarly tactile quality: ‘Une voix particulière, un peu puérile, caressante, gentille, chargée de mille inflexions gracieuses, donnant l’impression de ces petites pattes douces, barbouillés de confiture, que les tout jeunes enfants vous passent sur la figure et les vêtements; c’est tendre et poisseux, on est à la fois flatté et un peu ennuyé’: *Robert de Montesquiou et Marcel Proust* (Paris: Flammarion, 1925), p. 10.
suggestive of a heightened nervous excitement akin to sexual climax. It is appropriate that the episode of the novel which perhaps most fully illustrates the complex relationship between speech and sexual desire should appear in *Le Côté de Guermantes*, that volume of social verbosity *par excellence*. Having summoned the narrator to his apartment at midnight, Charlus begins a nine-page diatribe berating the latter for various wrongs done him. As the harangue progresses, Charlus’s speech becomes manically rhythmed, shrill rage now and then subsiding into ‘des caresses vocales de plus en plus narquoises’ (II, 845), before finally peaking in his disdainful and vocally resounding climax:

(Le force avec laquelle il parlait d’habitude, et qui faisait se retourner les inconnus dehors, était centuplée, comme l’est un *forte*, si, au lieu d’être joué au piano, il l’est à l’orchestre, et de plus se change en un *fortissimo*. M. de Charlus hurlait.) “Pensez-vous qu’il soit à votre portée de m’offenser? Vous ne savez donc pas à qui vous parlez? Croyez-vous que la saline envenimée de cinq cents petits bonshommes de vos amis, juchés les uns sur les autres, arriverait à baver seulement jusqu’à mes augustes orteils?” (II, 846)

As far as the hero is concerned, Charlus’s words, terminating with his ‘august toes’, are motivated by haughty pride. The voice of the narrator’s more aged self is able to throw some doubt on this immediate assumption: “Peut-être étaient-elles du reste l’effet, pour une partie du moins, de cet orgueil. Presque tout le reste venait d’un sentiment que j’ignorais encore et auquel je ne fus donc pas coupable de ne pas faire sa part’ (II, 847). Charlus’s tirade does not, in fact, stop until he has provoked a similarly frenzied reaction in the narrator, who, in an uncharacteristic display of temper, proceeds to rip and trample a hat belonging to the baron to shreds. The highly-charged sexualized encounter continues as, now in a calmer mood, Charlus

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89 The narrator later finds he is not the only one with whom Charlus has taken this particular kind of fulfilment: “Il y avait en effet certains êtres qu’il lui suffisait de faire venir chez lui, de tenir pendant quelques heures sous la domination de sa parole, pour que son désir, allumé dans quelque rencontre, fut apaisé. Par simples paroles la conjonction était faite aussi simplement qu’elle peut se produire chez les infusoires. Parfois, ainsi que cela lui était sans doute arrivé pour moi le soir où j’avais été mandé par lui après le dîner Guermantes, l’assouvissement avait lieu grâce à une violente semonce que le baron jetait à la figure du visiteur, comme certaines fleurs, grâce à un ressort, aspergent à distance l’insecte inconsciemment complice et décontenancé” (III, 30).
begins nonchalantly to point out some highlights in his décor to prevent the narrator from leaving too precipitately. At this point, a piece of music can be heard, forming a perfect conclusion to the fortissimo just executed; it is, quite appropriately, the last movement of Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony, ‘La joie après l’orage’ (II, 850). This comical post-coital allusion exposes the hero’s (but apparently not the later narrator’s) ignorance of the part he has himself played: ‘Je demandai naïvement par quel hasard on jouait cela et qui étaient les musiciens’ (II, 850); to which Charlus’s irritable reply further underlines the hero’s short-sightedness. The baron suggests they now part ways forever, but ‘comme en musique, sur un accord parfait’ (II, 851). The figurative interconnection of verbal, sexual and musical performance, so fully and intensely wrought in this episode, continues to reverberate in far-off parts of the text. For example, later, at La Raspelière, Mme Verdurin will put herself forward as the most facilitating of hostesses to allow Charlus and Morel to ‘make music together’:

Mme Verdurin leur donnait alors deux chambres communicantes et pour les mettre à l’aise disait: ‘Si vous avez envie de faire de la musique, ne vous gênez pas, les murs sont comme ceux d’une forteresse, vous n’avez personne à votre étage, et mon mari a un sommeil de plomb’. (III, 431)

Charlus’s speech in the above episode is, thus, overladen with the eroticism of performativity. And yet, even after all of this, this singular episode still manages to offer up one more proof of how the ‘publicizing’ of desire works to achieve jouissance. When the narrator finally flings open the door of the drawing room to leave, he finds that two of the baron’s footmen have been eavesdropping on the proceedings within. The hypothesizing narrator immediately lists three explanations for why the footmen might be lingering close to the door; but the most intriguing suggestion and also the one which provides the most satisfying prospect of interconnection with other episodes in the novel is the following: ‘que toute la scène
que m'avait faite M. de Charlus étant préparée et jouée, il leur avait lui-même demandé d'écouter, par amour du spectacle joint peut-être à un nunc erudimini dont chacun ferait son profit' (II, 847). The thought that the whole scene may have been a performance staged for the enjoyment and benefit of its chief participant and the hidden eavesdroppers is, of course, purely speculative; but its presence even as speculation is arresting. That Charlus later undergoes masochistic flagellation in a room specifically designed with spying apparatus renders the narrator's hypothesis doubly persuasive. It is also noteworthy that one of the listeners-at-the-door is called 'Charmel'. The name holds a particular fascination for Charlus. Quite apart from its pleasing sound combinations, it is also a fusion of 'Charlus' and 'Morel' and is the very name that Charlus later tries to persuade Morel to adopt for the advancement of his career. It is thus implied that the footman has not only been instructed to listen but that he might have been 'named' by the baron and may even be the recipient of the latter's amorous attentions. To this extent, Charmel is a convenient synthesis of desired object, incorporated third party and listening public. What this protracted exercise in titillation demonstrates is that the use of speech, constantly blended with musical metaphor, can become not a sublimation of sexual desire but its equivalent.

Certainly more subtle than Charlus's all-out erotic-linguistic performances, but pervasive nonetheless, is the narrator's sense that spoken confessions of desire might provide not so much a catharsis as a partial accomplishment of desire's goals. When the narrator's desire for Mme de Guermantes sends him stalking the route of her daily walks, we are given the following meditation on the futility of this isolating pursuit:

Ne serait-ce pas en effet me trouver plus près d'elle que je ne l'étais le matin dans la rue, solitaire, humilié, sentant que pas une seule des pensées que j'aurais voulu lui adresser n'arrivait jamais jusqu'à elle, dans ce piétinement sur place de mes promenades, qui pourraient durer indéfiniment sans m'avancer en rien,—si j'allais à
Desire, modest in carnal aspirations, is nevertheless ambitious in its expressive aims, the ‘forme parlée’ of desire here being conceived of as ‘presque une réalisation’.

‘Mutism’, in contrast, is portrayed as the verbal equivalent of sexual frustration and is to be feared. Nevertheless, the hero’s speech is a rare occurrence in the social scenes of the novel, where it is the older narrator’s unspoken words that permeate the text, acting as the glue holding everybody else’s speech and actions in place rather than forming features on the social landscape. Other methods of verbal jouissance present themselves, however. Speaking one’s desire, provided that there are others to listen, can be a highly pleasurable, even orgasmic, activity in the Recherche. But, for both the narrator and Swann, having someone else speak of one’s desire, even inadvertently, is an experience almost unrivalled in its eroticism. Throughout the Recherche, Proust’s theory of voice as containing the essence of individuality is elaborated, refined and constantly returned to.\(^{109}\) It is unsurprising, then, that while the generalized fascination with proper nouns which permeates the work becomes more acute within the desiring mindset,\(^{91}\) it is in specific instances when the beloved’s name is spoken aloud by a third party that the name emits its highest and most explicitly erotic charge. Couched in the singularity of another individual’s voice, the symbol of any specific desire (the loved-one’s name) takes on an

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\(^{90}\) ‘Quand je causais avec une de mes amies, je m’apercevais que le tableau original, unique de son individualité, m’était ingénieusement dessiné, tyranniquement imposé aussi bien par les inflexions de sa voix que par celles de son visage’ (II, 261). And again: ‘des voix de femmes surtout […] je les trouvais toutes dissemblables, moulées sur un langage particulier à chacune, jouant toutes sur un instrument différent’ (III, 609). On this point also, see Jean Yves-Tadié, Proust et le roman, pp. 132-3.

exoticism which is fuel to the desiring imagination. In Du côté de chez Swann, the narrator describes two occasions on which he hears Gilberte’s name called out by a third party. The first of these auditory jouissances takes place on the young narrator’s first sighting of Gilberte in her garden at Tansonville. An elegant woman—the previously impressive dame en rose and later-to-be-discovered Odette Swann—calls to her daughter who is lingering at the bottom border of the garden:

Ainsi passa-t-il [le prénom de Gilberte], proféré au-dessus des jasmins et des giroflées, aigre et frais comme les gouttes de l’arrosoir vert; imprégnant, irisant la zone d’air pur qu’il avait traversée—et qu’il isolait—du mystère de la vie de celle qu’il désignait. (I, 140)

The description fits into a system of sensual imagery developed over long stretches of the novel. The ‘gouttes’ foreshadow both the ‘gouttes’ of pleasure that result from the narrator’s tussle with Gilberte in the gardens off the Champs-Élysées and also the incident of the ‘jet d’eau d’Hubert Robert’ recounted in Sodome et Gomorrhe, where the fountain’s stream is rerouted in a sudden gust of wind and drenches the handsome Mme d’Arpajon, to the great delight of the grand-duc Wladimir (III, 57). What is described as the pungency (‘aigre’) of the acoustic emission is equally resonant, corresponding both to the smell associated with the ‘cabinet sentant l’iris’ and ‘le frais, sentant presque la suie, du pavillon treillage’ (I, 485), the place of his fleeting sexual climax whilst playing with Gilberte. All of these are reminiscent of, indeed they employ an imagery directly descended from, the masturbation scene as it is recounted in Contre Sainte-Beuve: ‘Enfin s’éleva un jet d’opale, par élans successifs, comme au moment où s’élance le jet d’eau de Saint-Cloud’. And mixed with the odour of lilac is ‘une odeur âcre, une odeur de sève’.92 In his exploration of the sensorial world constructed in Proust’s work, Jean-Pierre Richard pinpoints ‘le fusant, le giclé’ as being amongst those qualities (the velvety, the silky, the

92 Contre Sainte-Beuve, précédé de Pastiches et Mélanges et suivi de Essais et articles (Paris: Gallimard, 1971)
varnished, the rounded, the flowery, and so on) attractive to the narrator and constitutive of thematic clusters which emerge in the text to reveal a particular libidinal energy. The imagery of the 'gicle' is applied to anything that opens itself, reveals its secrets and, in this way, answers the narrator's 'thirst'. The name, projected in this fashion, travels across a 'zone', perturbing and affecting the space it traverses; for the narrator it is made material and, most importantly, has fertilizing power ('imprégnant', 'irisant'), very unlike the 'songeries solitaires et muettes' of his introspective ruminations.

The second, similarly eruptive, incident occurs later, in the gardens of the Champs-Élysées, when a young friend calls out to Gilberte: '[Le prénom] passa ainsi près de moi, en action pour ainsi dire, avec une puissance qu'accroissait la courbe de son jet et l'approche de son but' (I, 387). In other words, as Alain Roger succinctly puts it: 'le prénom [...] gicle comme une éjaculation'. As Roger further points out, in the Recherche it is perhaps even 'cette volupté de la nomination, onomastique orgastique qui est la véritable possession'. It is important to qualify, however, that it is not simply the beloved's name which produces this rare ecstasy, but the name spoken by another. Of course, the narrator can, and frequently does, anatomi...
Here again, the notion of mutism is used to denote a truncated desiring experience. The ‘lecture muette’ of one’s own passion, not shared or acknowledged by other human beings, is one of the most alienating experiences Proustian lovers can have.

The themes of fertilization, ‘arrosage’ and verbal articulation which run through these passages, then, suggest a desiring subjectivity which, although it cannot fully escape isolation, is dependent to a large degree on the confluence of the imagination with the phenomenal world and, more particularly, with the fecundating input of other human beings.

Family

The bedtime drama of ‘Combray’ and its relevance to the psycho-sexual development of the narrator has been well documented. Without repeating what has been expertly discussed by numerous Proust scholars, I will here turn my attention to related aspects of the family experience, in particular how family, in its aspect of shared domestic space, is made a receptacle for the externalizing impulses of the young narrator. In keeping with the acoustic theme initiated above, it is worth noting that, like many aspects of Proust’s picture of sexuality, the sustained interplay of the notions of sexual performance and musical execution, and the antithetical notion of mutism (‘lecture muette’), has its origins in a primal scene from ‘Combray’. The earliest experience of reading, before evolving into a solitary pleasure, is a pleasure meted out by the mother and is an acoustic rather than a reflective event. As she

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96 Adam Watt describes this as one of the ‘Primal Scenes of reading’: ‘what is witnessed is not an act of coitus [...], but an act of reading, the ambiguous, suggestive, transgressive performance of a literary text by the narrator’s mother’: Reading in Proust’s ‘À la recherche’: le délire de la lecture (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 17.
reads aloud to her son from George Sand’s *François le Champi*, the narrator’s mother mediates his first experience of the written text. At this juncture, pleasure in the text cannot be divorced from the voice that reads it, quite the contrary, the voice is at the crux of the pleasure experienced, a pleasure undiminished by the fact that the mother’s abridgement of the story (‘maman […] passait toutes les scènes de l’amour’ (I, 41)) tampers with its central logic, leaving it virtually incomprehensible. The sensation felt by the protagonist is in the order rather of a soothing, than an exciting, pleasure, induced by the mother’s melodious and harmonizing rhythms: ‘[Elle] dirigeait la phrase qui finissait vers celle qui allait commencer, tantôt pressant, tantôt ralentissant la marche des syllabes pour les faire entrer, quoique les quantités fussent différentes, dans un rythme uniforme’ (I, 42). But there is no doubt here that the narrator’s description highlights the moulding that a voice can enact upon a text, the almost physical pressure that can be applied to words (the French ‘presser’ meaning both to accelerate and to squeeze). Subsequent sensitivity to acoustic stimulation, and its likening to physical interaction, perhaps starts here, and the legacy of this experience can be seen to develop in a more revealingly sexualized way later in ‘Combray’.

To return to those occasions when the young hero prods parental conversation in the direction of his desire, the terms in which this endeavour is described positively invite erotic interpretation. First of all, the narrator tells us of the name of ‘Swann’ that: ‘je languissais du besoin de le leur entendre dire’ (I, 142, my emphasis). In an effort to satisfy this need, he pulls the parents ever-closer towards this goal: ‘je les entraînais sur des sujets qui avoisinaient Gilberte et sa famille’ (ibid.). His mounting anticipation culminates in a noticeably sensitive reaction when the name is finally spoken: ‘alors, j’étais obligé de reprendre ma respiration’ (ibid.).
The potency of the pleasure experienced is left in no doubt, indeed, it is such that the narrator believes that it must surely have been allowed him as a great act of self-sacrifice on the part of his parents: "Il me causait un plaisir que j'étais confus d'avoir osé réclamer à mes parents, car ce plaisir était si grand qu'il avait dû exiger d'eux pour qu'ils me le procurassent beaucoup de peine" (ibid.). The whole process, he tells us, invariably results in a layered and powerful concoction of pleasure and shame in the aftermath:

This activity does not conform to the Oedipal sidelining of the father that we see so much of in the early pages of 'Combray' but rather involves both parents. To this extent, desire here intersects with the family as a unit of functioning relations rather than as the ruptured unit of Freudian fantasy. Of course, the activity accomplishes nothing in the way of deepening the relationship with Gilberte herself but is nevertheless momentarily immensely gratifying despite, or perhaps because of, the narrator's filial guilt at having corrupted his parents by making them participants.

The remorse experienced from such mixings of the sexual and familial spheres is no doubt amplified by the memory of the narrator's great-uncle, Adolphe, who falls foul of precisely this kind of forbidden mingling. Having been the cause of much family tension for his impolitic presentations between courtesans and members of his family, Uncle Adolphe tries to enact a complete segregation of these two types of acquaintance ('[mon oncle] tâchait autant que possible d'éviter tout trait d'union entre sa famille et ce genre de relations' (I, 75)). The narrator is thus only permitted to visit his uncle on certain days. When he breaks this rule and turns up unannounced
one day, he there meets and speaks to Odette de Crécy ("la dame en rose"). The hero, unable to keep his new acquaintance secret, proceeds to relate the incident to his parents, which leads to a definitive rift between Uncle Adolphe and the rest of the family. The chastisement of the uncle is not merely witnessed but, due to an inadvertent misjudgement, actually participated in by the child narrator who, embarrassed by his own inability to keep a secret, fails to acknowledge his uncle in the street. But if the relationship between the uncle and great-nephew ends at this point, the similarities between them continue to accumulate. Just as Adolphe had been in the habit of gifting family jewels upon courtesans, the narrator later donates Aunt Léonie’s furniture to a brothel and in fact takes this mixing of spheres to an unprecedented level by moving Albertine into the parental home and adopting towards her language and behaviours learned outside the confines of their couple from the structures of kinship prevalent in his own family.

