

UNIVERSIDADE DE LISBOA
FACULDADE DE LETRAS



The Masked Autobiography

Proust's Literary Theory

João Pedro Cardoso Vala

Orientador: Professor Doutor Miguel Bénard da Costa Tamen

Tese especialmente elaborada para obtenção do grau de Doutor em Teoria da Literatura

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Júri:

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Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa
- Doutora Ana Cláudia Ramalho dos Santos, Técnica Superior da Imprensa da Universidade de Lisboa, na qualidade de Especialista



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*Tout entouré de monstres et de dieux,
On ne connaît guère le calme (II, 90)*

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Introductory Notes and List of Abbreviations

As is customary in Proustian studies, when referring to the narrator and main character of *À La Recherche du Temps Perdu* we will mention Marcel, and when referring to the author of the novel we will mention Proust. We find this distinction helpful as it underlines both the similarities and the differences shared between Marcel and Proust. Yet, there are several moments when this distinction becomes slightly arbitrary and very hard to establish, as we will be able to observe.

All quotations from *À La Recherche du Temps Perdu* come from The Modern Library edition of the novel, translated by C.K. Scott Moncrieff, Terence Kilmartin and Andreas Mayor and edited by D.J. Enright. However, every quotation will be referenced to the Jean-Yves Tadié 1987-1989 four volume edition, and thus followed by the volume and respective page number it appears in (e.g. II, 134).

The same will happen with other of Proust's texts: whenever a reliable translation is available, we will follow the canonical English version while indicating the page number of the French edition. In the case of Proust's correspondence, published by Plon in twenty-one volumes and edited by Philip Kolb, references will also be made to the volume and page number.

We will at times mention Proust's volumes. When this occurs, we will unvaryingly be referring to the seven volumes of *À La Recherche* (*Du Côté de Chez Swann*; *À L'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs*; *Le Côté de Guermantes*; *Sodome et Gomorrhe*; *La Prisonnière*; *Albertine Disparue*; and *Le Temps Retrouvé*), and not to the four volumes of the Tadié edition.

Translations uncredited in the Bibliography are my own.

The following abbreviations are used for Proust's writings:

<i>À La Recherche</i>	<i>À La Recherche du Temps Perdu</i>
<i>Contre Sainte-Beuve</i>	<i>CSB</i>
<i>Essais et Articles</i>	<i>E&A</i>
<i>Le Mystérieux Correspondant et Autres Nouvelles</i>	<i>Le Mystérieux Correspondant</i>
<i>Les Plaisirs et les Jours</i>	<i>P&J</i>
<i>Jean Santeuil</i>	<i>JS</i>
<i>Correspondance de Marcel Proust</i>	<i>Correspondance</i>
<i>Lettres</i>	<i>Lettres</i>
<i>Écrits de Jeunesse</i>	<i>Écrits de Jeunesse</i>
<i>Pastiches et Mélanges</i>	<i>P&M</i>

Acknowledgments

During the ever-lasting process of revising my thesis, I noticed I was at times somehow unfair to many of the Proustian critics who preceded me. I would therefore like to take this opportunity to state my admiration for all the people I have quoted throughout this thesis and whose influence over this work is, as I often suspected, unneglectable. I am indebted to all of them, mainly those with whom I tend to disagree more often. My heavy conscience was only soothed when I noticed Proust himself tends to be violent towards those who most deeply shaped his vision. But I will return to this subject later.

For the last seven years, Professor Miguel Tamen has supervised my PhD and Master's theses. This work is infinitely better due to Professor Tamen's careful guidance, constant readiness to help, and for all of his suggestions. Attending his seminars over these years has also considerably shaped my vision of literature and art.

In 2019, I was a visiting scholar at the University of Chicago where I attended Professor Robert Pippin and Professor Joshua Landy's joint seminar on Proust's Philosophical Fiction. Attending that seminar was one of the biggest pleasures of my so-far short academic life.

I am also indebted to Professor António Feijó, Professor Maria Sequeira Mendes, and Professor João R. Figueiredo.

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Jonas and Daniel spent two summer afternoons at the London Library only so I could have access to some texts I wouldn't otherwise have been able to consult.

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Preface: A World of Verdurins

In the last few lines of a section of *Du Côté de Chez Swann* named “Un Amour de Swann”, we famously find Charles Swann seated on a barber’s chair, inwardly considering: “To think that I’ve wasted years of my life, that I’ve longed to die, that I’ve experienced my greatest love, for a woman who didn’t appeal to me, who wasn’t even my type” (I, 375). When first reading this, we are struck not only by the obvious impossibility of someone experiencing his greatest love for a person who isn’t his own type, but also by the certainty that Swann had somehow finally overcome his immense love for Odette. However, a few pages later, still in the first volume of the novel, we are informed that Swann and Odette not only end up marrying, but are also the parents of Gilberte, Marcel’s first love. Knowing this, we can’t avoid revisiting the abovementioned barber scene and imagining that, after all, Swann might have been having his hair cut for the ceremony of his own marriage.

This misleading scene should therefore set the tone for *À La Recherche* and forewarn us of any conclusion withdrawn from a literal reading of the novel, while also pointing out one of its recurring features, namely the deceptiveness of the endings in most episodes and the conclusions of the various volumes. Regarding the ending of the first two volumes, Proust himself claimed, in a letter to Jacques Rivière, that

what I have stated at the end of the first volume (...) is the *opposite* of my conclusion. It is a stage, which appears subjective and diletante, on the path to the most objective and hopeful conclusion (...) I am thus forced to depict errors without feeling the need to state I have them for mistakes, so much worse for me if the reader takes them for the truth. The second volume will accentuate the mistake. I hope the last one will come to dissipate it (*Lettres*, 667-668)¹

In the third volume, Proust goes on depicting errors of perspective without ever feeling the need to state he also has them for mistakes. As should be expected by now, the volume ends with a failed attempt on self-delusion², one the reader never feels tempted to trust. In that last scene of *Le Côté de Guermantes*, Marcel and Swann pay a visit to the Ducs de Guermantes, right before the masquerade ball where the Duc would meet his

¹ In the first volume, even the endings of the internal sections cast illusions on what we are confronted with. This should prevent us from taking Marcel’s word at face-value. The first section ends with the notorious madeleine scene which, being one of Marcel’s epiphanies, is based on an optical illusion, as we will later claim; the second section ends with Marcel being certain of the right configuration of the room he is waking up in, only to be set free from that mistake by the morning’s arrival; and the third section is “Un Amour de Swann”.

² On this topic, cf. Joshua Landy’s *Philosophy as Fiction*.

current lover. Swann then informs the Duces of his imminent death, only to hear them disputing the accuracy of the doctor's prognosis, not due to any first-hand medical knowledge (they don't even know which disease he suffers from) but merely because Swann's illness constituted an annoying disturbance to the fun they had in store for that night. As we should expect by now, Swann will come to die of that same illness soon afterwards.