Although in ‘Combray’ some of the young narrator’s sexual fantasizing takes place on the periphery of the main family action (in the upstairs lavatory where he masturbates and the lanes and walks around the village where he daydreams of girls materializing out of thin air), these instances of solitude in early sexuality are by no means the rule, for the sexual, in one guise or another, permeates the entire familial atmosphere of the volume. Indeed, if further evidence of this infiltration were needed, crowning the section of the young narrator’s experiments in the sensual and the domestic we find the Montjouvain scene, near the end of ‘Combray’, in which the portrait of the father is interposed between Mlle Vinteuil and her lover as a spur to sexual arousal. In the incestuous inclusion of the father’s image we are given a metaphor that very much harks back to Adolphe’s transgressive distribution of family jewels and forward to the narrator’s profane donation of family furniture: of
Mlle Vinteuil we are told, ‘Bien plus que sa photographie, ce qu'elle profanait, ce qu'elle faisait servir à ses plaisirs, […] c'était la ressemblance de son visage, les yeux bleus de sa mère à lui qu'il lui avait transmis comme un bijou de famille’ (I, 162, my emphasis). This ‘wrongful’ bequeathment in fact ensures the dissemination of Vinteuil’s work to a larger public after his death—as decipherer of his music Mlle Vinteuil’s nameless lover is the person who carries the Vinteuil ‘fruit’ to the next generation. The story of Vinteuil’s posthumous success is therefore intimately tied up in the story of his daughter’s illegitimate desire.97

If the family unit is a space in which the narrator can experiment with the ‘outing’ of his desires, the families of others are equally subject to erotic intrusion. It is not only his own parents whom the narrator ropes into his desire for Gilberte, but hers also, and to such a degree that Gilberte herself is only confusedly contained in this arrangement:

C'est Mme Swann que je voulais voir, et j'attendais qu'elle passât, ému comme si ç'avait été Gilberte, dont les parents, imprégnés comme tout ce qui l'entourait, de son charme, excitaient en moi autant d'amour qu'elle […] (parce que leur point de contact avec elle était cette partie intestine de sa vie qui m'était interdite). (I, 410-11)

‘Intestine’ is the word of note here. Gilberte’s parents, like rivals, spies and chaperones, are ‘insiders’, but they are ‘insiders’ in a very visceral sense of the word. The blood connection which testifies to their closeness to the object is fascinating to the narrator whose preoccupations and desires centre on the idea of the mingling and fusion of self and other. Indeed, it often seems that relatedness itself, and the fantasy of penetrating it, is what the narrator finds most arousing. If Gilberte is sometimes named as the source of this family infatuation, it is only because she is the sole

97 Inge Wimmers points out that if his daughter’s friend achieves immortality for Vinteuil ‘she could only do so by having lived en famille, by gaining insight into his work, and by participating in the cult his daughter had for him’, ‘Proustian Ethics: A Maternal Paradigm’, in Contemporary French and Francophone Studies, 9 (2005), 151-163 (p. 158).
member whom the narrator can respectably be seen to pursue. Even the orphaned and singularly disconnected Albertine is enjoyed for offering to the narrator the spectacle of a family relationship on which he excitedly imagines intruding: ‘quand elle embrasserait sa nièce sur le front, Mme Bontemps ignorerait que j’étais entre elles deux’ (II, 284).

The dispersal of desire over the surface area of family relations reveals something very important about the Proustian desiring machine—its tendency to veer away from the specific, to broaden, to use familial relations as though they represent an infrastructure of sorts for the free play and circulation of desire. Indeed, during the ‘euphoria of connectedness’ that the narrator experiences at the end of Le Temps retrouvé on contemplating Mlle de Saint-Loup, the metaphor of infrastructure comes glaringly to the fore: ‘n’était-elle pas comme sont dans les forêts les “étoiles” des carrefours où viennent converger des routes venues, pour notre vie aussi, des points les plus différents?’ (IV, 606). His sexual desire for this young woman, in whom he can trace all the major relations of his life, exists in perfect symbiosis with the now emergent aesthetic that she brings forth in him. As Michael Wood states: ‘Mlle de Saint-Loup represents a jouissance of plot; a dizzy feeling that no one can not be related to you. There is an imaginary family here’. The relation lacking in the dream-of-Eve passage quoted at the beginning of this chapter becomes an increasing topic of sexual fascination for the narrator. If he fails to make of sexual experience a relation with the object of his affections, he ends, nevertheless, by investing all relation with an element of sexuality; and this sensual apprehension of relation is not

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100 Micheal Wood, p. 19.
sublimated by the end of the novel, but rather carried through in its raw state, retaining its erotic appeal even as it merges with artistic sensibility.

The *Recherche* undoubtedly charts the privacies of the subject-in-love with incredible incisiveness; yet it is equally true that the characters who love in Proust's novel spend a great deal of their time trying to divest their desiring experiences of this private quality. One-on-one intimacy is not prized by the desiring subjects, and neither is it given discernable value in the work generally. If we analyse Proustian desire in terms of a subject-object relation, what emerges is a rather impoverished Sisyphean pattern in which success is also always failure. Present to us, the object of our affections does not conform to the dream but presents a bewildering and drab reality; absent, the dream is closer and so the beloved is once again bedecked in poetic desirability and the pursuit is renewed. The subject-object relation is therefore no such thing; it is rather a relation of the subject to him- or herself. The great pains that Proust goes to to undermine the conventional centrality of the subject-object axis has been explained almost exclusively in terms of a valorization of the introspective over the interactive. Much of the scholarship which treats desire and sexuality in *À la recherche du temps perdu* has thus contributed to the lexicon of solipsism that has been applied to the work over many years.\(^{101}\) Yet the basic assumption—that a refusal to prioritize the subject-object relation necessarily entails a negative relationship to *all* forms of 'otherness'—is a somewhat blinkered one. In fact, the difficulties of the subject-object relationship in the *Recherche* are part and parcel of the broader problem of how to relate perception to reality, the wished-for to the attained. Proust is not the first to use sexual relationships as the chief site for

\(^{101}\) A recent example is Nicolas Grimaldi’s *Proust, les horreurs de l’amour* (Paris: PUF, 2008).
exploring such discrepancies; indeed, disappointments in love have been used to
dramatize this tension between subjective and objective realities since the very
inception of the novelistic form. However, the subject-object relation is not the *only*
sexual relation in Proust’s novel, and is perhaps not even the most important one. In
the *Recherche*, the *intention* behind much of the behaviour of desiring subjects is the
involvement of others, even as the original ‘target’ becomes less specific. In a work
in which sexual desire is so often connected with frustration and anguish, Proust
frequently nudges us to look beyond the normative frame of desire (the direct
subject-object relation) in order to locate the sexual ecstasy his characters are also
capable of experiencing.
So far, the principal focus of this thesis has been on the movement of desire towards the exterior. This movement outward is but one side of a two-way desiring dynamic apparent in À la recherche. In the present chapter, I shall deal with how Proustian desires are constructed and modified by the internalization of extra-personal experience and explore how such appropriative tendencies serve to further problematize any notion of strict boundaries between self and other.

Un amour de Swann

In the Recherche, detection of the romantic desires of a character can often produce an exploitative approach in those external to it. Despite the social elements of the narrator’s desires discussed in chapters 1 and 2, this sort of exploitation appears to be something from which he himself is exempt. But, in the gossipy matrix in which the desires of the other characters are enacted, relationships are constantly being laid claim to by outsiders. Consider, for example, the Verdurin ‘faithful’ who are carefully monitored for any romantic leanings which might threaten the loyal base of the ‘petit clan’. The Verdurin salon becomes a controlled environment, regulating not only the social and political thought of its adherents, but setting itself up as the sole medium in which they are permitted to desire. Hence, we are told, the Verdurins ‘ne
s’effrayaient pas qu’une femme eût un amant pourvu qu’elle l’eût chez eux, l’aimât en eux, et ne le leur préférât pas’ (I, 187, my emphasis). This engloutissement of the most intimate aspects of the lives of the regulars means that any sign of desire taking an independent course, any indication that the object of affection is desired in his or her specificity, constitutes, in the eyes of M. et Mme Verdurin, a form of treason for which swift, conclusive interventions are the necessary remedy. Swann’s chief error within the clan is to have displayed precisely such an exclusive taste in his desire: ‘Sans doute Swann avait pour Odette une affection trop particulière et dont il avait négligé de faire de Mme Verdurin la confidente quotidienne’ (I, 246). Swann’s failure to defer to Mme Verdurin in this respect is but one manifestation of a more general attitude of independence that sees him retaining his superior contacts and glittering society engagements. Yet, somehow, it is his desire for Odette that proves to be the most objectionable part of his behaviour. The elevation of romantic attachments to a position higher than that accorded the very circle in which they are nurtured is taken as a proof of sacrilege in the Verdurin code: a dangerous, topsy-turvy attitude to the established hierarchy. Swann is ostracized as a result, and an alternative lover, Forcheville, is promoted by the Verdurins as a more acceptable companion for Odette. Brichot’s loving relationship with his socially inferior mistress suffers a similar assault, as does Charlus’s connection with Morel, a union once actively encouraged and facilitated by the Verdurins, but which is aggressively manipulated by them when Charlus wields his social muscle at their expense. However, Charlus himself has, by this point, displayed an acquisitive drive to match that of the Verdurins in orchestrating the marriage between Morel, with whom he is in love, and Jupien’s niece, over whom he acts as protector, setting himself up as
'l'ardent partisan de leur union' (III, 556). For the baron, the idea of the couple comes to represent an extension of the surface area over which he will have control:

Car là où Morel seul, nu pour ainsi dire, résistait souvent au baron, qu'il se sentait sûr de reconquérir, une fois marié, pour son ménage, son appartement, son avenir, il aurait peur plus vite, offrirait aux volontés de M. de Charlus plus de surface et de prise. Tout cela et même au besoin, les soirs où il s'ennuierait, de mettre la guerre entre les époux [...] plaisait à M. de Charlus. Moins pourtant que de penser à la dépendance de lui où vivrait le jeune ménage. L'amour de M. de Charlus pour Morel reprenait une nouveauté délicieuse quand il se disait: sa femme aussi sera à moi tant il est à moi, ils n'agiront que de la façon qui ne peut me fâcher. (III, 559-60)

It may not at first be obvious that the narrator falls into the category of acquisitive third party in a triangular configuration of the type outlined above; but although his appropriations of the desiring relations between others are certainly more subtle, they are not hidden. The novel's structure depends to a large degree on the repetition and recontextualization of what amount to a handful of key experiences and psychological patterns, revealing what Malcolm Bowie has called a 'parsimonious re-use of building materials and design ideas'.102 This is particularly evident in the love relationships, where each of the narrator's desires—for Gilberte, for Mme de Guermantes, for Albertine ('mes autres amours n'y avaient été que de minces et timides essais qui préparaient, des appels qui réclamaient ce plus vaste amour' (III, 757)—share common contents and a common trajectory. The sameness of the narrator's relationship with Albertine to those of Swann with Odette, Charlus with Morel and Saint-Loup with Rachel is equally highlighted. But the connection that the narrative draws between these is not always one of mere analogy. The Proustian narrator does more than recognize and point towards similarities, he frequently moves beyond explanation by way of parallelism and into what might be more accurately described as an active requisitioning of the desiring narratives of

102 Bowie, Proust Among the Stars, p. 253.
other couples. Swann’s affair with Odette provides the most compelling example of such appropriation.

In terms of the material text, it is difficult to see the inclusion of ‘Un amour de Swann’ within a narrative that takes the form of a Bildung as anything other than an arrogation. In recounting this story of an adult love where he does—sandwiched between two sections detailing the formative years of his childhood and early adolescence—the narrator appropriates it to the point that it takes on the hue of personal experience. ‘Un amour de Swann’ occupies the same privileged position as the ‘drame du coucher’, the walks along the two ways of Méséglice and Guermantes and the narrator’s first infatuation. Coming at the beginning, it belongs in the order of those things we need to know and ‘hold in reserve’ for a fruitful reading of the narrator’s journey. And yet, ‘Un amour de Swann’ is singular amongst these other defining episodes in that it is not an experience properly belonging to the narrator. But if Swann’s story is made, retrospectively, to loom large in the narrator’s early years, as a warning, a threat, or simply as a means of injecting into childhood an atmosphere of prematurely stunted desire, the narrator also, quite against the grain of history, traces his own mark on this affair long since passed by the time his personal experience is taking shape. The encasement of Swann’s story within the larger narrative in the first person means that, although it may be considered, for all practical purposes, a récit in the third person, the je nevertheless remains close and relevant. Indeed, were it not for the fact that the narrator was unborn at the time of the events he recounts, one might be tempted to compare him with the type of novelistic gooseberry epitomized in Scott Fitzgerald’s Nick Carraway. He succeeds, nevertheless, in maintaining a quasi-presence throughout by sprinkling Swann’s

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103 In Sodome et Gomorrhe, the narrator refers to his memory of a scene witnessed at Montjouvain as ‘une image tenue en réserve’ (III, 499). The significance of this phrasing will be discussed below.
story with anticipatory remarks depicting his own later life. Gérard Genette, who
exacts a compelling deconstruction of this and other Proustian 'anomalies',
comments that these remarks on the part of the narrator 'sont comme une signature et
empêchent le lecteur de l’oublier trop longtemps: bel exemple d’égocentrisme
narratif'.

Everything conspires, in fact, to purge the narrative of Swann’s affair of all
elements which would emphasize the idea that it did not unfold within the fabric of
the narrator’s own life. In earlier drafts, it is a cousin who relays the story of Swann’s
obsession to the protagonist; in the definitive version of the text, allusions to any
specific source have been removed. Remaining details of how the narrator comes
to his knowledge of this period of Swann’s existence are scarce and, when they do
arise, conspicuously vague. At several points in the Recherche, the narrator mentions
that he has learned or been told of Swann’s love affair at a time that is never
indicated and by a third party who remains forever anonymous. The absence of
viable explanation plays down the fact that such knowledge represents a serious
logistical hurdle. The reader is asked to accept that what he or she is reading are the
narrator’s memories of ‘les souvenirs d’une autre personne de qui je les avais appris’
(I, 184). Yet such cryptic remarks serve only to further raise the question of
vraisemblance that floats above the entire piece. No explanation on the narrator’s
part is enough to account for the fact that, as a second or third-hand narrative,
Swann’s story seems to have escaped the Chinese-whisper effect we might expect.

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references to Genette will appear in parentheses after the quoted text unless otherwise indicated.
105 As detailed in the ‘Notice’ for ‘Un amour de Swann’ (I, 1185). The 1987-9 Pléiade edition of the
Recherche makes it easier than ever before to note important genetic aspects of the development of the
work and to track changes.
106 See in particular: ‘Je me suis souvent fait raconter bien des années plus tard, quand je commençai à
m’intéresser à son caractère à cause des ressemblances qu’en de tout autres parties il offrait avec le
mien...’ (I, 191); ‘Je pensais alors à tout ce que j’avais appris de l’amour de Swann pour Odette’ (III,
199).
The fullness of detail, the reconstruction of conversations, and the minute analysis of Swann’s innermost thoughts and feelings would be a surprisingly difficult feat to manage, even for Swann himself, a possibility, in any case, which cannot be entertained, for, as Gérard Genette states:

Swann, ex-hypostase de Marcel, ne doit plus être, dans l’économie définitive de la Recherche, qu’un précurseur malheureux et imparfait: il n’a donc pas droit à la ‘parole’, c’est-à-dire au récit—et moins encore au discours qui le porte, l’accompagne et lui donne son sens. Voilà pourquoi c’est Marcel, et Marcel seul, qui doit en dernière instance, et au mépris de toutes les autres, raconter cette aventure qui n’est pas la sienne. (250)

At the end of ‘Combray’, before giving himself over to the narration of Swann’s love affair with Odette, the narrator makes what appears to be a pre-emptive attempt to quell any charges of invraisemblance:

C’est ainsi que je restais souvent jusqu’au matin à songer […] à ce que […] j’avais appris, au sujet d’un amour que Swann avait eu avant ma naissance, avec cette précision dans les détails plus facile à obtenir quelquefois pour la vie de personnes mortes il y a des siècles que pour celle de nos meilleurs amis, et qui semble impossible comme semblait impossible de causer d’une ville à une autre—tant qu’on ignore le biais par lequel cette impossibilité a été tournée. (I, 183-4)

Although this sounds like an explanation, within a novel celebrated for its penetrating analysis it comes across as somewhat disingenuous. As Marcel Muller has noted:

Il était en effet inconcevable qu’on se parle d’une ville à l’autre avant l’invention du téléphone, mais on a inventé le téléphone; tandis que Proust se garde bien de préciser quel est ce ‘biais’ grâce auquel il sait sur Swann, et sur tant d’autres personnages, ce que les intéressés eux-mêmes ignoreront souvent.107

Outside any of the narrative difficulties that the inclusion of Swann’s story draws attention to, it is the live resuscitation of Swann’s doubts and hardships in the context of the narrator’s affair with Albertine that most fully demonstrates the degree of piracy taking place. Many times in the Recherche, the desiring experiences of others are noted by the narrator himself as having more than a passing effect on his

107 Marcel Muller, Les Voix narratives, p. 125. Tadié makes the same point in Proust et le roman, p. 370.
relationship with Albertine, but nowhere is the nature of this influence so fully and explicitly avowed as in the following reflection from *Sodome et Gomorrhe*:

Parfois même, sans que j’eusse revu Albertine, sans que personne m’eût parlé d’elle, je retrouvais dans ma mémoire une pose d’Albertine auprès de Gisèle et qui m’avait paru innocente alors; elle suffisait maintenant pour détruire le calme que j’avais pu retrouver, je n’avais même plus besoin d’aller respirer au-dehors des germes dangereux, je m’étais, comme aurait dit Cottard, intoxiqué moi-même. Je pensais alors à tout ce que j’avais appris de l’amour de Swann pour Odette, de la façon dont Swann avait été joué toute sa vie. Au fond, si je veux y penser, l’hypothèse qui me fit peu à peu construire tout le caractère d’Albertine et interpréter douloureusement chaque moment d’une vie que je ne pouvais pas contrôler tout entière, ce fut le souvenir, l’idée fixe du caractère de Mme Swann, tel qu’on m’avait raconté qu’il était. Ces récits contribuèrent à faire que dans l’avenir mon imagination faisait le jeu de supposer qu’Albertine aurait pu, au lieu d’être une jeune fille bonne, avoir la même immoralité, la même faculté de tromperie qu’une ancienne grue. (III, 199-200)

The narrator’s suspicions concerning Albertine come from within himself (‘je m’étais intoxiqué moi-même’) but it is within this very self that he has internalized Swann’s narrative. So much so that, in fact, it may be the narrator’s picture of Odette that informs his idea of Albertine more than any word or action on the latter’s part. In his analysis of the *Recherche*, Genette pinpoints the nature and degree of the influence being hinted at in the above passage and offers the following compelling explanation:

*Ces récits contribuèrent...* : c’est à cause du récit d’un amour de Swann que Marcel pourra effectivement un jour imaginer une Albertine semblable à Odette: infidèle, vicieuse, inaccessible, et par conséquent s’éprendre d’elle. On sait la suite. Puissance du récit [...] On ne juge pas bien d’*Un amour de Swann* si l’on ne comprend que cet amour raconté est un instrument du Destin. (251)

For Genette, ‘Un amour de Swann’ is to the Proustian protagonist what the oracle at Delphi is to Oedipus: ‘sans oracle, pas d’exil, donc pas d’incognito, donc pas de parricide et pas d’inceste’ (251). In both cases the narrative-oracles are instruments of destiny because the heroes have made them so. Certainly, the Proustian narrator is no passive receiver of narrative. At the height of his anxiety about Albertine’s unknown life, a fleeting comment opens up to scrutiny the complex possibilities of influence and counter-influence between the hero’s desiring narrative and that of
Swann. Françoise, rifling through the papers on the narrator’s desk, comes across one where he has jotted down ‘un récit relative à Swann et à l’impossibilité où il était de se passer d’Odette’ (III, 868). The narrator is evidently in the middle of a ‘re-writing’, but what exactly is being re-written? Swann’s love story, now overlain with the atmosphere of the narrator’s lived experience with Albertine? The younger hero’s relationship with Albertine in the narrative present, become a living re-animation of Swann’s affair with Odette? The older narrator’s memory of both these relationships as they have become entangled with each other? To some extent it is all of the above. The self that Proust envisages here is one whose story, even as he lives it, is being continuously shaped by the stories of others; but what has influenced the narrator will in turn be reshaped by him. If the self is a site of assimilations of others’ experiences, it follows that a work of art emanating from this self would be no less acquisitive and, indeed, in Le Temps retrouvé the narrator makes a comment precisely to this effect. Contemplating the future work to which he will devote the rest of his life, he states: ‘En somme, si j’y réfléchissais, la matière de mon expérience, laquelle serait la matière de mon livre, me venait de Swann’ (IV, 493-4).

In short, the narrator effectively makes of himself a third party in Swann and Odette’s love affair as well as allowing this affair to be a constant third presence in his own affective relations. ‘Un amour de Swann’ is, then, an indispensable template for considering the narrator’s position when it comes to the desiring dynamics of other people; it establishes a connection between the idea of a third party and the novelistic device of third-person narration that will inform the way we read any subsequent portions of the text in which either of these notions of the ‘third’ arise.
Three scenes of eavesdropping and voyeurism

It is the narrator's privileged position from the sidelines of Swann's love for Odette that makes this episode eminently comparable to certain scenes of eavesdropping and voyeurism. In a novel in the first person, watching and listening in secret are, of course, important devices for the passing on of information. Yet scenarios of this kind are insisted upon to such an extent in Proust's work that they cannot be dismissed as mere novelistic convention. His predilection for scenes of eavesdropping and voyeurism is deep-rooted and can be traced back to his early fiction. In both *La Confession d'une Jeune Fille* and *La Fin de la Jalousie*, secret spying constitutes the fundamental pivot on which the narrative turns. Proust's literary criticism is clear about the importance he attributes to recurrence and iteration in the works of others. In the preface to his translation of Ruskin's *The Bible of Amiens*, for example, he writes of how, in annotating the text each time he detects a repetition or a similarity with another of the author's works, he hopes to awaken the reader to 'ce qui est, chez [Ruskin], permanent et fondamental'. The reader of Proust is, therefore, in turn encouraged to interpret the recurrences in Proust's writing as indicative of all that is 'permanent et fondamental' in his own art. By the time we get to the *Recherche*, the frequency with which we find the narrator on the other side of a partition, wall or window listening to, or viewing, sexual encounters between other characters is such that the configuration becomes paradigmatic. As well as any 'discovery' communicated in these scenes, it is the narrator's very curiosity about the sexual conduct of others that is dramatized here as the other, and natural, side of his need to involve outsiders in his amorous affairs. Yet despite the

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proliferation of scenes in which we find him transformed into spy and sleuth, the narrator’s unchecked curiosity is often overlooked in generalized comments on his ‘character’. Richard Terdiman has stated, for example, that “Marcel in bed” is one of the constituent images of *La Recherche*, symbolizing at once the two sides of his nature: the passivity of his relationships with others, the passion of his curiosity about himself.\(^{110}\) Although it is true that from *La Prisonnière* onwards the narrator is increasingly house-bound, the greater part of the novel is situated before this point and is concerned specifically with his dealings in society. The image that Terdiman attests as being constituent of the *Recherche* is rather, I suspect, bolstered by the seepage of anecdotal biographical material pertaining to Proust into the figure of his narrator. As for the narrator’s curiosity about others, it is, on the contrary, intense and it exists in tandem with his curiosity about himself, indeed the two are interconnected to a high degree. In analysing some of the most prevalent scenes of eavesdropping and voyeurism in the *Recherche*, I hope also to challenge the idea of the passivity of the narrator’s reception of external data, whether visual or aural.

Three scenes of eavesdropping and spying are particularly resonant within the work and, indeed, in the critical commentary surrounding it.\(^{111}\) All three are scenes of sexual intimacy between couples in which the narrator forms a third observational point. The first is the famous Montjouvain episode of ‘Combray’ in which the hero witnesses, through an open window, the dramatization of sadistic courtship between Mlle Vinteuil and her female friend. The second dominates the opening sequence of

\(^{110}\) Terdiman, *The Dialectics of Isolation*, p. 162.

Sodome et Gomorrhe and sets the tone for the preoccupations of this volume. Here, the narrator is witness to the first meeting between Jupien and Charlus in the courtyard of the Guermantes hôtel and their subsequent sexual coupling in Jupien’s shop. The third scene in question is that in which the hero first hears, and then witnesses, Charlus’s flagellation in a male brothel owned by Jupien in Le Temps retrouvé.

The even spacing of these scenes within the novel (roughly at its beginning, middle and end) encourages us to see them as underpinning the narrator’s sexual and moral education. They also contribute much to the temporal complexity of the work. Unlike many key scenes in the Recherche that achieve temporal resonance through Proust’s predilection for the imperfect tense, what Genette calls his ‘ivresse de l’itération’ (153), the scenes of eavesdropping and voyeurism are singular occurrences whose action, despite some incursions into the iterative, is largely recounted in the past historic. Yet, in terms of their collective impact, the scenes clearly are iterative; they resemble one another in content and structure and they anticipate and recall many times over important external and psychological events pertaining to the hero’s love life. The content of these scenes has proved a rich source of interpretive readings around Proust’s treatment of sexuality and the role of the visual in particular. What will be of interest here, however, is principally the position of the Proustian narrator in these episodes, the extent to which he orchestrates this position and the way it impacts on his own narrative of desire.

L’étrange point trigonométrique

Before discussing the way the scenes of voyeurism offer various points of comparison with ‘Un amour de Swann’, I would like to take a preliminary look at a
passage appearing at the end of Le côté de Guermantes. Just before the hero witnesses that first revelatory meeting between Charlus and Jupien, while awaiting the return of the Guermantes, he refers to his observation point high in the building as ‘l’étrange point trigonométrique où je m’étais placé’ (II, 860). The allusion to this position, markedly referred to in terms of a third point, is somewhat buried in what appears to be a digression on the views available in populous areas of certain cities:

With an advantageous point of observation, life behind closed doors becomes a veritable gallery of old masters. The view the narrator here daydreams about does not conform to the romantic ideal of an artist’s solitude in unspoiled nature, it is of a rather more democratic and inclusive kind. Reference to the voisin has the effect of retaining at the heart of the passage—which is otherwise in danger of becoming removed from the idea of voyeurism through an aestheticized, high-culture comparison—the notion of the commonplace snoop and of quotidian experience. The would-be witness is a generalized figure, potentially including every city-dweller, every neighbour in a universalizing voyeuristic activity. André Benhaïm makes an interesting remark on the narrator’s proximity to the scenes he witnesses and hears which very much tallies with Proust’s insistence here on the voisin as spectator. In such scenarios, Benhaïm writes, the narrator’s closeness to the objects of his observation marks ‘le comble de l’exagération théâtrale proustienne. Le leitmotiv de
la vision-audition n’est peut-être donc qu’un cas d’un autre principe récurrent chez Proust, que l’on pourrait nommer de *voisinage*.112

Due to a strategic rearrangement of the chronology of events, the meeting of Jupien and Charlus, which in ‘real’ time occurs directly after this observation, is in fact only recounted at a later point, the narrator delaying its telling until after that of his more mundane visit to the Guermantes, thereby assuring that he can enter into the relation of the homosexual scene with full narrative relish (‘cette attente […] devait avoir pour moi des conséquences si considérables […] qu’il est préférable d’en retarder le récit’ (II, 861). The courtyard scene between the two men is thus narrated instead at the beginning of *Sodome et Gomorrhe* and separated from the passage above by the division between volumes. It is therefore perhaps only in retrospect or in subsequent readings of this encounter that the significance of the earlier comment on the narrator’s ‘étrange point trigonométrique’ and the ‘digressive’ material that follows emerges in full force. Yet, the passage provides an illuminating way of reading not only the courtyard scene, for which it is a direct primer, but all three scenes in which the narrator observes intimate activity between others, and which, incidentally, all involve an interposing pane of glass. What the passage specifically highlights is the way that witnessed scenes throw our narrative impulses into gear. The complete or partial suppression of language, along with the limiting of the visual field to ensure that observation can only be fragmentary, invites the witness to create mini-narratives around the glimpsed image: the cook is daydreaming; the young girl is attended to by an older woman with the physiognomy of a witch. Thus, before the narrator launches into another of his voyeuristic escapades, he takes care to remind us that we cannot witness without also narrativizing what we have seen.

Some of Mikhail Bakhtin’s writings on the emergence of the novelistic genre offer an interesting light in which to consider the above passage, and indeed the many instances of voyeuristic and eavesdropping behaviour to be found in Proust’s work. Bakhtin explains that epic forms began to morph into the ancient novel only when private life became an acceptable subject of literature. Along with this shift towards the private came the problem of how to document it. The figure of the secret observer thus evolved haltingly, but hand in hand, with the birth of the novel as we know it. As Bakhtin states:

The quintessentially private life that entered the novel at this time was, by its very nature and as opposed to public life, closed. In essence one could only spy and eavesdrop on it. The literature of private life is essentially a literature of snooping about, of overhearing ‘how others live’.

The Proustian narrator’s penchant for views into private scenes in some respects, then, links him to the earliest practitioners of his future art. Indeed, it is tempting to compare the narrator’s observational fantasies to an example given by Bakhtin in the course of his discussion of how private genres came to be worked out: that of Lesage’s ‘diable boiteux’ (Le Diable boiteux, 1797) who ‘removes the roofs from houses and exposes personal life at those moments when a “third person’s” presence would not be permitted’.

In her study of eavesdropping in the novel, Ann Gaylin elaborates further on its ties to narrative agency, illustrating how the novel as genre repackages the snoop through a formalization of the activities of spying and eavesdropping to produce what she calls ‘the sanctioned eavesdropper’, the omniscient narrator of the kind we find in much nineteenth-century literature. Of course, by the time we get to Proust, private life has been opened up from the inside through minute attention to an individual psychology. But the interest in ‘how others

114 Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, p. 127.
live' persists. If anything, the issue of how knowledge of the lives of others contributes to self-understanding and self-construction now endows novelistic spying with an added, more personal, dimension that raises questions about memory, cognition and the very nature of individuality.

The narrator's digression on courtyard views is not, however, an indication of the view actually before him, which differs entirely from the populous scene conjured up. As he looks out from his vantage point high in the building he sees below him a wide and far-reaching vista, virtually uninterrupted, over a plane of low-rise buildings in which several aristocratic hôtels form the only distinct features. The narrator's panoramic view over his own Parisian quartier may be a flimsier, more narrow (and in some respects more typically 'Proustian') version of Rastignac's determined gaze over the city at the end of Le Père Goriot ('À nous deux, maintenant!'), but it represents an attempted possession-taking in its own right, albeit of the truncated and problematic sort common to the fiction of the modernist era.

Curiosity, voyeurism, art and appropriation are thus all intricately and subtly entwined in this passage at the end of Le Côté de Guermantes in what seems like a perfect inner commentary on the three scenes I will discuss below.

Mise en scène

Critic have often remarked on the common lack of verisimilitude that characterizes the mise en scène of the three main scenes of voyeurism in the novel. This characteristic offers a striking point of comparison with 'Un amour de Swann'. However, where, in the case of Swann's story, there is a scarcity of information to hand about how the narrator received his knowledge, in the voyeuristic scenes he goes to sometimes extraordinary lengths to justify this knowledge of moments of
intimacy between other characters. Despite this, his accounts of innocently finding himself in the right place at the right time push the reader’s willingness to suspend disbelief to its extreme edge.

In the case of the Montjouvain episode, we are told that the hero, during the course of a solitary walk, becomes tired and decides to rest for a while. He chooses, as the spot for this nap, a patch of shrubs beside the Vinteuil house, affording an unhindered view of the parlour window. Upon awakening, the hero finds that night has begun to fall and that he is separated from Mlle Vinteuil by just a few metres. The window is open, the lamp is lit and the hero takes the trouble to justify his continued presence stating: ‘en m’en allant j’aurais fait craquer les buissons, elle m’aurait entendu et elle aurait pu croire que je m’étais caché là pour l’épier’ (I, 157), which is precisely what he goes on to do. Earlier versions show that Proust’s initial conception of this episode did not include it within the narrator’s first-hand experience. The event was instead witnessed and then communicated to the narrator by a ‘cousin’. But, just as ‘Un amour de Swann’ is carefully disentangled from all explicit notions of an original source other than the narrator, so too the Montjouvain episode comes to be subsumed within the narrator’s direct experience.

The other scenes are likewise justified with explanations of innocent waiting or accidental passing-through. The narrator’s entry into Jupien’s brothel in the final volume depends on a remarkable confluence of circumstances. Again succumbing to fatigue (just as at Montjouvain) and searching for somewhere where he might slake his thirst, the narrator spots an establishment which seems to be flourishing in a run-down district where all other businesses have been shut up due to the war. That he

116 The first sketch to include the characters of Vington (later Vinteuil) and his daughter, shows that the Montjouvain scene was originally conceived of as a reported incident: ‘un an après la mort de M. de Vington mon cousin voulut un soir avoir le cœur net de certaines scènes qui avaient lieu, lui avait-on dit, à la Rousselière’ (I, 798, Esquisse LI ‘Vington et sa Fille’ taken from Cahier 14).
should not only discover a brothel run by an acquaintance in a remote area of the city, but that he should also happen upon it at just the right moment to see Saint-Loup exiting and Charlus in the middle of a rather dubious appointment, is good timing to say the least. This episode of *Le Temps retrouvé* displays the same tension between innocence surprised and an actively voracious curiosity evident in each of the other scenarios for, having stumbled unwittingly into the brothel that he takes for a hotel, it is by the compulsion of his curiosity that the hero ascends the stairs to investigate strange sounds and peers through a spy-window in the wall. In fact, he is drawn in by his suspicion of an activity of which, in the end, he alone is guilty: ‘Cet hôtel servait-il de lieu de rendez-vous à des espions?’ he wonders before ascending the steps (IV, 389). Once again, as at Montjouvain, it is the narrator himself who introduces the notion of spying.