The fourth volume, *Sodom et Gomorrhe*, also ends in a misleading way, very similarly to "Un Amour de Swann". There we find Marcel informing his mother he had been unable to sleep the entire previous night, only to conclude that he "absolutely must—and let's settle the matter at once, because I'm quite clear about it now, because I won't change my mind again, because I couldn't live without it—I absolutely must marry Albertine"" (III, 515). Predictably, in the beginning of the following volume, nothing changes regarding Marcel's marital status and, quite predictably, the topic is never brought up for discussion again, at least not in any relevant way.

La Prisonnière, on the other hand, doesn't end with Proust misleading his readers but with Marcel understanding how he had been deluded regarding the nature of his feelings towards Albertine. He had by now imprisoned Albertine in his family house in Paris and convinced himself the separation he longed for would be painless, as he was sure of being completely indifferent to his lover's charms. Yet, when Françoise comes to inform him of Albertine's escape, something unexpected occurs:

Then—so ignorant can we be of what is inside us, since I was convinced of my indifference to Albertine—my breath was cut short, I gripped my heart in my hands, which were suddenly moistened by a perspiration I had not experienced since the revelation she had made to me on the little train with regard to Mlle. Vinteuil's friend, and I was incapable of saying anything else but: 'Ah! very good, Françoise, you were of course quite right not to wake me. Leave me now for a moment, I shall ring for you presently' (III, 915)

The sixth volume also ends with the dismissal of an illusion, this time regarding the way Marcel remembered what had happened in Combray and the nature of Gilberte's mysterious gesture towards him during their childhood. Regarding the ending of the last volume, we will have plenty more to say on this matter when reaching our last chapter.

The deceptive nature of Proust's endings allows us to understand one of the novel's most pressing characteristics, which could be said to represent what we shall call Proust's literary theory. Proust's criticism has been overwhelmingly focused on establishing a direct correlation between his life and Marcel's autobiography. Most critics seem to be very confident about their own readings and, in many ways, reiterate the

mistakes Proust so violently diagnosed in Sainte-Beuve's method: subsuming an author's work to his life, imagining one could be understood through the other, and, more importantly, imagining a work of art could be entirely explained by a competent critic. Another similar mistake, which may also be said to somehow originate from similar readings, is the tendency to compartmentalize Proust's work and divide it among different fields of literary studies: the portraits of Paris at the turn of the century, the Dreyfus affair, Judaism, and the aristocratic world should be analyzed culturally so as to determine the accuracy of Proust's depictions; comments on homosexuality should be made in Queer Studies; comments on the nature of Time should be analyzed by philosophers, particularly by those knowledgeable of Bergson's thinking; Proust's own vision of literature should be discussed by comparative literature, so as to understand what Proust had inherited from the likes of Balzac, Baudelaire and Flaubert; and all the remaining subjects should become intelligible through Proust's biography, perhaps with the aid of a Freudian lens.

By sectioning *À La Recherche* so thoroughly, we end up missing Proust's point entirely. What we will argue instead is that only a holistic vision of all these aspects would allow the reader to grasp a distinct image of the novel, even if in the end one can only conclude that nothing one has read in those three thousand and five hundred pages can be said to be, in any way, definitive. By the time we get to the end, we are in no position of withdrawing any reassuring conclusions regarding what has in fact taken place. Nonetheless, the time we have dedicated to reading *À La Recherche* is not, in any way, *temps perdu*. Any feeble conclusion we arrive at when closing the book, if viewed in spite of the confidence we deposit in our own analytic virtues, should also be reached while facing life itself: never will we be truly and surely certain of knowing anything or anyone, since we can only reach provisional and disposable conclusions. When this is finally understood, we might find a very limited therapeutic virtue in reading after all, since we may eventually develop a more acute sense of tolerance towards other people's mistakes, as we come to see our own perspective as necessarily deceptive. Somehow, when reading *À La Recherche*, we aren't able to imagine what it would have been like to live in Paris during the *belle époque*, but we do come to learn how there is no escape from the flaws of our own perspective. We might even, if we're lucky, clearly realize how we all live in a world of Verdurins, that we ourselves are in no relevant way different from those who constitute the *petit clan*, that bunch of people with abundant opinions about everything and nothing, opinions which are as confident in their validity as they are false. Grasping this might perhaps considerably frustrate us, but will also lead us to empathize with the

habitués of the banal, the bores who surround us from all sides and, in the end, may prove to only be another version of ourselves.

One of the main claims this work attempts to establish is that art does not imitate life but rather the other way round, as Oscar Wilde famously suggested himself. In Proust, life is unvaryingly a consequence of his *oeuvre*. He is obsessed with convincing the reader and himself that his life was lived so that he could write. Thus, the pleasures he engaged himself in, the social gatherings he went to and the people he met were, in some sense, only work, through which he was shaping his life and vision to fit *À La Recherche*. This seems to be Proust's literary theory in a nutshell, but it is also Proust's cure for his suffering. Facing life in such a way that everything one does is perceived to be done in order to create allows one to overcome suffering, which thus becomes a mere pathway to the joys of creation. Through this claim we are evidently denying some of the most canonic readings of Proust, namely those which perceived *À La Recherche* as a veiled confession, making of Proust's masterpiece something we should analyze in search of Proust's own life. Such is the rationale for influential theories, namely the transposition theory, which claims we should see characters as Proust's acquaintances in order to make some sense of what is going on in the novel. However, we would like to argue that although Proust's acquaintances are converted, or rather transported into his work, it is the process, the reasons, the intention, and the final product of that conversion we are concerned with here. This meaning that the raw materials will eventually be disposed of, as Proust himself intended. In light of the above, his work can be read as the refusal of a theory which describes art as imitation.

By trying to account for the complexity of this novel, the arguments we will now seek to present will often seem tortuous. The novel will essentially be described as a masked autobiography. And yet our main focus won't be on the autobiographic details at all but on the masks many characters so desperately hide themselves behind. We will analyze them at times with the intention of uncovering what is hidden and at other times of describing the face we see when the mask is on, often dissecting the mask's fabric and trying to understand why the masked person would need a mask at all.

In the first three chapters we will discuss how several of Proust's characters, both in *À La Recherche* and in his earlier work, seem to consider pleasure as a quest for control and domination. To understand this, we will put forth an explanation for the strong presence of sadomasochism in Proust's *oeuvre* and its close relation with the importance

he attributes to literature. The description of sadomasochism there included will be the unacknowledged legislator of this work, as our theory will regularly return to these notions of control and domination.

The argument presented will allow us to make sense of Proust's notion of violence and how he aimed at redirecting it through adequate channels. Therefore, in Chapter 4, "Adrien Santeuil", we will analyze how Proust tried to redirect the "immense longing he felt to strike his father" (Santeuil, 500) in ways which would allow him to live on without such a heavy conscience and also closely resemble our previous description of sadomasochism. In Chapter 5, "Le Syndicat", we will try to understand how Proust dealt with the burden Judaism imposed upon him, in a country with increasingly blatant manifestations of anti-Semitism. Finally, "Cher Maître" will relate our argument on sadomasochism to this purging of violence; Bloch will be described as the character Proust felt the need to offer as a holocaust to save the life of many.