The spectacle of the sexual encounter between the baron de Charlus and Jupien is witnessed because the hero, awaiting the return of M. and Mme de Guermantes with a query about the likely authenticity of an invitation he has received, has taken up a post by a window looking onto the courtyard. Of the three scenes in question, this is the one that is most fully embedded in preparatory material. The episode is accompanied by an extended botanical comparison that at once mirrors the interaction between Jupien and Charlus and acts as the narrator’s alibi. Transfixed with curiosity about the plant life in the courtyard, he watches to see if ‘l’insecte improbiable viendrait, par un hasard providentiel, visiter le pistil offert et délaissé’ (III, 4). He descends to the ground floor (la curiosité m’enhardissant peu à peu’ (ibid.)) to get a better view but no explanation is given for why one would need to feel ‘emboldened’ before being pushed to such an action, the subject of curiosity being still, at this point, a scene of nature. A commentary on the difficulties of
‘coupling’ and reproduction in plants ensues in which emphasis is placed on the part played by coincidence, timing and the general weighing of variables. When Charlus and Jupien appear on the scene and the narrator’s attention is diverted from the plants towards the human conjunction, the botanical metaphors so carefully put in place become entwined in the new scenario developing before the narrator’s eyes. A continuity of sorts is thus established as a mute courtship dance takes place between the two men. Jupien poses ‘avec la coquetterie qu’aurait pu avoir l’orchidée pour le bourdon providentiellement survenu’ (III, 6) and, when he leaves the courtyard, Charlus quickly follows suit, ‘sifflant comme un gros bourdon’ (III, 8). The adjective ‘providentiel’ is used repetitively over the pages detailing this event, as indeed are synonymous words and phrases such as ‘hasard’ (III, 4; 9), ‘miracle’ (III, 4), ‘impossible à espérer’ (III, 4), ‘improbable’ (III, 4), ‘la bonne fortune’ (III, 9) ‘possibilité miraculeuse’ (III, 9) and finally, in keeping with this lexicon, when the pair move indoors to complete their sexual encounter, the narrator’s remark, ‘la chance les avait servis’ (III, 10). But for the reader, the chief irony resides not in the application of these terms to the sex life of plants or the meeting between Charlus and Jupien, but in the narrator’s own position in the whole spectacle. The reader is forced to broaden the scope, to include the narrator’s very presence in the list of miraculous coincidences that he documents as taking place before his eyes.

As the episode proceeds, the notion of accidental overhearing and innocent ‘happening upon’ is abandoned. Jupien and Charlus return to the courtyard together and move into Jupien’s shop, thus interrupting the narrator’s observation. The hero may well be going about his own business when he first witnesses the two men in the courtyard but now he contemplates undergoing what, for him, amount to a series of acrobatic movements in order to satisfy his curiosity. Aware that the shop next to
Jupien's is empty, and separated from the latter by only the thinnest of partitions, the narrator decides that this will be the perfect place from which to eavesdrop on the pair. And of this target location, he tells us:

Je n'avais pour m'y rendre qu'à monter à notre appartement, aller à la cuisine, descendre l'escalier de service jusqu'aux caves, les suivre intérieurement pendant toute la largeur de la cour, et arrivé à l'endroit du sous-sol, où l'ébéniste il y a quelques mois encore serrait ses boiseries, où Jupien comptait mettre son charbon, monter les quelques marches qui accédaient à l'intérieur de la boutique. (III, 9)

The comedy of this 'I had only to...', followed by a long-winded description of the labyrinthine course necessary, brings to the fore the hero's avid curiosity and preoccupation with the sexual intimacies of others. Indeed, rather unnecessary comments on the past and future uses of the room are inserted into the already-swollen middle of the sentence, thereby increasing its syntactic complexity and serving to make the route it describes sound even longer, the empty shop even more difficult of access. This sentence takes on the air of a mini-adventure. However, having laboriously outlined this circuitous path, we are told straightaway afterwards that 'C'était le moyen le plus prudent. Ce ne fut pas celui que j'adoptai, mais longeant les murs, je contournai à l'air libre la cour en tâchant de ne pas être vu' (III, 9). In the end, the method which is not chosen is allotted more textual space than the one which is. The intention here might be bathetic deflation of the hero's adventurous turn of mind, but the passage also throws into relief and seems to gently ironize all the previous assertions of innocent coincidence, of being in the right place at the right time, for it explicitly sets the hero up simultaneously as a keen strategist and someone for whom curiosity will win out over prudence and planning. The outlining of the more prudent 'route not taken' might equally be interpreted as an allusion to the possibility of a covert rendering of this episode, one in which the je would not be in view ('ainsi toute ma route se ferait à couvert' (III, 9)). This
hypothetical report would involve a more circuitous narrative rendering, perhaps in the form of a second-hand story, in which the narrator would not be exposed as a voyeur. Seen in this light, the passage takes on an added significance precisely because it outlines a method that is rejected in the end. The path the narrator chooses leaves his traces uncovered, exposes him to discovery, and abolishes any notion of his passivity in acceding to this knowledge. His decision to take the direct, riskier route pays dividends, for he subsequently hears Jupien and Charlus in the act of love-making, an experience that goes some way towards completing his picture of the link between desire and suffering.

The inclusion of these scenes within the narrator’s first-hand experience obviously, then, puts an added strain on narrative verisimilitude. In a seeming awareness of this risk, the narrator tries to pre-empt any raised eyebrows on the part of readers by being the first to speak of the evident unlikelihood of finding himself in such privileged positions:

• De fait, les choses de ce genre auxquelles j’assistai eurent toujours, dans la mise en scène, le caractère le plus imprudent et le moins vraisemblable, comme si de telles révélations ne devaient être la récompense que d’un acte plein de risques, quoique en partie clandestin. (Ill, 10)\(^\text{117}\)

The insights revealed in these scenes are thus configured as rewards for risks taken. But what is the exact nature of the risk the narrator speaks of? There is, undoubtedly, the risk of his being discovered by the parties in question, or other individuals who might see him in the rather compromising position of voyeur (although with regard to the courtyard scene, he admits the unlikelihood of coming under the notice of the neighbours, ‘qui ont autre chose à faire qu’à regarder dans la cour’ (III, 10)). Yet, even allowing for these obvious dangers, the comment on risk remains somewhat cryptic, perhaps deliberately so. Again, the risk might well be interpreted as the

narrative risk of *invraisemblance*, handsomely repaid by the retention of these scenes within the narrator’s first-hand experience, ensuring a personal involvement in these secret episodes and avoiding the distancing effect of what Genette calls ‘metadiegetic’ narratives. Indeed, as we have seen above, within these scenes we can frequently detect an ironizing voice that serves not only to draw attention to the narrator’s presence, but to his participation in the triangular dynamic at work. Thus Mlle Vinteuil’s reference to a ‘hypothetical’ witness, which acts almost as an invitation to the narrator, as yet undecided whether to watch or leave, and Jupien’s collusion in integrating the narrator into the complex sado-masochistic structure involving Charlus in the brothel.

*Third-person narration*

If the way in which the text prepares and accounts for these scenes serves to highlight the Proustian narrator’s complicity in the acts he witnesses, so too does the alternation between interior and exterior perspectives that are at play within these episodes. In an article on Proust entitled ‘The Mystery of Others’, Jack Murray states that ‘The first-person vantage point constantly prevents both author and reader from going much beyond the ostensible behaviour of the characters observed’. First-person narration certainly should entail such a limitation yet, as we shall see in the

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118 ‘Metadiegetic’ narratives are Genette’s term for ‘Chinese-box’ narratives or narratives in the second degree. Taking the example of Prévost’s *Manon Lescaux*, he explains that, ‘*tout événement raconté par un récit est à un niveau diégétique immédiatement supérieur à celui où se situe l’acte narratif producteur de ce récit*. La rédaction par M. de Renoncourt de ses *Mémoires* fictifs est un acte (littéraire) accompli à un premier niveau, que l’on dira *extradiégétique*; les événements racontés dans ces Mémoires (dont l’acte narratif de des Grieux) sont dans ce premier récit, on les qualifiera donc de *diégétiques, ou intradiégétiques*; les événements racontés dans le récit de des Grieux, récit au second degré, seront dits *métdiégetiques*, *Figures III*, pp. 238-9.


context of the three scenes in question, it does not always do so. Indeed, the narrator’s position as a third, hidden point is accompanied by repeated incursions into the third person. Genette uses precisely this type of Proustian scene to highlight ‘l’entorse déguisée qu’elles font subir au principe du point de vue’ (219). He is, however, careful to stipulate that any transgression of a narrative code involves an implicit recognition of that code. In the Monjouvain episode, the reader is not made privy to what Mlle Vinteuil’s friend whispers in her ear because the protagonist does not hear it, just as he cannot see the look on Mlle Vinteuil’s face, and the perception of their actions and words is cut short entirely when Mlle Vinteuil closes the shutters and the window. Yet, despite this adherence to strict parameters of view and earshot, the depiction of the encounter between the two young women now and again surpasses not only what the hero hears and sees, but also, presumably, what the older narrator may have been able to ascertain in the interim. The most striking slippage into third-person omniscient narration takes place in the following passage:

Bientôt son amie entra. Mlle Vinteuil l’accueillit sans se lever, ses deux mains derrière la tête et se recula sur le bord opposé du sofa comme pour lui faire une place. Mais aussitôt elle sentit qu’elle semblait ainsi lui imposer une attitude qui lui était peut-être importune. Elle pensa que son amie aimerait peut-être mieux être loin d’elle sur une chaise, elle se trouva indiscrete, la délicatesse de son cœur s’en alarme. (I, 158, my emphases)

The ‘comme’ may be easily attributed to the ordinary deduction or interpretation that follows all witnessed events. Not so for such pronouncements as ‘elle sentit’, ‘elle pensa que’, ‘elle se trouva indiscrète’ and most certainly not for the final ‘la délicatesse de son cœur s’en alarme’. Whilst it is reasonable to expect a certain amount of blurring and exchange between the perspectives of hero and older narrator, indeed often it is impossible to make any clear distinctions on this count, an awareness of Mlle Vinteuil’s feelings and emotional reflexes as they happen goes far

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121 See Genette, p. 218, and Muller, pp. 148-49.
beyond the ken of the simple voyeur, as well as that of the narrator privileged with hindsight, and into the realm of omniscience.

The episode of the first meeting between Charlus and Jupien displays a similar narrative ambiguity. While on the whole the entire scene is elaborately set up for a communication of what the narrator can see from his vantage point at a staircase window, some elements of his report completely flout the restrictions so carefully put in place. So, for example, the narrative occasionally departs from attention to the facial and gestural expressions of both characters to convey information that properly belongs to their internal psychological workings:

Le baron, qui cherchait maintenant à dissimuler l'impression qu'il avait ressentie, mais qui, malgré son indifférence affectée, semblait ne s'éloigner qu'à regret, allait, venait, regardait dans le vague de la façon qu'il pensait mettre le plus en valeur la beauté de ses prunelles. (Ill, 6, my emphases)

A little further on, the narrative crosses over into the domain of intentions as we are told that the looks exchanged between Jupien and the baron 'ne semblaient pas avoir pour but de conduire à quelque chose' (III, 7).

In the scene at Jupien’s male brothel in Le Temps retrouvé, the temptation of third-person narration proves to be such that the text goes off on a tangent with it. The hero is spying on Charlus’s masochistic ritual through a small oval-shaped window in an adjacent room when Jupien enters to enquire whether everything is to the baron’s satisfaction. At this point, a bell rings in another room and serves as the signal for a narrative shift: a lengthy focalization through Jupien that also flirts with focalization through the unnamed client:

‘Une seconde’, interrompit Jupien, qui avait entendu une sonnette retentir à la chambre n° 3. C’était un député de l’Action libérale qui sortait. Jupien n’avait pas besoin de voir le tableau car il connaissait son coup de sonnette, le député venant en effet tous les jours après déjeuner. Il avait été obligé ce jour-là de changer ses heures, car il avait marié sa fille à midi à Saint-Pierre-de-Cléry. Il était donc venu le soir mais tenait à partir de bonne heure à cause de sa femme, vite inquiète quand il rentrait tard, surtout par ce temps de bombardement. (IV, 395)
Of course, such changes in perspective and incursions into omniscience are not restricted to these scenes but are found throughout the novel. Hence, the reader is told of Bergotte’s final thoughts before his death as he contemplates a Vermeer painting: ‘C’est ainsi que j’aurais dû écrire, disait-il’ (III, 692), and many conversations that are purportedly private are communicated with ease: a confidential dialogue between Norpois and the prince of Faffenheim (II, 558-9), for example, or Charlus’s conversation with Cottard about his planned duel, where we are expressly told that they are the only participants (‘le baron […] trouvait plus réglementaire que Charlie et moi n’assistions pas à l’entrevue […] Une fois seul avec Cottard… (III, 458)). All of these amount to the kinds of scenes Genette has in mind as being ‘scandaleuses pour les puristes de ‘point de vue’, où je et les autres sont traités sur le même pied’ (222). There is a particular proliferation of this kind of slippage in the society passages of the novel, where often very long stretches of text are presented from an omniscient viewpoint. An encompassing, dispassionate outlook is more suited to Proust’s purposes in his social portraiture, where exclusive adherence to the first person would have hampered the breadth of his analysis. The cognitive hijacking that takes place in the long-drawn-out salon scenes is less noticeable than in the scenes of voyeurism, however, for it is dissipated in a general aura of commentary and reporting from which the hero-narrator himself virtually disappears. Though unhidden from the rest of the company, the narrator, in these instances, seems almost devoid of physical presence, fading into the background where he becomes no more than a wall with ears, very much ‘outside’ the action. As Gene Moore comments, the Proustian narrator is ‘least visible as a character during the long salon scenes he records with such close attention to nuances of speech and

An interesting interpretation of this omniscience is to be found in Raoul Ruiz’s 1999 film adaptation of Le Temps retrouvé, in which we see ‘Marcel’ gliding through gatherings unnoticed or suspended in a chair traversing salons and privy to the collective chatter of the guests. Very different are the scenes of eavesdropping and voyeurism, where incursions into omniscience happen at moments during which we are not only aware of the hero’s presence but where, as we have seen, the text insists upon it by drawing up the measure of its limits. Such a narrative position transgresses ‘une “loi de l’esprit” qui veut que l’on ne puisse être à la fois dedans et dehors’ (Genette, 223).

With regard to the Montjouvain episode, Genette points out that these contrasting levels of focalization (through the hero and through other characters) remain on separate narrative planes, operating in parallel without ‘colliding’ (‘il y a là deux codes concurrents, fonctionnant sur deux plans de réalité qui s’opposent sans se rencontrer’ (223)). By this view, the narrative voice that witnesses the encounter between the women cannot strictly be the same as the one that reports the innermost thoughts and feelings of Mlle Vinteuil. A fairly obvious and technically logical point, we might assume. However, by the same standard these narrative voices should not then be able to ‘contaminate’ each other. But this is precisely what happens. Through alternating juxtapositions of focalization, the narrative voice enacts a pincer movement of sorts on these three scenes, giving the impression of a rounded possession of their contents. Thus the narrator who says ‘I’, the narrator who witnesses, seems implicitly to understand the nature of Mlle Vinteuil’s sadism, as if he has also had access to those inner thoughts, contrasting with her outward behaviour, which technically, only the omniscient voice could be in possession of:

In his explanation of the switches between inner and outer perspectives in these scenes, Marcel Muller broadens the standard frame of critical reference to include the author’s own psychological motivations. Referring to ‘la double présence du Narrateur et du Romancier’, Muller sees these voyeuristic scenes as veiled avowals on Proust’s part: ‘les réactions intimes des personnages’ he writes, ‘sont probablement celles que Proust avait eues, qu’il croyait avoir eues, ou celles dont il se sentait capable’ (143). Alternating distance and identification are, in this view, the cause of the rather stark juxtapositions of perspective characteristic of the three scenes:

La double présence du Narrateur et du Romancier dans les épisodes d’homosexualité aurait donc pour but de rendre possibles l’utilisation directe de certains éléments autobiographiques tout en respectant une volonté de secret, sans rien sacrifier de la psychologie des cas pathologiques présentés. (Muller, 155)

Muller’s argument is certainly persuasive and, for those with even a little knowledge of Proust’s biography, it will strike as being at least partially true. Yet we need not adopt an explanation ‘qui déborde le texte’ (Muller, 154) in order to see the perceptiveness of Muller’s comments. The stereoscopic treatment of these scenes, involving both interiorized and external perspectives results in a heightened level of complicity between the hero who witnesses and hears the interactions and the characters performing them; so much so, that the text seems to establish a connection between the protagonist as third party and slippage into third-person, omniscient narration.
A passive voyeur?