In the two chapters on aristocracy and orphanhood, we will try to justify why so many of Proust's characters seem to be born out of thin air. In the first one, we will approach this problem by analyzing the nature of the marital relationships in *À La Recherche*. In the second, we will look at the same problem through the lens of Proust's idea of literature, directly juxtaposing it with his attack on Sainte-Beuve. Understanding Proust's diatribes against Sainte-Beuve will, therefore, be crucial for us to realize how Proust perceived art as the recognition of an ultimate defeat; this topic will return in chapter 20 but, more importantly, in the last chapter.

After our analysis of Proust's attacks against Sainte-Beuve, we will turn our attention to "Sentiments Filiaux d'un Parricide", arguably a seminal text for the concept of *À La Recherche*, and will discuss Proust's need to burn down what had preceded him in order to create. As such, it will be important to examine how Proust exorcizes the influence of the French writers who preceded him and whose shadows he felt lingering over him; this will be done in chapter 10, "Denis Revolte and The Violence of Gratitude". In Chapter 11, "Tribal Violence and Saint-Loup", we will return to this strategy Proust used to find his own tone.

"A Novel of Revenges" is a series of commentaries on Proust's failed first attempt at writing a novel, also analyzing what differentiates *Jean Santeuil* from *À La Recherche*. This will be followed by a chapter which compares Rousseau's *Confessions* to Proust's novel. In "Mme. Imbert's Asparagus", we will present a description of Aunt Léonie's strategy to deal with what she felt to be the world's wildness. These three chapters takes

us back to our discussion on sadomasochism once again. This time the aim is to better perceive how hard Proust tried to purge his own life, firstly by creating a world in which his triumph is absolute, then by following an argumentative strategy which had already been used by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, an author Proust never gave much credit to, but whose influence is overwhelmingly present in *À La Recherche*. Finally, in the chapter devoted to Aunt Léonie, we will look into another possible strategy for exercising control over one's own surroundings, which basically consists in thoroughly restricting it, and appears profusely, in many disguises, throughout the novel.

From here follow a series of chapters on Proust and his posterity. In chapter 14, we will try to describe Céleste Albaret's biography of Proust as a biography which seems to have been supervised by Proust himself, in an attempt to shape the way posterity would perceive both him and his work. This same effort, although applied to different objects, will be at the core of the following chapters.

In Chapter 17, "The Lonesome Center of the World", we will start by refuting Gérard Genette's influential take on the novel, with the purpose of observing how the demarcation between form and substance we tend to use in *À La Recherche*'s particular case is useless, since in Proust the form of the novel is its substance, and they both revolve around Proust's praise of egotism as the path leading to artistic creation. In "The Posthumous Infidelity", the importance Proust attributes to illness will be articulated with this discussion about egotism in order to further shape our idea of Proust's perspective on literature.

Afterwards, "Un Amour de Marcel" will present our explanation for the appearance of "Un Amour de Swann", a story centered around Swann's love for Odette, which took place before Marcel was even born. This chapter will try to show how this episode doesn't compromise our suggestion that everything in the novel is obsessively and exclusively about Marcel.

Having discussed "Un Amour de Swann", we will then be ready to approach love's mechanism according to Proust, which will be done in the following two chapters. In order to provide a description of how Proust perceived love we will first focus on Marcel's love for Albertine, Gilberte and his mother, and then on the theme of homosexuality in the novel.

In our last chapter, we will try to collect these many strands into a unified argument. What at times might have seemed to be just a disparate myriad of subjects with no connection between each other will there be given a distinct and coherent shape. We

will then bring back many of the points previously raised for a final consideration. What will hopefully emerge is our unified sense of Proust's larger picture: his vision of literature, time, love, and death. Such a vision, or so we will claim against many critics, is not an optimistic one.

Chapter 1

Sadomasochism I: Before Nightfall

In one of the most interesting essays regarding sadism in Proust's work, Anna Katharina Schaffner remarks that even though sadism, fetishism and voyeurism are, in *À La Recherche*, as omnipresent as for instance homosexuality, "surprisingly, these themes and motifs have been less well explored [by the critics]" (Schaffner, 198). Schaffner's statement seems accurate bearing in mind the scarce number of essays found on those topics, if compared with the number of articles on Proust and homosexuality. Yet, it is even more truthful if we take into consideration the variety of answers these essays on sadism, fetishism and voyeurism provide for the appearance of those sexual paraphilias in *À La Recherche*.

At this point, it is important to stress that the following chapters will be centered solely on providing a theory for the appearance of sadomasochistic behavior in *À La Recherche*. Fetishism will be ignored on the whole and voyeurism will be considered to the extent that it comprises Marcel's exclusive access to the sadomasochistic scenes he glimpses both at Montjouvain and at Jupien's brothel, the two main scenes which will herein be mostly under scrutiny. Nonetheless, one should not infer from this exclusion that fetishism and particularly voyeurism do not deserve a more careful analysis, or that they do not play a significant role in *À La Recherche*, but only that they do not fall under our scope here³.

Even if there are few essays exclusively about sadism in *À La Recherche*, some critics have dwelt on the subject. Still, the justifications they came up with tend to be variations of answers previously given and can unfailingly be grouped in at least one of four pre-defined reasons for sadomasochism: 1) sadomasochism is presented as a revelation of a new facet in characters that would have otherwise remained unknown, being therefore a privileged vantage point, as suggested by Tadié in *Proust et le Roman*; 2) sadomasochism as a way for Proust to obtain revenge and/or sympathy from his dead mother, as Painter, Hendrika C. Freud and Carl Niekerk argue; 3) sadomasochism occurs in Proust's work because it had also occurred in his life⁴, and, finally, 4) sadomasochism

³ Regarding voyeurism in *À La Recherche*, cf. Elisabeth Ladenson's illuminating "Reading Between the Blinds", in *Proust's Lesbianism*.

⁴ In their biographies of Proust, White, Painter and Tadié provide thorough descriptions of the author's alleged sadomasochistic preferences. Yet, it is important to point out that there is no testimony of Proust indulging in any physically violent masochistic behavior similar to Charlus',

is, as Bataille first suggested (being later followed by, for instance, Antoine Compagnon and Schaffner herself), a privileged moment when love and resentment fully meet, thus enhancing pleasure.

It is not in any way our intention to deny the validity of the four abovementioned answers, as all of them are, from our perspective, partially accurate. It is true that Marcel's knowledge of the world and of the people who surround him is considerably improved by glancing at people in private, behaving in ways they would not when in public, doing things Marcel would not expect of them. It is also true that in Proust's *oeuvre* there seems to be a strong correlation between sadomasochism and the death of parents, as will later be stated in these pages and as becomes clear when taking "Sentiments Filiaux d'un Parricide" into consideration⁵. It is true that it is impossible to neglect the similarity between what Marcel sees in those scenes and what Proust allegedly did to obtain pleasure around and after 1917, according to many and credible sources. Finally, it is also true that in Proust's description, sadomasochism somehow mixes love and hate in order to achieve sexual gratification, or as Bataille poetically puts it, "if love is sometimes pink, pink combines with black, without which it would be the token of insipidness" (Bataille, 105).

Yet, if all these reasons ring true, no combination of the four completely justifies the presence of those scenes in *À La Recherche*, or more importantly, the enthusiasm felt by Marcel during their description. The four answers mentioned earlier fail to capture what we consider to be a crucial aspect of sadomasochism in *À La Recherche*, and which we shall explore throughout this chapter. To capture it, we will firstly have to pay attention to three short-stories Proust wrote before beginning his work on *À La Recherche*. Then, we will analyze his idea for a play he never wrote, and finally, we will turn our attention to the two famous sadomasochistic scenes in *À La Recherche*. We shall read all these texts to try to understand how they have evolved, their unneglectable role amidst Proust's works and the image of love, art and human desire that permeates them.

Between 1891 and 1894, Proust wrote three stories on a similar subject, including its last version, "La Confession d'une Jeune Fille", in *Les Plaisirs et Les Jours*⁶. Just the fact that we have at least three variations of the same episode should warn us about its

which obviously invalidates this theory, or at least deflates it considerably. This topic of biographical interpretations of *À La Recherche* will be developed further in the seventeenth chapter.

⁵ Cf. Chapter 9.

⁶ "Violante ou la Mondanité" could also be added to this tryptic. Even if Elisabeth Ladenson is concerned with a completely different topic, her analysis of the short-story is rather interesting and helpful for the argument that will now be presented (cf. Ladenson, pp. 82-84).

importance to the writer. However, the number of sketches and proofs Proust famously made of his works, and the similarities between all his texts, force us to provide more evidence for the pertinence and centrality of these stories in the understanding of Proust and of *À La Recherche*. Nonetheless, it is at least uncontroversial to state their cruciality in the analysis of a number of the novel's episodes, namely those which take place at Montjouvain and at Jupien's brothel.

In 1891, Proust published "Souvenir" in *Le Mensuel*, a fragment about a young woman named Odette, awaiting her death at her family house, where she is visited by an unnamed narrator who knew her from their childhood. Nothing much happens in this version, but the proximity of death, the bitter remembrance of the past and the fact that the protagonist is a woman, allow us to read "Souvenir" as a sketch for what would follow in both "Avant La Nuit" and "La Confession d'une Jeune Fille". The similarities between these three texts are so explicit that in his biography of Proust, Jean-Yves Tadié was led to write that, in "La Confession d'une Jeune Fille", "the heroine, as in "Avant La Nuit" and "Souvenir" (...), has tried to commit suicide" (Tadié (2001), 198). There is absolutely no textual evidence to support Tadié's claim that the heroine of "Souvenir" tried in any way, shape or form to kill herself. Tadié's conclusion is, thence, derived solely from the fact that there is such a sense of continuity between the three short stories that one cannot help but assume that the "terrible illness" (*P&M*, 244) she alludes to was in fact self-inflicted, as happened with the heroines in the other two texts, as we will observe.

If "Souvenir" can be read as the first draft for "Avant La Nuit" and "La Confession d'une Jeune Fille", "Avant La Nuit" is, in a sense, the origin not only of *Les Plaisirs et Les Jours* but also of *À La Recherche*. As Thierry Laget points out, "Avant La Nuit" appears to have been excluded from *Les Plaisirs et Les Jours* not only because it was an earlier version of "La Confession d'une Jeune Fille", but mainly because Proust had copied several of its sentences for other parts of the book⁷. Hence, "Avant La Nuit" serves both as an early attempt at a very pressing issue for Proust, and as a graft which originates what would form his 1896 anthology and, afterwards, *À La Recherche*.

In "Avant La Nuit", a dying female character confesses to the narrator that the acknowledgment of her own lesbianism had led her to a sense of despair so great she tried to commit suicide. Having partially failed to do so, the bullet she shot herself with had

⁷ Cf. *P&J*, 343. In *Proust and The Art of Love*, J.E. Rivers suggests that this exclusion is due to Proust's fear of the consequences the explicit defense of homosexuality there included might have brought upon him (cf. Rivers (1983), 110).

lodged in her body and would eventually kill her. In this confession, we find several elements which would later bear a central role in *À La Recherche*. Firstly, we find in it a sketch of Proust's argument in favor of homosexuality, which would later be developed in *À La Recherche*, from the fourth volume onwards. In the first paragraph, we also find the metonymic imposition of the terms of the metaphor⁸, when the narrator, facing the sadness and guilt of her moribund suicidal friend, perceives the clouds over their heads as being as "persistent as regrets" (*P&J*, 248). Here we also find the first appearance of one of Swann's most iconic traits, the suggestion of irony after the usage of sophisticated terms⁹.

If these similarities could be seen as playing only a secondary role in *À La Recherche*, the same cannot be said regarding the definition Proust started to come up with for erotic pleasure or for its linkage with aesthetic beauty. Proust, like Swann, is a firm disbeliever of the 'hierarchy of arts'. This disbelief is visible in the constant comparison made between what would traditionally be considered a form of high art and what would be defined, in Proust's days, as low art, at best. This trait prosaically appears in *À L'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs*, in the description of how Françoise cooked *galantine*, in which her method is compared to Michelangelo's¹⁰. Yet, Marcel will go as far as to state that the sort of revelation he had in brothels "deserved to be ranked by me with those other benefactors more recent in origin but of comparable utility" (I, 566): illustrated editions of the Old Masters, symphony concerts, and guidebooks to historic towns.

More importantly, however, in *À La Recherche*, no art is simply born out of a quest for the divine or for some other ethereal ambition. Proust believed that art, like politics or any other thing in life, is derived and fed out of our loves and erotic attractions, destroying the frontier we imagine dividing the two realms. Thence, art generates love and love is generated by art¹¹.

⁸ Cf. "Métonymie Chez Proust" in *Figures III*.

⁹ "She smiled while pronouncing that epithet [aesthetic arrangement] with the little ironic exaggeration with which she accompanied these words, so extremely rare in her conversation" (*P&J*, 248). In *Du Côté de Chez Swann*, after stating that he does not believe in the hierarchy of arts, Swann adds "'hierarchy, don't you know, as silly people call it.' But then, if it was so absurd, why did he use the word?" (I, 97).

¹⁰ "She had gone herself to the Halles to procure the best cuts of rump-steak, shin of beef, calves' feet, just as Michelangelo spent eight months in the mountains of Carrara choosing the most perfect blocks of marble for the monument of Julius II" (I, 437).

¹¹ We will have more to say on this topic later.