In the three scenes under discussion, the narrator’s rejection of that method of reporting whereby traces of his own presence would be obliterated has not prevented critics from seeing his role as an often disturbingly passive one. Moore echoes many critics when he points towards ‘the isolation of the narrator from any active or effective participation in the events he witnesses’. Margaret Gray, in turn, emphasizes the narrator’s ‘inner absence’ and describes his voyeuristic activity as ‘marked by a failure to respond to the illicit scenes he chances upon’. She further attributes the passivity she sees in these scenes to an evacuation of desire in the observer: ‘it is the release from desire, from its appetitive appropriations, that allows the world to be beheld as pure image, spectacle’ (51). With reference to the Montjouvain scene, Gray determines the Proustian narrator’s reaction as ‘strangely constative, objective, that of a dispassionate observer’ (52) and she sees his involvement in the other voyeuristic scenes as similarly withdrawn and clinical: ‘Many of the most pathetic and dramatic scenarios in the novel are thus flattened to the indifference and remoteness of spectacle, of a mise en scène’ (54).

Such assertions of passivity seem surprising on reading the passages in question which are, on the contrary, demonstrative of a voracious brand of curiosity. As we saw above, the various elaborate excuses constructed to account for the narrator’s privileged observational position in these scenes, along with the talk of risk, place a heavier emphasis on the non-passive aspect of his voyeurism. Of course, the narrator’s apprehension of these scenes is not merely visual, it is also auditory. On this count, Ann Gaylin takes pains to point out that, far from being a passive

124 Moore, Proust and Musil, p. 23.
125 Margaret E. Gray, Postmodern Proust, p. 38. Further references appear in parenthesis after the quoted text.
activity, eavesdropping contains a strong conspiratorial aspect: ‘once we eavesdrop, we are implicated in the story we have acquired. Once it becomes part of our repertory of stories, it also becomes part of ourselves’. The importance of the concept of overhearing, and by extension also witnessing, as a tool for self-construction and, indeed, for the construction of narrative should not be underestimated:

Moments of secret listening insist upon the importance of others in the construction and understanding of the self. Other people’s conversations play formative roles in the elaboration of how we understand them and ourselves. Eavesdropping offers in miniature a representation of the repeated efforts by which we try to process these other stories; it dramatizes how we need other people and their stories to create meaning and meaningful identities. (Gaylin, 18)

Gaylin is right to point out that the Proustian narrator ‘apprehends life (and love) through the mediation of other people’s affairs’ (Gaylin, 24). However, we may go one step further than this and speculate that it is actually the incorporation of the affairs of others which comes to form the main substance of the narrator’s own narrative of desire. The three scenes of eavesdropping and voyeurism, together with the received narrative of Swann’s love story, undoubtedly play a significant role in the hero’s construction of his desiring self. The hero-narrator’s presence as a third in these relations of desire between other people means that they, or rather memories of them, in turn become a third point in his own relationships, a ghostly background presence which can never be completely expunged. Voyeurism in Proust’s novel, and its aural equivalent, are manifestly not a release from the ‘appetitive appropriations’ of desire, for, as Jean-Yves Tadié rightly remarks, ‘il n’y a pas, dans La Recherche, de pur spectacle’.

127 Jean-Yves Tadié, Proust et le roman, p. 376.
Reverberations

The events depicted in the voyeuristic scenes of the *Recherche* stand apart from other key events in the narrator’s sexual and social formation in that they are singular occurrences. Unlike the ‘drame du coucher’, the description of secret masturbating in the ‘petit cabinet’ and a host of other experiences which, through the use of the imperfect tense, we ascertain to be habitual or recurring, the scenes of voyeurism and eavesdropping each occur just once, in a specified time and place. How is it, then, that these episodes of transgressive listening and watching come to gain such purchase on the desiring atmosphere of the novel as a whole? How, despite their singularity, and their relative brevity, do they attain that particularly Proustian characteristic of resonance that marks the many iterative events of the *Recherche*?

First and foremost, although Montjouvain, the courtyard scene and the brothel scene are manifestly not the same episode repeated, they are similar enough to lend an air of repetition to the plot, even over the lengthy time frames required of Proust readers. The narrator’s own sense of déjà-vu with regard to these experiences reinforces the feeling of repetition: the courtyard scene in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, for instance, resounds with ‘un obscur ressouvenir de la scène de Montjouvain’ (III, 9). Add to this the marked tendency to expand these singular events into universalized models of desire and we find that a larger surface area of text, not to mention moral ground, is permeated by what are a few fleeting moments of the narrator’s lived experience. Just as Swann’s specific experience is peppered with generalizations using the pronouns ‘on’ and ‘nous’, the Montjouvain incident is the touchstone for the narrator’s subsequent conception of ritualized cruelty; it is out of this incident, the narrator ruminates, that ‘l’idée que je me suis faite du sadisme’ (I, 157) emerges. The

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128 On the prevalence of the iterative in the *Recherche*, see Genette, pp. 145-82.
greatest expansion away from the strictly fictional moment comes after the hero witnesses the encounter between Jupien and Charlus at the beginning of *Sodome et Gomorrhe*. Here, generalizations coalesce to form an essay-style commentary better known as ‘La race des Tantes’ (III, 16-30). But by far the most significant means by which these episodes are diffused throughout the novel is the narrator’s imaginative and emotional appropriation of them into his private experience of desire and, thus, the narrative.

The most notable assimilation, after Swann’s story of desire, is the Monjouvain scene. Years after having witnessed the scene of flirtatious sadism between Mlle Vinteuil and her friend, the hero learns from Albertine of her association with Mlle Vinteuil. From this point, he repeatedly re-imagines the Montjouvain episode, retrospectively placing Albertine at the heart of it. These composite mental scenarios, in which Albertine variously takes the place of Mlle Vinteuil’s friend and of Mlle Vinteuil herself, are almost filmic in their description:

Derrière Albertine je ne voyais plus les montagnes bleues de la mer, mais la chambre de Montjouvain où elle tombait dans les bras de Mlle Vinteuil avec ce rire où elle faisait entendre comme le son inconnu de sa jouissance. (III, 501-2)

À Mlle Vinteuil maintenant, tandis que son amie la chatouillait avant de s’abattre sur elle, je donnais le visage enflammé d’Albertine, d’Albertine que j’entendis lancer en s’enfuyant, puis en s’abandonnant, son rire étrange et profond. (III, 504)

In a similar vein, when the narrator’s mother wants to distract him by encouraging him to take an interest in the picturesque sunrise through the window at Balbec, it is the new collage of Albertine and Montjouvain that takes precedence over the material view in front of him:

Mais derrière la plage de Balbec, la mer, le lever du soleil, que maman me montrait, je voyais, avec des mouvements de désespoir qui ne lui échappaient pas, la chambre de Montjouvain où Albertine, rose, pelotonnée comme une grosse chatte, le nez mutin, avait pris la place de l’amie de Mlle Vinteuil et disait avec des éclats de son rire voluptueux: ‘Hé bien! si on nous voit, ce n’en sera que meilleur. Moi! je n’oserais pas cracher sur ce vieux singe?’ C’est cette scène que je voyais derrière
celle qui s’étendait dans la fenêtre et qui n’était sur l’autre qu’un voile morne, superposé comme un reflet. (III, 514)

Albertine comes to inhabit Montjouvain from every possible angle; she is both the shy maiden pursued that Mlle Vinteuil had played at being and the predatory and sadistic character of the friend; her voice now speaks the friend’s words, while her laugh replaces that of Mlle Vinteuil. The witnessed encounter from ‘Combray’ thus undergoes a textual dispersal, sprouting elsewhere in the narrative under recognizable, but always slightly different, guises.

After Albertine’s death, the narrator refers to the ‘irradiation par association d’idées’ (IV, 221) which gave rise to both his affection for her as well as his jealousy. Yet, if we consider in detail the narrator’s reaction to Albertine’s comment about knowing Mlle Vinteuil (a comment that excites his jealousy so much that he decides, there and then, that he must marry Albertine), alongside the shock of a sudden association of ideas is to be found the contrasting notion of deliberateness:

À ces mots prononcés comme nous entrions en gare de Parville, si loin de Combray et de Montjouvain, si longtemps après la mort de Vinteuil, une image s’agitait dans mon cœur, une image tenue en réserve pendant tant d’années que, même si j’avais pu deviner en l’emmagasinant jadis qu’elle avait un pouvoir nocif, j’eusse cru qu’à la longue elle l’avait entièrement perdu; conservée vivante au fond de moi […] pour mon supplice, pour mon châtiment peut-être, qui sait? d’avoir laissé mourir ma grand-mère; surgissait tout à coup du fond du fond de la nuit où elle semblait à jamais ensevelie et frappant comme un Vengeur, afin d’inaugurer pour moi une vie terrible, méritée et nouvelle, peut-être aussi pour faire éclater à mes yeux les funestes conséquences que les actes mauvais engendrent indéfiniment, non pas seulement pour ceux qui les ont commis, mais pour ceux qui n’ont fait, qui n’ont cru, que contempler un spectacle curieux et divertissant, comme moi, hélas! en cette fin de journée lointaine à Montjouvain, caché derrière un buisson, où (comme quand j’avais complaisamment écouté le récit des amours de Swann) j’avais dangereusement laissé s’élargir en moi la voie funeste et destinée à être douleureuse du Savoir. (III, 499-500)

Rising persistently to the surface of this telling passage is a veiled avowal of how fully the Montjouvain scene has been arrogated and incorporated by the narrator. Montjouvain is not a mere memory, it is ‘une image tenue en réserve’ and, like the other scenes, and indeed Swann’s story to which it is connected at the end of the
passage, it has been ‘stored up’ (‘en l’emmagasinant’, ‘conservée vivante au fond de moi’) for the day when it will be put to use. The danger here seems to lie not so much in the rather melodramatically termed ‘voie funeste et destinée à être douloureuse du Savoir’, but rather in the permeability of the self. That the narrator considers himself particularly susceptible to what he witnesses and hears is without doubt and extends even so far as the most mundane threads of gossip:

Mes dispositions plus douces à l’égard d’Albertine [...] ne duraient pas plus longtemps que la fragile bonne santé de ces personnes délicates sujettes à des mieux passagers, et qu’un rien suffit à faire retomber malades [...] une parole avait échappé à quelqu’un qui les avait vues seules ensemble et allant se baigner, petits riens tels qu’il en flotte d’une façon habituelle dans l’atmosphère ambiante où la plupart des gens les absorbent toute la journée sans que leur santé en souffre ou que leur humeur s’en altère, mais qui sont morbides et générateurs de souffrances nouvelles pour un être prédisposé. (III, 199)

The narrator’s is a nature predisposed to receive and integrate the narratives which populate all social atmospheres and to which others seem relatively immune. These floating snippets of narrative generate more than just suffering, they generate more narrative. The narrator’s store of experience, his personal narrative, has become replete with extra-personal data and his relationship with Albertine is entirely mediated through this stockpile of others’ stories of desire, whether passed on as narrative or witnessed in secret. Ironically, the narrator will later discover that Albertine lied about knowing Mlle Vinteuil but it hardly matters; her inscription into the early scene, and the stamp it has made on the narrator’s conception of her has, by this point, generated hundreds of pages of narrative and has taken on the rootedness of truth in the narrator’s mind, and even, perhaps, in that of the reader.

We are, thus, encouraged to see the course of desire as an internal narrative, one which is being constantly rewritten, overwritten, not only by ‘discoveries’ on the subject’s part—of which, indeed, there are few—or by the manifold untruths told by the beloved, but also by the narratives of other desiring couples and individuals. Just
as the influence of Swann's story on the narrator is exposed most powerfully in that succinct, and seemingly insignificant, revelation that he is writing 'un récit relatif à Swann' (III, 868), so too, the various permutations of his image of Albertine are referred to in novelistic terms: twice in *La Prisonnière*, the 'novel' of Albertine the narrator has been developing in his mind goes up in flames ('Je regardais une flambée brûler d'un seul coup un roman que j'avais mis des millions de minutes à écrire' (III, 852); 'Il me sembla qu'une partie du roman qui n'avait pas brûlé encore, tombait enfin en cendres' (III, 854)). Part of Albertine's elusiveness and, therefore, of her appeal, is her aspect of a novelistic work in progress, constantly recontextualized in a series of kaleidoscopic mental shifts in which she is formed of one set of inherited fears after another.

The appropriations at work in the narrator's construction of Albertine are rendered even more complex when we take into account the narrative structure of the *Recherche*. Most readings, for the sake of clarity, separate the narrative function (the narrating *je*) out into a dual mechanism that combines the younger hero's perspective from the 'present', as he lives it, with that of the older narrator, who casts a retrospective eye over his past. This is, no doubt, an oversimplification, but one which is sometimes necessary if we are unwilling to get bogged down in the precise deciphering of voices at every turn. There is, however, an additional strain of the narrative voice which it is important to mention here. Among the total of nine narrative voices that he detects in the *Recherche*, Marcel Muller identifies what he calls the 'sujet intermédiaire', also referred to as the 'insomniac', who is not yet that *je* at the end of his life or on the point of retiring to write his work, and no longer the hero of the most part of the action in the novel from childhood through to social ascent, but an intermediary figure somewhere between the two. From time to time,
we encounter the intermediary subject remembering certain portions of his past from an indeterminate time before the final *matinée* and the 'Bal de têtes' but after the tantalizing and elusive promise of the madeleine episode. This is the somewhat immaterial figure who, in the opening pages of 'Combray', seems full of pathos as he recalls the various rooms in which he has slept and whom we meet again at the close of that section when he once more takes stock of these memories:

*C'est ainsi que je restais souvent jusqu'au matin à songer au temps de Combray, à mes tristes soirées sans sommeil, à tant de jours aussi dont l'image m'avait été plus récemment rendue par la saveur—ce qu'on aurait appelé à Combray le 'parfum'—d'une tasse de thé. (I, 183)*

Certain incorporations, such as Albertine’s superimposition onto the memory of the Monjouvan scene, clearly take place in the narrative ‘present’ of the hero, as a response to specific events or new information, and are related by the older narrator as happening in this way. Other incorporations are more difficult to place and seem to be the result of incremental assimilations rather than well-defined moments of mental association. The transmigration of Odette’s personality (or what the narrator believes it to have been) into that of Albertine is one such phenomenon. We cannot be sure of when the narrator actually came to know of Swann’s story. Anticipations in the text which refer to the narrator’s reception of the story at points in the narrative where the hero is still a child serve to further mystify this event. All that can be said with certainty is that it has been communicated to the younger narrator at some point prior to that comment in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*—‘Je pensais alors à tout ce que j’avais appris de l’amour de Swann pour Odette’ (III, 199)—and, of course, before Françoise uncovers the evidence that the narrator has been writing on the topic of Swann and Odette’s relationship. It is the intermediary subject, contemplating his life during a period of apparent existential limbo, whom we are allowed to glimpse in the act of assimilation. The very opening pages of *À la recherche du temps perdu*
illustrate the role played by sleep in the conflation of all memories, of people and places, ‘ce que j’avais vu d’elles, ce qu’on m’en avait raconté’ (I, 9), and, by extension, the role of sleep in the creative process. It is as he tosses and turns in fitful sleep that the narrator mixes up all the rooms he has known during the course of his life, that he becomes one with the subject of his bedtime reading material, that he forgets who he is, and crucially, it is also on the threshold between waking and sleep that the narrative of Swann’s love affair simmers amongst recollections of Combray (I, 183-4). Later, a more conscious appropriation of Swann’s story, a more deliberate equation of Odette’s character with that of Albertine may take place retrospectively, as part of the older narrator’s unifying, pattern-seeking view over his past life. For the other scenes too, their general import, and the patterns they epitomize in the narrator’s own love affairs, will be something vaguely perceived by the hero and retroactively imposed by the older narrator.

All of this, of course, raises serious questions about the role of memory, and indeed, that of a ‘personal’ past, in the act of narration. The narrator at one point even goes so far as to warn himself against ‘reconstituant la vie réelle de mon amie uniquement d’après ce que j’avais appris de celle d’Odette’ (III, 228). If the hero, as he lives, is creating amalgams of personal and extra-personal experience to form an image of those around him, as well as his own self image, then how much more true might this be for the dreaming intermediary subject and, indeed, how much more tempting for the older narrator, whose sole functional act is the synthesizing of his former self. As Margaret Gray argues:

Narration as the knowledgeable display of memory’s contents—however panoramically ordered, and reordered, in Genette’s demonstration—might more properly be read in the Recherche [...] as the incessant invention and revision of these ‘contents’. Such a shift from the notion of memory as fixed record to memory as ongoing invention finds interdisciplinary support [...] The past, whether personal
or historic, is increasingly formulated as a retrospective creation cast from the present.\textsuperscript{129}

Along with the Verdurins and Charlus, then, the Proustian narrator is one of those who lay claim to the desires of others, albeit with differing wishes (whether conscious or subconscious) and results. The narrator’s appropriations of the desiring experiences of other people are, however, far from being acts of straightforward ‘mastery’ over what he has heard and witnessed. The influence that these scenes and narratives have upon him is acknowledged as reaching far into the narrative act: he assimilates and his sense-making apparatus is, in turn, animated by what he has assimilated. In fact, it is safe to say that there is no depiction of the loves of others which is not remembered, reused, experienced subjectively and duly retold in the Proustian hero’s own love narrative. The result is that although the \textit{Recherche} may be renowned for its oceanic expansiveness, when it comes to a comparison of the love affairs it seems to tell a different story. What we find time and again is reduplication and recurrent patterns to the point that Proust’s aim seems to be less that of expansion than of continual, dare it be said, almost monotonous, repetition. Such strategies of reformulation would appear to confirm Peter Brooks’s outlining of one of the characteristics of modernist fiction:

\begin{quote}
[T]he implication that all stories are in a state of being retold, that there are no more primary narratives [...] that there seems to be a need for protagonists and storytellers, and particularly protagonists as storytellers, to attach their narratives to someone else’s, to be ever the belated followers of the track of another.\textsuperscript{130}
\end{quote}

Personal and extra-personal scenarios of desire, love and jealousy become highly imbricated, for the Proustian narrator both comprehends love through others and borrows their experiences wholesale, creating such an amalgam that it is often impossible to tell where the influence of others ends and his individual experience

\textsuperscript{129} Margaret E. Gray, \textit{Postmodern Proust}, p. 10. The entire chapter ‘Memory, Neurology, and Narration’ offers a fascinating exploration of these questions, pp. 67-94.

\textsuperscript{130} Peter Brooks, \textit{Reading for the Plot}, pp. 261-2.
begins. All of this undoubtedly poses some difficult questions as far as artistic and narrative originality are concerned. It is to these questions about originality and the influence of the social that I will turn in the next chapter.
The Self in the Social World

Much of the Recherche, in terms of structure, content and overarching ideology, is underpinned by a relentless opposition in the work between the world of action and the world of reflection, the social self and the authentic, or 'hidden', self, outsidersness and insidersness. In the passages that directly address the question, the narrator leaves us in no doubt as to which side of his dualistic system is to be prized and which shunned. So it is that, in the difficult-to-navigate landscape of the narrator’s opinions, this opposition stands out as something on which the reader may be confident of having a sure grasp. On so many other issues, the narrator’s opinions are ill-defined or paradoxical; we never can tell, for instance, which way he swings on the Dreyfus affair (and, indeed, it does not appear to matter), and his views on the social hierarchies of the day seem to sway between snobbery and egalitarianism. Here however, the Proustian narrator constructs what he only rarely permits himself: a dichotomy. In most other respects, the narrator is a pluralist, but where dichotomies of this kind do come to the fore—we see them, for example, in divisions between voluntary and involuntary memory, instinct and intelligence—^they serve to reinforce the aesthetic of Le Temps retrouvé. Each of my chapters on the movement of Proustian desire, however, has been concerned with deciphering what the text says

131 This is not to say that these divisions are straightforward. Edward J. Hughes conducts a nuanced analysis of the weighing of instinct and intelligence in his Marcel Proust: a Study in the Quality of Awareness (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), see especially pp. 176-84.
on the subject of the divide between a social and interior self when the narrator is not directly addressing it. Having instead put forward an argument for how desire acts as a pathway of communication between other people and the complex, interior experiences of the desiring subject, the present chapter seeks to draw together the lines of questioning previously developed into the broader considerations on selfhood and creativity that Chapter 4 began to address. The questions that now need to be asked are why such a dichotomy appears to be vociferously endorsed in the straightforward proclamations of the narrator and refuted in the novel’s practice?—in what way have the dynamics of desire in the work mirrored, contributed to, or prepared for, the artistic vocation set out in the ending?—and, given the processes at work in the construction of ‘self’, how significant is the narrator’s determined turning from all forms of social interaction, including love, at the close of Le Temps retrouvé?

**Artistic fantasy and artistic fear**

A glance over the many statements on the divide outlined above reveals a surprising tendency on the narrator’s part to shrink definitions, despite the fact that elsewhere he shows himself to be alive to linguistic possibility. Where the narrator chooses to speak of the ‘social’ self, he usually means only the self that is presented in salon society, although the self distracted by friendships and love affairs is targeted also. The meaning given to the ‘authentic’ self that comes to the fore in solitude is even more strikingly reductive; it is invariably the self of penetrating artistic sensibility, never the neuroses-laden self, the egotistical self or the self that nit-picks at the minutiae of others’ deeds and words. What is also striking is that these two threads of self are considered to be mutually exclusive. Where one is present, the other must be
cancelled out. The subject who socializes or converses with others is necessarily absent to himself and neglects his own self-realization: ‘En entrant dans toute réunion mondaine […] on meurt à soi-même’ (II, 225-6). Constantly seeming to tie in with this idea that social engagements represent a ‘death to self’ is the intimation, in these instances if not elsewhere, that thought-processes are uni-directional: ‘Dès que j’étais avec quelqu’un’, the narrator tells us, ‘dès que je parlais à un ami, mon esprit faisait volte-face, c’était vers cet interlocuteur et non vers moi-même qu’il dirigeait ses pensées’ (II, 95). To direct thought outward is to stop paying attention to the self and, in the Proustian universe, such inattention to an object, be it the self or something in the material world, provokes fear of its disappearance. Truly talented artistic individuals must, therefore, abdicate their social personality for the sake of their work; if they do not, they abdicate themselves, and the work thus produced falls into the damning category of what is dismissively referred to in the *Recherche* as ‘la littérature de notations’, or merely a written form of social discourse, designed to ‘mingle’ with and to please an already familiar audience. The moment the writer makes concessions to the social, he gives up his claim to greatness. On this point, the text is insistent. The newly determined narrator of *Le Temps retrouvé* must consciously avoid writing the way one might be tempted to speak whilst in company:

> Plus que tout j’écarterais ces paroles que les lèvres plutôt que l’esprit choisissent, ces paroles toutes physiques qu’accompagne chez l’écrivain qui s’abaisse à les transcrire le petit sourire, la petite grimace qui altère à tout moment, par exemple, la phrase parlée d’un Sainte-Beuve, tandis que les vrais livres doivent être les enfants non du grand jour et de la causerie mais de l’obscurité et du silence. (IV, 476)

A hermetic border is thus drawn up which seems to preclude the narrator’s social interactions from having any worthy impact on his potential creative output. Of course, in other parts of the novel, parts not directly or openly concerned with either the claims of society or those of art, a very different picture presents itself, and the two realms do not appear to be quite so autonomous. As many have acknowledged,
echoing the words of Revel, ‘T’out se passe comme si Proust, tout en rendant un culte à une esthétique, en pratiquait une autre opposée’.132

In terms of imagery, this conception of the conditions necessary for artistic production shares much with some of the narrator’s more isolated sexual practices. In their recording of the monadic procurement of satisfaction, passages such as the one above are reminiscent, for example, of the narrator’s sombre enjoyment of the sleeping Albertine, death-like only for her breathing. Both are fantasies of the suppression of the other over the fear of self loss. Of rather less easy enjoyment where sexuality is concerned is direct interaction with a waking being. The first kiss between the narrator and Albertine is an example in point. Unable to hold her whole image in view as he moves close to her and to enjoy simultaneously the experience of all his senses, the kiss is accomplished in an atmosphere of disorientation for the narrator:

Dans ce court trajet de mes lèvres vers sa joue, c’est dix Albertines que je vis [...] tout d’un coup, mes yeux cessèrent de voir, à son tour mon nez, s’écrasant, ne perçut aucune odeur, et sans connaître pour cela davantage le goût du rose désiré, j’appris, à ces détestables signes, qu’enfin j’étais en train d’embrasser la joue d’Albertine. (II, 660-1)

The destabilizing of the attention, the upsetting of the internal compass, is exactly what is feared in turning towards attention-demanding others, and the only apparent way of cushioning this anxiety is through calm dependence on one’s own ‘resources’. In yet another passage on the dangers of inter-personal relations for the artist, we are again reminded of some of the narrator’s propensities for ‘safer’ sex:

Les êtres qui en ont la possibilité—il est vrai que ce sont les artistes et j’étais convinced depuis longtemps que je ne le serais jamais—ont aussi le devoir de vivre pour eux-mêmes; or l’amitié leur est une dispense de ce devoir, une abdication de soi [...] L’amitié n’est pas seulement dénuée de vertu comme la conversation, elle est de plus funeste. Car l’impression d’ennui que ne peuvent pas ne pas éprouver auprès de leur ami, c’est-à-dire à rester à la surface de soi-même, au lieu de poursuivre leur voyage de découvertes dans les profondeurs, ceux d’entre nous dont la loi de

132 Jean-François Revel, _Sur Proust_, p. 196.
The passage promotes the idea that true fulfillment is a solitary, inward, even masturbatory act. Let us recall that the literal masturbation scene from ‘Combray’ uses distinctively similar analogies of inward voyages, burgeoning foliage and self-stimulated growth (I, 156). The previous chapters have endeavoured to show that this is not the only kind of sexuality enjoyed by the narrator; the present chapter aims to do the same for the question of creativity. But before we come to that, it may be useful to consider the motivation behind this often stringent separation between ‘surface’ and ‘profondeurs’. It seems that at the heart of these statements there resides an idea of art born not so much from observation of creative practice as from a psychological ‘defensiveness’. Alive in statements reinforcing the schism is to be found on the one hand an ‘artistic fantasy’, on the other an ‘artistic fear’. The first is manifested as a dream of self-commune, absolute originality and the concomitant idea that great achievement is the product of a “pure”, uncontaminated individuality. The second, is a dread of the self’s permeability, of influence, contamination, idolatry and, ultimately, unoriginality.

Statements reinforcing the schism between social and creative life take on an added interest and significance when we examine some of the character traits imputed to the narrator and some of the traits revealed outside the parameters of the fictional world of the Recherche, in Proust’s own preoccupations. The narrator of the Recherche is portrayed as uncommonly open to external influence, not least in the area of romantic desire. One recalls the power of suggestion that brings forth desire as illustrated in Chapter 1 and the narrator’s assimilative tendencies when it comes to
the narratives of others, outlined in Chapter 4. This susceptibility is dramatized and, according to the novel’s orthodoxy, relegated to the category of salutary error by the end. Some of the hero’s most ridiculous mimetic tendencies, indeed, are subjected to the acerbic corrective of comedy long before this. The child-protagonist, eager to emulate Swann’s prestige, imitates instead his facial tics and expressions at the dinner table, whereupon his father concludes that his son is becoming idiotic. Linguistic mimicry also proliferates, affecting most notably those characters with artistic pretensions: Bloch speaks in Homeric tones, Morel ‘does’ Bergotte in his journalistic writing and the young narrator also displays what Norpois calls ‘la mauvaise influence de Bergotte’ (I, 465). These same tensions between openness to influence and the need for uniqueness also appear to have animated Proust’s life. His gifts of imitation are well documented in accounts by those who knew him. Yet Proust’s susceptibility to the influence of literary predecessors was a source of continual unease for him and may go some way towards explaining his attraction to the pastiche form. In his 1920 essay, ‘À propos du ‘style’ de Flaubert’, Proust recommends the practice to writers as a supremely cleansing act:

Pour ce qui concerne l’intoxication flaubertienne, je ne saurais trop recommander aux écrivains la vertu purgative, exorcisante, du pastiche. Quand on vient de finir un livre, non seulement on voudrait continuer à vivre avec ses personnages, avec Mme de Beauseant, avec Frédéric Moreau, mais encore notre voix intérieure qui a été disciplinée pendant toute la durée de la lecture à suivre le rythme d’un Balzac, d’un Flaubert, voudrait continuer à parler comme eux. Il faut la laisser faire un moment […] faire un pastiche volontaire, pour pouvoir après cela, redevenir original, ne pas faire toute sa vie du pastiche involontaire.\(^{133}\)

In his superb analysis, *Proust, the Body and Literary Form*, Michael Finn extends this Proustian fear of ‘intoxicating’ literary influence to include a fear of assimilating worn-out forms of spoken language and sees both fears as emanating from an unusual cognitive ability, or disability, depending on how one views it:

\(^{133}\) *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, p. 594.
However one might nowadays diagnose the nervous disorder from which Proust suffered, the social mark of his condition was an openness to external stimuli, the kind of porosity that might be called neurasthenic. This attitude of unprotectedness was positive, on the one hand, since it attuned him to the world of sensation, the source of inspiration for the artist. But Proust’s awareness of his openness is the source of an acute concern about linguistic dependency and authenticity of language that flavours all his major reflections on literary aesthetics. For this potential writer, the spoken word, which floats in the air between interlocutors, authorless, unassignable, represents language at its most ambivalent and most threatening.\footnote{Michael R. Finn, *Proust, the Body and Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 65.}

Within the *Recherche*, concern about assimilating derived forms of language is given novelistic presence in the very obvious hierarchical division between social exchange and the literary use of language. Conversation, as mentioned above, is marked by the absence of artistic reflection: ‘La conversation même qui est le mode d’expression de l’amitié est une divagation superficielle, qui ne nous donne rien à acquérir’ (II, 260). And yet, for all his comments on the topic, we rarely find the narrator of the *Recherche* engaged in conversation proper. We do, however, find him listening, and what he hears provides both some of the greatest social comedy and food for his own thought, a kind of internalized dialogue. Repeatedly we are told that he has ‘listened’ to the narrative of Swann’s story; he listens also to Saint-Loup’s descriptions of the battle-field, to Charlus’s monologues on class and genealogy, to Françoise’s accent and her changing vocabulary and, perhaps most importantly, to the words of the ‘jeunes filles’. All of this, rather than deflecting thought, becomes the stuff of inner contemplation. It is not without significance that *Contre Sainte-Beuve* took form as a staged dialogue, the famous ‘conversation avec maman’. Nevertheless, what appears as a small offering of magnanimity towards the value of exchange within the *Recherche* and in other writings, remains somewhat buried under Proust’s and the narrator’s contrastive insistence that there is a choice to be made between social life and solitary reflection.
The fears and fantasies which animate this strained division are, of course, neither new nor particularly original. The idea of the work of art emerging from a pure and uncontaminated interiority is an aesthetic view stemming directly from the individualism of the Romantics. Also, as Richard Terdiman points out, the author shared aesthetic sensibilities with his contemporaries: 'Like most modernist writers, Proust exalts originality as the brightest sign of the artistic imagination’s autonomy.' The historical, ideological context in which Proust himself wrote should not be discounted in evaluations of the aesthetic pronouncements of his narrator. Proust’s disagreement with, and wish to set himself in opposition to, Sainte-Beuve obviously played a crucial role in his development of this sometimes stringent distinction between social and inner selves. Sainte-Beuve, with his infuriating (to Proust) tendency to conflate the man and the artist, his blurring of the line between literary and conversational exchange, his penchant for journalism, was, as far as Proust was concerned, much too immersed in social conversation, much too ‘external’ a practitioner for his writing to hold any genuinely artistic worth. Sainte-Beuve’s conception of literary activity therefore became the stone against which Proust would push in developing the early ideas of the *Recherche*. In his separation between a social and a literary self, Proust may also have been influenced by Henri Bergson’s philosophical distinction between a ‘moi superficiel’ and a ‘moi profond’. Although views are divided on the extent of such influence, it is incontestable that Proust’s separation of the self into these contiguous but exclusive threads resembles his contemporary’s formulation to a great degree. In any case, the general

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135 Richard Terdiman, *The Dialectics of Isolation*, p. 94.
dissemination of Bergson’s philosophy meant that such ideas were certainly ‘in the air’ at the time.