In *Du Côté de Chez Swann*, Proust clearly traces this exchange between art and erotic attraction through the example of Swann's love for Odette. As always happens in *À La Recherche*, this apotheotic episode starts with disappointment. In this case, the disappointment of Swann with Odette's beauty¹². Amidst this discontentment, Swann notices a striking similarity between Odette and the representation of Zipporah in a Botticelli painting. What happens afterwards is that Swann's love for Odette increases, as his love is assured by having "the sure foundations of aesthetic principle" (I, 221). However, it is not simply Swann's love for Odette that is boosted by her similarity with Botticelli's goddess. The painting itself (which Swann, prior to this revelation, didn't admire excessively) acquires extreme value to him, becoming attached to Odette to the point of both becoming indistinguishable in Swann's mind:

He placed on his study table, as if it were a photograph of Odette, a reproduction of Jethro's daughter. He would gaze in admiration at the large eyes, the delicate features in which the imperfection of the skin might be surmised, the marvelous locks of hair that fell along the tired cheeks; and, adapting to the idea of a living woman what he had until then felt to be beautiful on aesthetic grounds, he converted it into a series of physical merits which he was gratified to find assembled in the person of one whom he might ultimately possess. The vague feeling of sympathy which attracts one to a work of art, now that he knew the original in flesh and blood of Jethro's daughter, became a desire which more than compensated, thenceforward, for the desire which Odette's physical charms had at first failed to inspire in him. When he had sat for a long-time gazing at the Botticelli, he would think of his own living Botticelli, who seemed even lovelier still, and as he drew towards him the photograph of Zipporah he would imagine that he was holding Odette against his heart (I, 221-2)

Marcel himself reproduces Swann's behavior in *À L'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs*, when getting to know Elstir's studio, with a significant twist that is worth considering¹³. While at Balbec, Marcel meets Elstir, who invites the young narrator to visit his studio. The excitement of the invitation rapidly fades away when he realizes that visiting the great artist at his work place would mean losing the opportunity of crossing paths with the little clan of girls to which Albertine belonged. Characteristically, even the glimpse of happiness Swann had captured in Botticelli's painting is disfigured in Marcel's version of it. Hence, Elstir does not become the angel announcing the good news and the good news itself, as Botticelli did, but the "necessary intermediary between these girls and me" (II, 203), a middleman utterly unable to do the job of introducing Marcel to the

¹² "and the necessity, if he was to find any beauty in her face, of fixing his eyes on the fresh and rosy protuberance of her cheekbones, and of shutting out all the rest of those cheeks which were so often languorous and sallow, except when they were punctuated with little fiery spots, plunged him in acute depression, as proving that one's ideal is always unattainable, and one's actual happiness mediocre" (I, 219).

¹³ On this subject, cf. Chapter 19.

young girls. When forced by his grandmother to visit Elstir, before knowing he was in fact friends with the girls, Marcel finds Elstir's home "the most sumptuously hideous (...) of all that there were to be had at Balbec" (II, 190). He finds Elstir's wife, who precludes them from joining the little clan by the seashore, "tedious [*très ennuyeuse*]" (II, 205), pays no attention to Elstir's paintings, which he used to admire and will later admire again, and doesn't care for his work method, only wishing to escape the artist's company.

In case the parallel between this scene and Swann's wasn't clear enough, in the middle of this meeting Proust dwells on the subject of Elstir's love for his wife, explaining that he found her beautiful because she seemed extracted from his paintings while his paintings were fed by the discovery of the muse he had searched for so long, in a movement exactly similar to the one depicted above¹⁴. Even the love of Mlle. Vinteuil for her friend, in the episode we will soon scrutinize, seems to be enhanced by the theatrical performance the two of them engage in before Vinteuil's picture, which in consequence enhances the pleasure of the sadistic scene.

This proximity between aesthetic beauty and erotic pleasure, which is so explicitly established in *À La Recherche*, was first drafted in "Avant La Nuit". There, the dying young girl explains that, even though she was "physically predisposed to that kind of love" (*P&J*, 251), lesbianism was first suggested to her neither by some voyeuristic scene, nor by the attraction she always felt by the beauty of the female body, but by the arguments in favor of it presented by the narrator and by Rodin's statues¹⁵.

Lastly, "Avant La Nuit" plays a central role in Proust's *oeuvre* due to being there Proust's first attempted formulation of the complex relationship (omnipresent in *À La Recherche*) between joy and melancholy. A tension that is, as Compagnon rightfully claims¹⁶, complexified, dechristianized and considerably demoralized after *Les Plaisirs et les Jours*. This association is present in the last sentence of the short story in which,

¹⁴ "he had never been able to look at [his ideal] with detachment, to extract emotion from it, until the day on which he encountered it, realized outside himself, in the body of a woman, the body of the woman who had in due course become Mme. Elstir and in whom he had been able (...) to find it meritorious, moving, divine. How restful, moreover, to be able to place his lips upon that ideal Beauty which hitherto he had been obliged so laboriously to extract from within himself," (II, 206). It is obvious in passages like this that Proust enormously complexifies the scheme Sainte-Beuve used to approach literature. He is stating that art and life are constantly and mutually feeding themselves, making of the distinctions Sainte-Beuve relies upon something arbitrary and impossible to trace. For more on this subject, cf. Chapter 8.

¹⁵ "Don't you believe that those arguments might help a woman physically predisposed to that kind of love gain conscience of that vague curiosity, if certain Rodin statues, for example, had already triumphed- artistically- over her repugnancies (...)" (*P&J*, 251).

¹⁶ Cf. "Ce Frémissement d'un Coeur à Qui on Fait Mal" in *Proust Entre Deux Siècles*.

after hearing the confession of her friend's sexual orientation and attempted suicide, the narrator claims that "never have we felt so much evil and so much good" (*P&J*, 252), but it is even more revealingly present a few lines earlier when the narrator claims that he "tried to drink her tears out of her hands". This passage is a paraphrase of Anatole France's words that serve as an epigraph of "Rêve" ("Your tears flowed towards me, my lips drank your cries" (*P&J*, 190)) and is recovered and expanded in the same fragment of "Reveries Couleur du Temps". There, in a dream similar to the one narrated in the opening of Dante's *La Vita Nuova*, the dreamed girl's tears appear in the narrator's own eyes¹⁷, while she, "spearing her tongue outside her fresh mouth, and smiling, plucked all my tears around my eyes" (*P&J*, 192). The confusion and indistinction between what belongs to the narrator and what belongs to the characters, clumsily drafted in "Rêve", will again be nuclear to the artistic process of *À La Recherche*¹⁸, but what concerns us most here is the idea of feeding oneself of one's own suffering, which is somehow transferred to someone else. This idea will be fully developed below, in the discussion about the Montjouvain and Jupien's brothel scenes.

Despite their other merits, "Avant La Nuit" and "La Confession d'une Jeune Fille" can, in different degrees, be regarded as little more than "vulgarized baudelairianism and (...) tinpot satanism" (Compagnon, 161). If the two scenes under analysis in these chapters were no different than these two stories, there would be no reason to devote any attention to them, as they could, in fact, be explained by Bataille and Compagnon's theory that for Proust sexual attraction is a strange mixture between love, anger and resentment or, as Compagnon puts it, erotic cruelty¹⁹. Thus, Charlus would be doing nothing more than following his instincts to maximize pleasure which, for some reason, would originate from a blend of cruelty and love. Yet, as it soon will be argued, this is not what occurs in *À La Recherche*.

"La Confession d'une Jeune Fille" seems, as Thierry Laget suggests, heavily influenced by Augustine's *Confessions*, not only in its title, not only in some passages which sound like *pastiches* of Augustine's biographical work, but mainly in the idea that sin is merely virtue misplaced²⁰. An idea that will serve as the unacknowledged legislator

¹⁷ "My eyes (...) were filled with tears, her tears, I could say" (*P&J*, 192).

¹⁸ Cf. Chapter 19.

¹⁹ "Cruelty in Proust is not metaphysical, theological or moral after all. It remains uncertain and ambiguous: sometimes it is sadian, other times it is sadistic, or even baudelairian, but it is, first of all, erotic" (Compagnon, 182).

²⁰ Laget lists many more similarities between both works that are worth considering (*P&J*, 333). It should also be added to this list that, both in *Confessions* and in "La Confession d'une Jeune Fille", sins

of Bataille's theory on Proust, even if Bataille gives it a significant twist by arguing that goodness itself needs evil in order to avoid becoming insipid.

If the tinpot satanism can be read as an inheritance from Baudelaire, it is certainly more deeply rooted in the tension suggested by the epigraphs. The quotation of *Imitation of Christ* proposes that nothing besides guilt and sadness survives when we give in to sensuality and pleasure²¹, whereas Régnier claims that amid false mirth (*fausses allégresses*), there is still the sweet melancholic perfume of lilac²². This indecision between the belief that nothing good can result from giving in to the appeal of our senses, and the creed that from false mirth we can somehow extract a sweet melancholic perfume, is exactly the tension that drives the protagonists of both stories to despair and to attempt against their own life.

In "La Confession d'une Jeune Fille", Proust, just like Régnier in the epigraph, repeatedly resorts to two paradoxical adjectives when referring to pleasure, suggesting thence that in pleasure there is always a crossroad of two paths, one of joy, and another of violence and sadness²³. The concomitance of these two paths in "La Confession d'une Jeune Fille" is shown in the moment the narrator states that "absence brings other even bitterer teachings, we get used to absence, but the biggest diminution of oneself, the most humiliating suffering is to feel that we suffer no more" (*P&J*, 142). For the *jeune fille*, the enhancement of suffering is brought paradoxically by the diminishment of suffering, as that diminishment is always accompanied by the disappearance of pleasure altogether or, as Bataille might have phrased it, by having what's left of darkness untainted by pink. Therefore, what a Stoic would consider his highest hope seems to be an absolute nightmare for the *jeune fille*, a nightmare that would be restaged in the episode of Marcel's grandmother's death, thus allowing us to believe that Proust himself would agree with the story's narrator on this particular point.

are never explicitly stated but only vaguely alluded to, which might suggest that both authors are more concerned with the path that led to sinning than with the sins themselves.

²¹ "Sensual craving sometimes entices you to wander around, but when the moment is past, what do you bring back with you save a disturbed conscience and heavy heart? A happy going often leads to a sad return, a merry evening to a mournful dawn. Thus, all carnal joy begins sweetly but, in the end, brings remorse and death" (*P&J*, 139). Here we have followed Croft and Bolton's canonic translation of *Imitation of Christ*.

²² "Amidst the forgetfulness we seek in false mirth, the sweet melancholic scent of lilacs returns more virginal through the exhilarations" (*P&J*, 139).

²³ "Her visits were the sweetest and cruelest thing"; "...old habit she had lost, because I found in it too much pleasure and too much grief" (*P&J*, 140); "the joyous anguish of that expectation"; "[he] taught me things that instantly made me tremble of remorse and lust" (*P&J*, 141); "you made me smile and weep" (*P&J*, 144); "he had simultaneously gentle and daring manners" (*P&J*, 145); "[she was] sad and content for betraying her sentence and her mourning to please me and celebrate my joy" (*P&J*, 150).

This exaggerated and juvenile paradoxical formula used by Proust in his 1896 short story to show how pleasure and grief's paths are entangled is more developed than Compagnon credits it to be. The young girl tries to present alternatives for why this entanglement took place, even if we recognize that this attempted theorization always seems feeble when compared to what would follow in *À La Recherche*. The joy the narrator felt when she was ill, for instance, is explained not by some unaccountable pathological masochism but by the return, in those days of sickness, of her beloved mother to Les Oublis, where she would take care of her daughter, offering her unrestrained tenderness.

If this short story doesn't have the sophistication of the arguments developed, for instance, in "Sentiments Filiaux d'un Parricide"²⁴, Proust still won't allow the reader to imagine the guilt felt by the young narrator is born from nothing. Even if she might seem like a cartoonish character from a melodrama, the *jeune fille* is justified in associating her mother to pleasure. This association occurs not only due to her mother's demonization of every little pleasure²⁵, but also by her mother's long history of sudden appearances on occasions she was yielding to temptation²⁶, which leads her to metonymically associate pleasure with the abandonment of her own childhood and a necessary separation from her mother. This strong association, which the narrator can never avoid making, will eventually lead her, while having sex with a former lover, to think of the horror felt by "anyone who, having seen me just now embracing my mother with *melancholic tenderness*, saw me this way transfigured into a beast" (*P&J*, 151, my emphasis). Moments after this, her mother would become an involuntary voyeur and catch the couple in the act, making her fall to the ground and indirectly causing her death.

This confusion between pleasure and suffering that permeates "La Confession d'une Jeune Fille", allows one closing remark regarding a crucial difference between the pages of *Les Plaisirs et Les Jours* and the sadistic episodes in *À La Recherche*, even if we can see that both Mlle. Vinteuil and the narrator share the same depiction of pleasure as

²⁴ Cf. Chapter 9.

²⁵ The moment the narrator prepares to make a toast to celebrate her recent engagement, which would in the eyes of the world transform her into an adult, her mother infantilizes her, showing the reader how sin was always presented to the *jeune fille* as an imminent threat: "She tenderly [*doucement*] said: 'One should never give space to evil, no matter how small that space is'" (*P&J*, 150). Here we once more find violence and tenderness closely associated in the story. This episode is reenacted in *Du Côté de Chez Swann*, when the grandmother despairs while Marcel's aunts try to offer a beer to Marcel's grandfather. In *À La Recherche*, Marcel will also express discomfort while having beer, as he felt that his grandmother "saw me already dying a drunkard's death" (I, 487).