Another potent influence, pointed out by Anne Henry, was the contemporary sociologist Gabriel Tarde.\textsuperscript{137} Henry shows that, despite the fact that Proust has a tendency not to reference sources (what she calls an ‘abstention référéntielle’, 346), he drew heavily on the theories of Tarde. Indeed, she has indicated certain ‘emprunts flagrants bien proches de la formulation originaire’ (346) of Tarde’s work in Jean Santeuil, Sodome et Gomorrhe and Le Temps retrouvé. The rudimentary elements of Tarde’s theories include the idea of sociology as individual psychology on a large scale. Tarde places imitation at the very core of his social theory. Indeed, Luc Fraisse makes the very pertinent observation that, had René Girard known of Tarde’s influence on Proust before writing his Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque, it would have provided a strong reinforcement and validation of his own mimetic theory.\textsuperscript{138} The whole of society, Tarde believes, is formed by imitators and a small handful of innovators. The evolution of societies is accomplished through a process whereby this minority of innovators, who may not be understood in their own time, introduce the new ideas which eventually proliferate by way of imitation—the most cohesive and regulatory of social forces—and become accepted as the new norms. Society can thus change over time whilst maintaining an overall uniformity. Imitation is often practiced unconsciously, or hypnotically, and it also includes auto-imitation (habit) and counter-imitation (imitation, argues Tarde, actually reaches its apex in a conscious decision to fight against one’s inclination to follow the herd by doing the opposite—a point perfectly illustrated in the behaviour of Oriane de


Guermantes). The clannish mentality which Tarde underlines clearly animates the Proustian universe also. An observation from the mouth of Charlus on people’s discourse on the war, is a case in point: ‘Ce qui est étonnant’, dit-il, ‘c’est que ce public qui ne juge ainsi des hommes et des choses de la guerre que par les journaux est persuadé qu’il juge par lui-même’. The narrator continues thus:

En cela M. de Charlus avait raison [...] il fallait voir les moments de silence et d’hésitation qu’avait Mme de Forcheville, pareils à ceux qui sont nécessaires, non pas seulement à l’énonciation, mais à la formation d’une opinion personnelle, avant de dire, sur le ton d’un sentiment intime: ‘Non, je ne crois pas qu’ils prendront Varsovie’; ‘je n’ai pas l’impression qu’on puisse passer un second hiver’; ‘ce que je ne voudrais pas, c’est une paix boîteuse’. (IV, 367)

Although Proust never openly aligned himself with any sociological outlook and tends, in the Recherche, to be dismissive about sociological interpretations of life and art, Tarde’s type of sociology was the perfect complement to the author’s well-developed and biting portrayal of salon society. Moreover, Tarde’s emphasis on imitation drew the line just where Proust would have wanted and, in so doing, Tardian sociology served to corroborate the notion of artistic solitude that the aesthetic of Le Temps retrouvé promotes. It is easy to see how some of the terms Tarde uses might have been appealing to Proust, pointing up, as they do, a conception of the innovator as closed off from the general imitative flux: ‘Seuls quelques sauvages esprits’, Tarde writes in the preface to Les Lois de l’imitation, ‘étrangers, sous leur cloche à plongeur, au tumulte de l’océan social où ils sont plongés, ruminent ça et là des problèmes bizarres absolument dépourvus d’actualité. Et ce sont les inventeurs de demain’. 139 The solitude and ultimate interiority of the artist is thus protected and held apart in reverential regard. So too, in the Recherche, while everyone else’s imitation seems unconscious and incurable, the narrator’s imitative traits are put down to the mistakes of youth and indirection and are, in the

canonical conception, slowly shed in his coming to vocation. This is precisely what a fully-wrought Girardian reading of Proust entails. As Luc Fraisse has stated: 'Les analyses [...] de René Girard invitent à se demander si l’histoire d’une vocation que dessine principalement la Recherche ne reposerait pas sur un lent désapprentissage du désir mimétique'. There is undoubtedly a great deal of truth in this view. The unlearning of the laws of imitation allows the narrator to decipher what is beautiful, fantastic and worthy of attention in the everyday, so often shrouded in habit. Adopting the Girardian perspective whole-heartedly nevertheless depends on a tacit silencing of those elements of the Recherche that do not corroborate or come easily into line with the ‘theories’ propounded in Le Temps retrouvé. Endings need not always be accepted as the final word or the ultimate meaning of any text over all that has gone before. And indeed, even the final volume itself is not without ambivalence on the question. In their neat sectioning of social life from creative life, the passages we have considered do not reflect what takes place in the novel as a whole, the workings-out of which are so much more fluid and vital than the odd memorable phrase will suggest. In opposition to the parts of the Recherche which advocate extrication from the social matrix, and thus removal from the dangers of cliché and mimicry, there are other passages to suggest that such ‘purgation’ is impossible and that it is precisely out of a realization, an acceptance and a utilization of influence that originality must be born.

140 Luc Fraisse, ‘René Girard en critique de Proust’, p. 142.
Amalgams and recontextualizations

When the narrator looks inwards, what he often finds are the remnants of the legacy left by others. His appropriations, whether of word, story or image, maximize ownership over information and behaviour. The result, as we saw in Chapter 4, is that through striking transpositions, what is taken hold of is reordered to bear fruitful new meanings. Thus Albertine and Odette are placed in a relation of affinity with one another despite the fact of their having no inter-personal relation at all (Gilberte is vaguely acquainted with Albertine but Odette never meets her). This shuffling of experience not only makes for blurred divisions between self and others but also has the effect of mixing spheres of association and époques of the narrator's life. It is through such borrowings that the past is infiltrated by the present and vice versa. Another striking example is that of the chaste goodnight kiss of the narrator's mother. In 'Combray' the kiss is compared to 'une hostie pour une communion de paix' (I, 13). The narrator's later transposition of this image-laden kiss into his relationship with Albertine means that the maternal kiss is retrospectively eroticized while amorous relations with Albertine undergo a simultaneous injection of the familial and the pious. Such appropriations, then, add levels of texture, both temporal and psychological, to the narrator's experiences with others and a dizzying degree of entwinement to all the personal relations charted in the work.

This kind of recycling is not the preserve of desiring relations (although it does seem to be portrayed most richly in this area), it is apparent also in more general ideas on selfhood. The amalgamative elements of Proust's portrait of 'selfhood', however, are somewhat obscured by the notion of a preserved, unchanging past, spectacularly discovered in moments of involuntary memory. The power of such spontaneous memories resides in the very fact of their purity. These 'moments
bienheureux’ represent the bursting of an uncontaminated time-bubble, what Proust calls ‘vases clos’, clusters of experience metonymically held together:

La moindre parole que nous avons dite à une époque de notre vie, le geste le plus insignifiant que nous avons fait était entouré, portait sur lui le reflet de choses qui logiquement ne tenaient pas en lui, en ont été séparées par l’intelligence qui n’avait rien à faire d’elles pour les besoins du raisonnement, mais au milieu desquelles […] le geste, l’acte le plus simple reste enfermé comme dans mille vases clos dont chacun serait rempli de choses d’une couleur, d’une odeur, d’une température absolument différentes. (IV, 448)

Moments of involuntary memory bring with them intense joy but they are, by definition, short lived, for the present context can never be excluded from any act of memory for long—whether voluntary or involuntary. A most striking illustration of this is provided in a moment of fear in the library of the prince de Guermantes in *Le Temps retrouvé*. Initially, on the narrartor’s discovery of George Sand’s novel, *François le Champi*, the past in the form of a totally contextualized former self, surges to the surface: ‘avec la même impression du temps qu’il faisait dans le jardin, les mêmes rêves qu’il formait alors sur les pays et sur la vie, la même angoisse du lendemain’ (IV, 464). As the narrator closes Sand’s book and replaces it on the shelf he considers his reluctance to repeat the experience, however pleasurable. Realizing that he could never have been a bibliophile, even in the most personal sense of one who collects, not first editions per se, but the editions of his own first readings, the narrator states: ‘Je sais trop pour cela combien les choses sont poreuses à l’esprit et s’en imbibent’, and he continues thus:

Je sais trop combien ces images laissées par l’esprit sont aisément effacées par l’esprit. Aux anciennes il en substitue de nouvelles qui n’ont plus le même pouvoir de résurrection. Et si j’avais encore le *François le Champi* que maman sortit un soir du paquet de livres que ma grand-mère devait me donner pour ma fête, je ne le regarderais jamais; j’aurais trop peur d’y insérer peu à peu mes impressions d’aujourd’hui. (IV, 466)

Involuntary memory can only ever be momentary; narrative must be composed of other stuff. To dwell on moments of involuntary memory for any length of time, to
turn them over to the power of narration, is to destroy their spontaneity. To this extent, moments of involuntary memory remain as ‘singularities’ in the text, they can kick-start the process of narration but they cannot sustain it. The great bulk of Proust’s narrative demands, and depends on, the kind of contextual ‘contamination’ precluded from the properly ‘involuntary’ memory—we need only think of the importance of repetition as a structuring, texturing device to see the truth of this. The memory of his mother’s kiss is changed forever for the narrator when it is recontextualized in his relationship with Albertine. Something is lost, no doubt, but that something is neither the narrative pleasure of deliberate association nor the readerly pleasure of intratextual links. It is precisely because the associations are allowed to be played out in, and contaminated by, the present that they become interesting. The moments of involuntary memory can, for all that, stand unharmed in the text, as beautiful emblems of the kind of experience we can all relate to and which Proust describes so poignantly. They also serve as bridges giving easier access to layers of the past that can then be explored in a more methodical way. The ‘future’ work that the narrator postulates at the end of *Le Temps retrouvé* may hold involuntary memory up as a model, but the text we hold in our hands is a very different beast. As Antoine Compagnon has put it:

_Si le narrateur était fidèle à la doctrine qu’il élabore dans _Le Temps retrouvé_, il devrait s’écrier comme Swann: ‘Dire que j’ai gâché des années de ma vie pour un livre qui n’était pas mon genre’. Mais le narrateur n’aurait jamais écrit le livre conforme au modèle idéal tracé dans _Le Temps retrouvé_, comme Swann n’aurait jamais aimé une femme qui eût été son genre. Et ce livre-là, et cette femme-là, nous auraient ennuyés. Voilà le dernier mot de l’indéterminisme proustien. On postule des lois, un livre idéal, une femme idéale, mais ce n’est jamais celui-là, celle-là qu’on aime, et on aime l’autre justement parce qu’il n’est pas celui-là, parce qu’elle n’est pas celle-là._142

However much the narrator speaks of the need to apply himself to the decipherment of these involuntary memories, his narration necessarily departs from

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the involuntary, it must unravel in time. Just like those scenes glimpsed behind other people’s windows, these illuminations of past experience in their purest essence attract the elaborative, ordering impulse which is narration. And, as we saw in the previous chapter, any personal narrative act has a tendency to enfold within it the narratives and experiences belonging to others. In their anthropological study on the relation between self and narrative, Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps stress the extent to which our experience is of a narrative order and how permeable personal narratives are to outside influences:

Although many societies celebrate the notion of an individual thinking ego, the development of self-awareness in all human beings is inextricably tied to an awareness of other people and things. From this perspective, we define ourselves through our past, present, future and imagined involvements with people and things; our selves extend into these worlds, and they into us.\(^{143}\)

The narrator’s linguistic borrowings in the sphere of his desire are particularly noteworthy on this count. The narrator tells us of his verbal exchanges with Albertine that: ‘au milieu des expressions charnelles, on en reconnaîtra d’autres qui étaient propres à ma mère et à ma grand-mère. Car peu à peu, je ressemblais à tous mes parents’ (III, 586). In similar fashion, the grandmother had used the words and inflections of Mme de Sévigné when communicating with her daughter, who in turn uses these expressions as a kind of homage, the seal of deepest affection, when speaking to her own son after her mother’s death; proof that even the purest love borrows the terms of its expression. But then, any use of language is at best a recontextualization, for as Bakhtin emphasizes in ‘Discourse in the Novel’:

Language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the border between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes ‘one’s own’ only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal

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language [...] but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions.144

At certain moments, the Proustian text openly endorses just the type of conception of self that underpins Bakhtin’s theory of linguistic dialogism. In such instances, the narrator speaks of individuality not as a given, something to be dragged from the depths of an interior self which is hidden from the world or developed in Tarde’s metaphorical ‘cloche à plongeur’, but rather as a hotchpotch creation, a mixed bag of borrowed or resurrected lives, experiences and relationships:

Je parlais à Albertine, tantôt comme l’enfant que j’avais été à Combray parlant à ma mère, tantôt comme ma grand-mère me parlait. Quand nous avons dépassé un certain âge, l’âme de l’enfant que nous fûmes et l’âme des morts dont nous sommes sortis viennent nous jeter à poignée leurs richesses et leurs mauvais sorts, demandant à coopérer aux nouveaux sentiments que nous éprouvons et dans lesquels, effaçant leur ancienne effigie, nous les refondons en une création originale. (Ill, 586-87)

The effacement of the effigy stands here as a powerful symbol denoting the idea that influence need not mean idolatry. Such amalgams and borrowings would seem to sit in uneasy company with some of Proust’s best known proclamations on the solipsistic tendencies of love and also on the nature of individuality. Strikingly, this idea of the self as a kind of crucible from which originality may be born through the work of composition and remodelling (‘refondre’) sounds very like the sociological conception of individuality as resumed by Descombes:

Le principe d’une conception sociologique des choses est que le groupe précède l’individu, de sorte que l’individualité humaine ne peut pas être considérée comme une donnée primitive, qu’elle doit être décrite comme le produit d’un travail individuel.145

The passage on resurgent hereditary traits is significant also because it dissolves the seeming exclusivity between the concepts of influence and originality often prevalent in pronouncements on art or ‘le monde’. Originality can prevail because, in quasi-Darwinian terms, ‘si les choses se répètent, c’est avec de grandes variations’ (III,

144 M. M. Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, pp. 293-94.
586). Indeed, this outlook has more in common with a relational conception of selfhood than with the classical, Cartesian model that must, admittedly, have held a certain appeal for Proust. As Garry Hagberg explains:

On the Cartesian model of selfhood, the human being is pictured as a hermetically sealed point of consciousness with transparent introspective access to its own contents; on this view the self would predate any of its engagements with what we would then, under the influence of this model, call the ‘outside world’, and it would only contingently associate with that outside world. The relational conception, in stark contrast, sees the self as not merely contingently associated with that world, but rather as constituted by it: the contents of selfhood are not hermetically sealed inside a mental world prior to those external engagements, and they are not necessarily transparently available to introspection.¹⁴⁶

The influence that the Cartesian model might have had over the development of the aesthetic of Le Temps retrouvé, did not however, lead Proust to adopt its chief flaw—the Recherche is very much aware of language as a shared medium, whereas ‘la philosophie de la subjectivité a fait entièrement abstraction de la médiation langagière qui véhicule son argumentation sur le “je suis” et le “je pense”.’¹⁴⁷ At the end of the novel, the idea that the only conversation worth having is the conversation with oneself is brought forward. However, so many times over in its long-drawn-out construction, the Recherche has indicated that the internal conversation has, precisely, been made up of dialogue with the outside and with others, with numerous recontextualizations of others’ behaviour and of their words. The ‘jardin intérieur où nous sommes forcés de rester toujours’ (III, 334) is in fact a space populated with extra-personal experience. When the narrator is not engaged in upholding the exclusivity of the two forms of self, their hermetic existence, he has actively endorsed the dialogism of experience. What might appear to be an internal

‘monologue’ is affected by, and in turn affects, what takes place in our shared or social life with other people:

If relations with others can affect the inner self, change the direction of the ‘essai psychologique’ as Proust puts it, then surely they must affect all products of this inner self, including creative work. We saw in Chapter 4 how the haunting of the narrator’s own experience of desire, and by implication of his future work, is apparent beyond the influence of genetic precursors—indeed, the narrator attributes to Swann the material not only of his life but also of his future book, thus openly avowing the input and influence of others and of the self’s formation in the social world. Perhaps more than any explicit statement, it is this assimilation of the narratives of other characters into the narrator’s own swelling narrative that betrays the conception of self really divulged in the Recherche. Notions of slow gestation, taking place all along, almost without the narrator’s knowledge, now come to the fore: ‘Je me sentais accru de cette œuvre que je portais en moi (comme par quelque chose de précieux et de fragile qui m’eût été confié et que j’aurais voulu remettre intact aux mains auxquelles il était destiné et qui n’étaient pas les miennes)’ (IV, 613-14). Turning inwards, then, includes the notion of turning to face that part of the self characterized by otherness, as Paul Ricoeur would have it, ‘l’ipseité du soi-même implique l’altérité à un degré si intime que l’une ne se laisse pas penser sans l’autre, que l’une passe plutôt dans l’autre’.\(^{148}\) Crucially, such dissolution of the barriers

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between self and others is both one of the reigning sexual fantasies of the Proustian subject as well as the very stamp of the artist. Or as Malcolm Bowie puts it:

During artistic creation, the self has the higher duty to become indefinitely porous to what lies outside it; to press no individual claim other than that of its own power of sympathy; to welcome all comers, the whole raggle-taggle procession of them, into its now hugely extended interior world.  

Such a reading serves to highlight one of the most perplexing aspects of the novel, one of its irresolvable inner conflicts, that is, Proust’s setting up of the idea of a pure individuality as the foundational rock of his work and the simultaneous exposure of pure individuality as myth. This is not to say, however, that the artist, even the one who works with language, cannot produce original work. Style, as Proust hesitatingly expresses in a letter to Anna de Noailles, is an effect of ‘blending’ (‘une espèce de fondu’). By this conception, the influence of others and even their assimilated experiences are as if absorbed into the internal fabric and made to cohere in the unity of the artist’s subjective vision of the world. Indeed, the narrator’s receptive acts, where the experiences of other people are involved, only become properly interactive at the point at which he relates these to his personal experiences.

Significantly, the analogies of literary creation that emerge in Le Temps retrouvé tend to stress the nature of amalgam, patchwork and blending that the creative act embodies. The creation of the book is compared with the construction of churches and cathedrals, with dressmaking and even with cookery: ‘ne ferais-je pas mon livre de la façon que Françoise faisait ce bœuf mode […] dont tant de morceaux de viandes ajoutés et choisis enrichissaient la gelée?’ (IV, 612). As the narrator moves ever closer to his resolution to forgo society, the imagined book, on the other hand, becomes ever more populous: ‘il n’y aurait pas que ma grand-mère, pas qu’Albertine, mais bien d’autres encore dont j’avais pu assimiler une parole, un

149 Malcolm Bowie, Proust Among the Stars, p. 204.
150 Correspondance de Marcel Proust, IV, p. 156.
regard [...] un livre est un grand cimetière’ (IV, 482). Every lover, every doubter
‘ont apporté chacune leur pierre pour l’édification du monument’ (IV, 482). The
more we compare the history of the narrator’s relationships with this form of
creativity, the more easily we can perceive that his desiring relations have been
useful to him as more than simply lessons learned and pain endured, that, in fact, his
method of desiring has been an experiential model for literary composition. The
signs are there as early as ‘Combray’, where, on the brink of entering on the story of
Swann’s love affair, the narrator provides us with an idea of memory, and indeed of
self, as a heterogeneous, accumulative and even acquisitive process:

Tous ces souvenirs ajoutés les uns aux autres ne formaient plus qu’une masse, mais
non sans qu’on ne pût distinguer entre eux—entre les plus anciens, et ceux plus
récents, nés d’un parfum, puis ceux qui n’étaient que les souvenirs d’une autre
personne de qui je les avais appris—sinon des fissures, des failles véritables, du
moins ces veines, ces bigarrures de coloration, qui dans certaines roches, dans
certains marbres, révèlent des différences d’origine, d’âge, de ‘formation’. (I, 184)

In a process akin to sedimentation, the self is conceived of as a layered construction,
a narrative bearing the traces of second-hand narratives. The geological analogy,
placed at a crucial point in the novel, gives a highly nuanced gloss to the idea of the
Recherche as a ‘roman de formation’, the interpenetration of the internal and external
spheres creating distinctive features over time.

Against solipsism

There is, of course, an important line of argument that might be presented in
opposition to this idea of porosity to the external: the fact that the world presented is
the product of a single mind, that what is pilfered from one character by another in a
fictional work cannot properly be labelled ‘influence’, ‘borrowing’ or ‘interaction’.
The same is true for the arbitrary distinctions made between ‘internal’ and ‘external’
worlds in fiction. However, the novel is a literary genre concerned precisely with the
individual in society and, difficult as it is to define as a genre, once it stops concerning itself with this dialectic we might safely say that it ceases to be novelistic. As Vincent Descombes writes: ‘La seule façon d'écrire le roman solipsiste est d'éliminer toute mention d'un autre sujet. Or l'élimination des autres sujets fait disparaître aussi le besoin de désigner quelque sujet que ce soit’.\(^{151}\) To employ characters, to employ the idea of a narrator, is actively to engage in a dialogue between the differing discourses that populate one’s being in the world. In constructing a narrative self, the novelist makes a statement about how selves are formed in general and, in the creation of a diverse world, he or she underlines the dialogical, heteroglossal nature of language:

The author utilizes now one language, now another, in order to avoid giving himself up wholly to either of them; he makes use of this verbal give-and-take, this dialogue of languages at every point in his work, in order that he himself might remain as it were neutral with regard to language, a third party in a quarrel between two people (although he might be a biased third party).\(^{152}\)

Borrowing and interaction in the work is, therefore, reflective of the borrowing and interaction channelled into the work.

Another facet of the Recherche that immediately renders any charge of solipsistic tendencies problematic is the narrator’s unwavering attachment to universalizing statements. This self-proclaimed interior analysis never goes far without an appeal to the commonality of the experiences it charts. In L’Être et le néant, Jean-Paul Sartre writes that:

Le héros de Proust ‘n’a pas’ de caractère directement saisissable; il se livre d’abord, en tant qu’il est conscient de lui-même, comme un ensemble de réactions générales et communes à tous les hommes (‘mécanismes’ de la passion, des émotions, ordre d’apparition des souvenirs, etc.) où chacun peut se reconnaître: c’est que ces réactions appartiennent à la nature générale du psychique.\(^{153}\)

\(^{151}\) Vincent Descombes, Proust: philosophie du roman, p. 61.
\(^{152}\) M. M. Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, p. 314.
Although Sartre certainly goes too far by completely evacuating the Proustian narrator of subjective reactions, his overstatement does not detract from the very real tendency in the *Recherche* to turn the particular towards the general. The ‘on’ and the ‘nous’ have been constant attendants on all the discoveries of the ‘je’. Now, as the finale draws near, the narrator begins to endorse as an objective what he has already committed himself to in fact: ‘ce qu’il s’agit de faire sortir, d’amener à la lumière, ce sont nos sentiments, nos passions, c’est-à-dire les passions, les sentiments de tous’ (IV, 485-86). Indeed, accompanying the narrator’s determination to execute his work in solitude, we find preparations to let go of his specific claims to his own memories so that they may be appropriated by others. The narrator’s practice in the formulation of his own story is what he now recognizes must be the reader’s practice in an equally assimilative activity. The wish, however, is not without ambivalence:

Il était triste pour moi de penser que mon amour auquel j’avais tant tenu, serait, dans mon livre, si dégagé d’un être que des lecteurs divers l’appliqueraient exactement à ce qu’ils avaient éprouvé pour d’autres femmes. Mais devais-je me scandaliser de cette infidélité posthume et que tel ou tel pût donner comme objet à mes sentiments des femmes inconnues, quand cette infidélité, cette division de l’amour entre plusieurs êtres, avait commencé de mon vivant et avant même que j’écrivisse? […] La profanation d’un de mes souvenirs par des lecteurs inconnus, je l’avais consommé avant eux. (IV, 481)

It is not, though, merely the succession of his love interests, the sameness of the desiring pattern applied to different objects, that induces the narrator’s feeling of ‘infidélité’; this is provoked also by the fact that he has applied to the women he has loved the shadow of women loved by other men. A similar feeling of alienation from the personal experience of desire, and from the love object, that we saw attending the narrator’s use of third parties in Chapter 2, infiltrates his preparations here. And it is noteworthy that, both then as now, desire undergoes an externalization, it is freed to move in the outer world. This is clearly envisaged, in the literary sense, as a sending off of the created product, its extrication from the author in the hope that it will now
take on autonomous existence in the world. Certainly, a solipsistic work could not propose that, in the reading of it, its readers would be able to read deeply within themselves:

Ils ne seraient pas, selon moi, mes lecteurs, mais les propres lecteurs d'eux-mêmes [...] De sorte que je ne leur demanderais pas de me louer ou de me dénigrer, mais seulement de me dire si c'est bien cela, si les mots qu'ils lisent en eux-mêmes sont bien ceux que j'ai écrits. (IV, 610)

Having variously laid claim, in his desiring trajectory, to so much extra-personal experience and made it his own, the narrator now supplicates the readers of the work to do the same, to appropriate the book to their own ends. And so, in outlining the plans for his work, the narrator envisages that strange thing, what he terms an altruistic selfishness: 'un égoïsme utilisable pour autrui' (IV, 613). A whole host of parallels with the desiring dynamic that has played out in the work now come to the fore. The reader is invited to 'eavesdrop', to allow the other in, to live vicariously, but in no way passively, and ultimately to employ the work as part of a 'relational construction of selfhood' \footnote{Garry L. Hagberg, 'Imagined Identities: Autobiography at One Remove', p. 169.}.
CONCLUSION

The picture I have presented of third parties in Proust's portrayal of desire has no doubt been one of overall positivity, highlighting the give and take of desiring impulses, the links between the subject and the social environment. Third parties have been revealed as spurs to desire, aids to plot and to the textual networks on which it depends, and aids also to 'jouissance' and creation. But it is perhaps not too late to guard against the charge of having produced a cleansed picture of this very prevalent human configuration in *À la recherche*. Proust's novel also reveals the casual pimping of human flesh and the cynical exchange and exploitation of perceived sexual objects, and it frequently does so in a stylized fashion, very far from the gritty portraits of Realism. In *La Prisonnière*, the narrator, having dispatched Albertine to the Trocadéro for the afternoon, asks Françoise to send him up a girl, one of the many laundry, bakery or grocery girls who habitually call, under the pretence of needing someone to run an errand. The request, however, is tellingly preceded by several pages of rather greedy sensorial attention to the calls and movements of young working women in the street below. The reader's attention is arrested by the following description as Françoise ushers in a young dairymaid, simultaneously scolding her for her reticence:

Françoise, en bonne et honnête servante qui entend faire respecter son maître comme elle le respecte elle-même, s'était drapée de cette majesté qui ennoblit les entremetteuses dans ces tableaux des vieux maîtres, où à côté d’elles s’effacent presque dans l’insignifiance la maîtresse et l’amant. (III, 648)\textsuperscript{155}

\textsuperscript{155} Several paintings by Dutch artists come to mind: Gerrit van Honthorst’s *The Matchmaker*, 1625, Dirck van Baburen’s *The Procuress*, 1622 and Johannes Vermeer’s 1656 painting of the same name.
Françoise, unwitting procuress, is here brought glowingly to the forefront as the fundamental nexus of relations. This is not, however, mere artistic embellishment of a morally reprehensible transaction. An undercurrent of threat and predation is equally written into the text. Françoise’s Caravaggiesque illumination is rendered somewhat eerie by her remark to the narrator that she has found him a girl fit for the task who resembles a ‘Petit Chaperon Rouge’ (III, 647). Françoise is at once a sublime and devoted facilitator and the high-priestess of a sacrificial rite, for, although she is ignorant of her role in this instance, the passage certainly plays on Françoise’s history of cruelty, both to kitchen-girls and chickens, in Aunt Léonie’s house in Combray. By mixing, too, the notions of power and subservience, sublimity and commerce, humour and aestheticism, the scene as a whole achieves a complex emotive charge. In the end the girl is sent away with five francs after the narrator has conducted his discrete close-up observation of her.

This is by no means the only incidence of unsavoury mediation that occurs. Andrée supplies details of how Albertine had been in the habit of charging Morel with the procuration and grooming of young girls (IV, 179), while, in Jupien’s brothel, we are told that ‘les Écossais faisaient prime’ (IV, 402). Indeed, in attempts to satisfy Charlus as to his competence as a provider of sexual partners, Jupien has to resort to imputing to the working-class men he employs to please the baron the very activity that marks his own relation to these men: ‘Jupien les avait recommandés à la bienveillance du baron en lui jurant que c’étaient tous des ‘barbeaux’ de Belleville et qu’ils marcheraient avec leur propre sœur pour un louis’ (IV, 403). The satisfaction that Charlus achieves from the men he pays for sexual pleasure is greatly increased if he can consider them as would-be pimps. Sexual mediation is thus very much overdetermined in the passages devoted to the war-time brothel.
These social and economic expressions of desire's mediation remain disturbing elements of Proust's treatment of the third, sitting in striking contrast to the more magnanimous portrayals dealt with in the body of this thesis. The narrator's justifications on a psychological level need not be accepted at face value, but at the same time, few could accuse them of being simplistic. Here is the narrator, for example, describing the context of his first introduction to a brothel by Bloch:

The hope-inducing 'bonne nouvelle' that Bloch supplies, with all its biblical connotations, does not, however, tally with the narrator's experience in the long-run, for, as we know, full 'possession' of another human being proves impossible. And yet the narrator's frank appreciation of the maisons de passe that he visits does not suffer the same deflation in value through time. As mediating facilities, the brothels serve a function akin to that of those individuals who, acting as go-betweens in another way, ensure the dissemination of cultural riches to the public at large. Once
again, the image of the umbilical cord that connects the individual to the world around him, ensuring a two-way exchange, is evoked through the commonplace, and at times decidedly murky, function of the mediator.

Through an analysis of third parties and of the externalizations and appropriations common to the desiring mindset, this thesis has sought to demonstrate that Proust’s portrayal of desire is not confined exclusively to the subjective sphere. Yet, admittedly, Proust’s text itself shows a tension and ambivalence throughout when it comes to these issues of the ‘internal’ and ‘external’, of self and other and their possible interpenetrations. I would like, here, to draw attention to two quotations from the *Recherche*. The first ranks amongst the best known and most frequently referenced of the entire work. It is the now famous:

L’homme est l’être qui ne peut sortir de soi, qui ne connaît les autres qu’en soi, et, en disant le contraire, ment. (IV, 34)

The second, stated with equal confidence, is perhaps less well known:

Nous ne connaissons jamais que les passions des autres et [...] ce que nous arrivons à savoir des nôtres, ce n’est que d’eux que nous avons pu l’apprendre. (I, 127)

This highlights what any attentive reader of Proust knows only too well—that quoting from the *Recherche* can be a problematic affair. In fact, the best-known quotations, the ones wielding the greatest influence over our most basic and accepted views of the work, often become entrenched rather from over use, from the greater circulation afforded them, than due to their textual sovereignty. It is a warning that any interpretation should take at least some account of the resistance the *Recherche* sets up to it because it is divided already from within.
In his book, *Proust entre deux siècles*, Antoine Compagnon describes the *Recherche* as 'le roman de l’entre-deux, pas de la contradiction résolue et de la synthèse dialectique, mais de la symétrie boîteuse ou défectueuse, du déséquilibre et de la disproportion'.\(^{156}\) Compagnon recalls the episode in *Le Temps retrouvé* where the now aged hero, making his way to the final, climactic ‘bal de têtes’, experiences the unbalancing effect of the uneven paving stones in the Guermantes courtyard. As he wavers, ‘un pied sur le pavé plus élevé, l’autre pied sur le pavé plus bas’ (IV, 446), a near-identical experience outside Saint Mark’s Baptistery in Venice returns to him in total recall. It is one of the instances of involuntary memory, the first, in fact, in the last important series of involuntary memories which will prompt the narrator to retire from society and give himself over to the writing of his book. It is not, however, the well-known revelation and decision which follows this moment that captures Compagnon’s attention here, but rather the moment itself. Compagnon points to the ‘démarche chancelante’ of the hero as an appropriate preamble for the subject of his own book, which considers the *Recherche* from the point of view of its perspective as a novel straddling two centuries. But, beyond the fact of the pull between tradition and modernity which is at work in *À la recherche*, the image of the ‘démarche chancelante’ fits so many aspects of the novel that Compagnon, I think, is certainly right to offer it up as an allegorical representation of the work as a whole. The ‘démarche chancelante’ is everywhere detectable. For example, the narrator may theorize to his heart’s content about the impossibility of knowing anything outside of the self, but the novel we have before us is as much a work of compelling social portraiture as it is interior monologue. It is interesting, for instance, that the focus on introspection, the importance attached to the individual impression, the constant self-

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\(^{156}\) Antoine Compagnon, *Proust entre deux siècles*, p. 13.
analysis, at no point leads the narrator to an overly-anxious concern about the limitations of language as a shared medium. The truth is, Proust keeps a tenacious hold on the idea of a shared world. It is this idea alone that allows for the hopes placed in the reader that I discussed in the final chapter. Vincent Descombes suggests that such duality in the *Recherche* arises from the hybrid genesis of the novel, growing as it did from the critical essay *Contre Sainte-Beuve*:

Tandis que l’essai s’en tient au mode de penser des philosophes de la conscience, de sorte que la scène de l’action est réduite à l’esprit d’un sujet pensant, le roman conçoit tout événement selon le schéma d’une action à laquelle prennent part plusieurs personnages. Proust théoricien est résolument hostile à toute compréhension sociologique de la vie humaine. Proust romancier, pour construire ses personnages et ses épisodes, montre un flair sociologique exceptionnel.\(^{157}\)

Descombes asserts that in its theoretical aspects the *Recherche* is a compendium of the philosophical commonplaces of its time and that the authentic ‘philosophie du roman’ is developed, almost despite its author, in the novelistic aspects of the work. Despite confident distinctions between threads of the novel that are not, in fact, always easily separable—‘Proust théoricien’ and ‘Proust romancier’—Descombes makes an excellent point. Whether we name it indecision or an appetite for inclusiveness, the same facility which allows one seemingly comprehensive and universalizing statement to be overwritten by its opposite, also allows the aesthetic of the novel to be contradicted many times over in its practice.

It is an awareness of this duality that has prompted many sociological and historical analyses of the work despite the opposition towards such readings which is written large in both the *Recherche* and in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*. But, while other aspects of Proust criticism have been engaging industriously with this duality as a fruitful source of divergent readings, studies of desire in the work have remained surprisingly uniform, continuing by and large to explore the complexities and

modulations of a wholly introspective drama. A possible explanation for this lies in
the fact that psychoanalytic theory has proved to be something of a heavyweight in
all discourse on desire in the *Recherche*. The areas of overlap and the possibilities of
comparison between the fiction of Proust and the theory of Freud are astounding. It is
understandable that psychoanalysis has therefore largely shaped and orientated
studies on Proustian desire from the very outset. But in many ways the study of
desire in the work has been as hampered by psychoanalytic reading as it has been
helped. Malcolm Bowie, an exponent of psychoanalytic theory, nevertheless pointed
to its reluctance to engage with sociology, to move beyond the realm of the
individual mind, as one of its most damaging features. He extends this criticism
beyond specifically Freudian psychoanalysis and into the afterlife of the theory,
adding that:

Freud’s resigned turning inwards of the mind conceived of as a quasi-autonomous
system of interrelated forces is not markedly improved upon by Lacan, for all his
insistence that language is the inevitable bearer of social meanings into the mental
interior.  

Bowie goes on to remind us of ‘Proust’s capacity, in describing feeling and
behaviour, to work productively on the borders of society and the individual mind’,
concluding that, ‘Explanations of the interactive kind that psychoanalysis all too
often eschews are of course the copper coinage of Proust’s novel’ (*Freud, Proust and

There is indeed much potential in Proust’s work for further investigations into
the interactions between society and the individual mind through a focus on desiring
relations. Although the scope of this thesis has been restricted to the mere edge of the

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refer to ‘the central myth that pervades contemporary Western culture and has insinuated itself into
the foundational assumptions of psychoanalysis—the myth of the isolated individual mind’, in their
*Contexts of Being: The Intersubjective Foundations of Psychological Life* (Hillsdale, New Jersey:
area where these concepts begin to overlap, I hope, through this illustration of the movement of desire, to have reinforced the idea of a more porous notion of the Proustian self, one that neither excludes otherness nor immures individual experience. From the point of view of the analyses undertaken here, desire emerges as a force that operates a two-way gate of communication. It represents at one and the same time an attempt to exteriorize the individual passion, to let it embody and move in others and also a taking in, a swallowing up of the desires and the experiences of other people.
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