²⁶ Cf. *P&J*, 142.

a rare and diabolical thing²⁷. Despite this similarity, there is not a shadow of sadomasochism in the 1896 story, which is perhaps why the narrator perceives the final scene as something that happened to her, instead of something she did²⁸. As something she had no control over, which brings her closer to Mme. Verdurin than to Mlle. Vinteuil or Charlus, as will later be argued.

Yet, before abandoning “La Confession d’une Jeune Fille” altogether, it is worth briefly pointing out how Proust was already preparing the end of *Le Temps Retrouvé*, anticipating and refuting most of the readings of *À La Recherche* still to come. At the end of story’s second section, perhaps the most melancholic moment of the text, the young girl directly addresses the poppies, clovers and cornflowers of Les Oublis, explaining to them that “if I carried you with such exhilaration, with fiery eyes, all trembling, if you made me smile and weep, it was because I composed [*je composais*] you with all my hopes from then, which now, like you, have dried, rotten, and not having blossomed like you have turned to dust” (*P&J*, 144). Here Proust is pointing out that the past²⁹ did not exist in itself, but in dialogue with an imagined future that tainted it, as something she used to compose at her own will. The same happens, as will be argued in the last chapter, with the *temps retrouvé*, which is never the past itself but something that has been magnified by the rottenness of the present, by things that have transformed themselves into dust before the narrator’s eyes, and make the verb *retrouver* somehow deceiving in this context. Proust seems to elucidate us in this aspect when, in the beginning of the episode, the girl starts by praising the “fresh water of recollection” that comes to her now “untainted and unweakened” by the present. However, a few lines later, this mystic moment is cut short by a brief lamentation: “back then, however, I didn’t believe that I would one day come to miss it” (*P&J*, 143). In this melancholic confession, the young girl declares that it was not so much that those days were celestial and complete in themselves, but that they are now, in the devastation her tragedy brought, remembered as that by comparison. This allows us to suspect those allegedly untainted and unweakened

²⁷ “It now confusingly appeared to me that, in every lustful and culpable act, there is (...) ferocity on the part of the bodies that are enjoying it, and in us there are (...) pure angels being martyred and weeping” (*P&J*, 151); “... it was pleasure, rather, that seemed evil”; “Perhaps she would not have thought of evil as a state so rare, so abnormal, so exotic, one which it was so refreshing to sojourn, ...” (*I*, 163)

²⁸ “After that, I did nothing but let myself go”; “pleasure held me tighter and tighter” (*P&J*, 151).

²⁹ It can never be neglected that the past is here, located in a place called ‘Les Oublis’, something that could be translated as ‘The Oblivions’.

waters, from which Marcel himself will so thirstily drink, at the Princes de Guermantes' party.

Chapter 2

Sadomasochism II: The Dusk

In September 1906, three years before embarking on *À La Recherche* and during the long mourning period that followed the death of Proust's mother, a period during which he apparently didn't write, we find the first explicit appearance of sadism in Proust's intended fiction in a letter to Reynaldo Hahn. Proust tells his friend, asking for absolute secrecy, that he "had an idea for a play that I believe is not bad. I told [René] Peter about it, he seemed to want to write it with me" (*Correspondance*, VI, 216). Then, on the same letter, Proust briefly explains the plot. This plot was never followed through, at least as far as we know. According to Proust, the story would go like this:

A couple loves each other, immense, saint, pure (not chaste, of course) affection of the husband for his wife. But that man is a sadist and apart from the love for his wife, he is involved with whores with whom he finds pleasure by staining his own good sentiments. And eventually the sadist, feeling the need for more and more, comes to stain his wife while talking with those whores, to make them slander and to slander himself (he is disgusted five minutes afterwards). Once, while he is talking like that, his wife appears in the play without him listening, she cannot believe her ears and her eyes, she falls. Afterwards, she leaves her husband. He begs, but there was nothing to be done. The whores wanted to come back, but the sadism would have been too hurtful for him now, and after one last attempt to win back his wife that would not even answer him, he kills himself (*Correspondance*, VI, 216)

The obvious similarities with both "La Confession d'une Jeune Fille" and the Montjouvain episode make this ghost play the missing link in the evolution of Proust's sadomasochism. An evolution which is undoubtedly propitiated by the death of Proust's mother occurring in the meantime.

This story contains fundamental traces of what would constitute Proust's depiction of sadomasochism. The husband finds pleasure not in evil for evil's sake but in a theatrical dramatization. He doesn't beat the prostitutes and they do not beat him, as they would most certainly do if this was simply about pain or evilness. He is not a tinpot Satanist, but someone who is 'staining his own good sentiments'. Thus, sadism is not about evil, but about some complex dialogue with our own feelings. It has nothing to do with the intention to harm, but everything to do with an intention to purge and control what constitutes us, as will be claimed henceforth. Proust reinforces the importance of seeing sadism as an attempt to regain some control by stating that the husband felt 'the need for more and more', leading him to slander his wife. What Proust is portraying here

is a desperate effort to dominate and redefine his own pleasure, his own affections and what constitutes him. Still, like the *jeune fille* in her confession and like Marcel in the volumes consecrated to Albertine, the more one tries to regain control, the more that same control slips away, until the moment ‘pleasure held me tighter and tighter’ and ‘I did nothing but let myself go’, until the moment one becomes the prisoner of what one thought was controlling.

What happens in the play when sadism goes wrong is also very revealing. As the wife catches her husband in an act of profanation, she falls down, in what seems to be an allusion to the tragic death of the *jeune fille*’s mother. However, after the fall, she does not die. She gets up and abandons the sadistic husband. Again, if pleasure was derived solely from the infliction of suffering and cruelty upon oneself or others, if sadism had anything to do with some form of satanism, then we wouldn’t expect the wife’s involuntary voyeurism to ruin pleasure, leading the husband to get rid of the prostitutes and kill himself. If this was a case of pure satanism, of thirst for cruelty, then the intromission of the wife would presumably enhance that same pleasure by destroying the frontier between stage and life altogether.

Finally, it is important to point out that there is no evidence to define the husband as a sadist, as Proust did, since his behavior is much more similar to the one of a masochist. We will get back to this definition issue later, when analyzing the Montjouvain scene.

The first thing we must establish when understanding the importance of sadomasochism for Proust is that, as Schaffner stated, sadomasochism is a reproduction of behaviors that are constantly reappearing throughout *À La Recherche*³⁰. We will also have to bear in mind that, due to his father’s influence, Proust was very familiar with state-of-the-art medicine in his days and could not avoid some degree of contamination, particularly from Krafft-Ebing and Karl Heinrich Ulrichs’ influential theories on sexuality. In a 1921 letter Proust claims he never read Freud³¹, but we will nonetheless suggest that Freud’s hypothesis somehow also indirectly contaminated Proust’s conception of sadomasochism³².

³⁰ “cruelty – both of the sadistic and of the non-sadistic kind – determines the broad majority of interpersonal relations in Proust’s world” (Schaffner, 204).

³¹ Cf. *Correspondance*, XX, 447.

³² The intellectual debt Freud assumes having towards Krafft-Ebing, in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, helps explain part of the similarities to be pointed out during this chapter, as that debt makes us realize that both Freud and Proust were, in a sense, created from Krafft-Ebing’s ribs.

These considerations regarding Proust's familiarity with the medical treatises of his day, and particularly with Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*, are relevant for the argument we are trying to make. Both Freud, in *Three Essays on The Theory of Sexuality*, and Krafft-Ebing, in his *Psychopathia Sexualis*, claim that sadism is not something only psychopathic characters embody, but is in fact a generalized human tendency that is just more acute in some people for any number of reasons, therefore reinforcing Schaffner's hypothesis³³. Furthermore, both Freud and Krafft-Ebing propose that sadistic tendencies are not acquired at some later stage of an individual's life but can be "traced back to early childhood and exist during a period of life when their revival can by no manner of means be attributed to external impressions, much less to sexual temper" (Krafft-Ebing, 82). This closely resonates with what Proust himself seems to believe, as well as with the upcoming argument that those tendencies are directly related to the characters' lives and are nothing more than a reaction to their whole existence, instead of some form of pathological outbreak³⁴.

Thus, for the sake of argument let us for now accept Schaffner and Krafft-Ebing's suggestion that sadism is a reproduction of life and interpret it as such in the scenes of the novel that concern us at this point. Let us, for just a moment, assume that sadism, like most of the human behavior in the novel, is mainly concerned with a quest for pleasure. This belief will, hopefully, be justified by what will follow.

Compagnon's argument on Proust's sadism revolves around the definition of sadism given by Proust himself in a letter to Louis de Robert. In that 1913 letter, Proust defines sadistic people as "sensitive perverts" (*Correspondance*, XII, 238). A definition which, without an adequate contextualization, allow for Compagnon's interpretation of pleasure as a mixture between love and resentment, love and suffering and/or love and anger. Krafft-Ebing himself argued in favor of a metonymic confusion between love and anger by claiming that

love and anger are not only the most intense emotions, but also the only two forms of robust (sthenic) emotion. Both seek their object, try to possess themselves of it, and naturally

³³ "[Sadism], however, differs from the manifestations of normal life only in the intensity of the sexual feeling that here comes into play, and in the slight degree of will-power necessary for the maintenance of its equilibrium. The difference is one of intensity, not of quality" (Krafft-Ebing, 202); "Sadism and masochism occupy a special position among the perversions, since the contrast between activity and passivity which lies behind them is among the universal characteristics of the sexual life" (Freud (1953), 159).

³⁴ It is worth reminding, at this point, that *À La Recherche* is precisely a novel about how everything can be traced back to our early childhood.

exhaust themselves in a physical effect on it; both throw the psycho-motor sphere into the most intense excitement, and thus, by means of this excitation, reach their normal expression. From this standpoint it is clear how lust impels to acts that otherwise are expressive of anger (Krafft-Ebing, 84).

It is true that, as stated before, Compagnon's theory cannot be immediately ruled out as a description of how pleasure works in *À La Recherche*. We can trace many evidences of the simultaneous existence of love and suffering when there is some form of pleasure taking place, which would somehow transform the novel's sadists into sensitive perverts, even if they are sensitive perverts similar to almost all the remaining characters³⁵. In the first pages of *La Prisonnière*, Marcel is convinced that he had stopped caring about Albertine, and the main reason why he believed that was precisely because she didn't make him suffer anymore³⁶. A few pages later, reinforcing Compagnon's position, Marcel seems to suggest that love and suffering are one and the same thing, when he states that what he refers to as love is, in fact, just mutual torture³⁷.

However, if *À La Recherche* teaches us anything, it is that when two things appear simultaneously in front of our eyes, we cannot infer that the link uniting them is a necessary one, or that the ties binding them are simple and thoroughly explained, just like we cannot infer that because we see a person behaving the same way every day, that person will behave similarly when we are not around taking a look, as the start of *Sodome et Gomorrhe* famously pointed out. The task of the reader of *À La Recherche*, just like the task of Marcel, is to trace distinctions between metonymies and causes in order to get closer to the understanding of what is in fact going on around the protagonist. It is the task of distinguishing what tends to occur simultaneously out of necessity (and therefore will occur simultaneously every time) from what occurs simultaneously out of a mere contingency³⁸. Thus, just because love and suffering appear very often intertwined, we cannot suppose that pleasure occurs whenever love and suffering appear simultaneously or that a simple combination of both has generated it. The hypothesis that will herein be presented is that love and suffering in *À La Recherche* are, in most cases, necessary for pleasure to take place, but that pleasure depends not simply on those factors but rather on

³⁵ Schaffner convincingly proposes that Proust depicts love exactly as a perversion (Schaffner, 202).

³⁶ "I no longer loved Albertine, for I no longer felt anything of the pain I had felt in the train at Balbec" (III, 530).

³⁷ "Here I mean by love reciprocal torture" (III, 617).

³⁸ One good example of this confusion occurs in the first volume when Marcel tells us he used to imagine that the weather in Tansonville was different than the one in Méséglise because his parents took the shortest one when it was raining.

our ability to control, reduce and restrain the suffering inflicted on us by the ones we love. Or, rephrasing it in plainer terms, love and suffering are necessary conditions for pleasure, but they are not sufficient conditions³⁹. We need to add control to the equation, as, according to Proust, once we are able to control suffering, we can rewrite our love narratives on our own terms.

Like any other description of these paraphilias, Krafft-Ebing's definition of sadism and masochism is focused on the idea of a quest for submission and control: "lust in the infliction of pain and lust in inflicted pain appear (...) as two different sides of the same psychical process, of which the primary and essential thing is the consciousness of active or passive subjection, in which the combination of cruelty and lustful pleasure has only a secondary psychological significance" (Krafft-Ebing, 215). Reading *À La Recherche* in the light of this formulation, we become aware of the fact that in the novel pleasure is closely connected with taming either the loved one, by his or her incarceration, or the feelings generated by him or her⁴⁰. Not surprisingly, this connection is made more explicit in *La Prisonnière*, the volume where Proust is concerned with this exact question. There, pleasure occurs when Marcel believes to be in control of Albertine, which causes the correlation of pleasure to be established not with suffering itself but with the illusion of restraining it. Whenever Albertine is asleep, Marcel feels himself as a dominator and his love for her increases with the peace brought by having the woman he loves unable to escape him, unable to move and, most of all, unable to do things without him knowing. Paradoxically, the pleasure felt with the taming of the beast always creates the illusion

³⁹ Elstir's love for his wife and the love of Marcel's parents for each other for instance, do not seem to be, as far as we are shown, correlated with suffering of any kind. We are then forced to read the necessity of suffering in pleasure as something that only applies to people similar to Marcel himself, people of a specific kind that are clearly predominant in *À La Recherche*.

⁴⁰ Marcel goes so far as to compare Albertine to a domestic animal, with her being pleasurable as far as the domestic side prevails over the animal instinct, and being a nuisance otherwise: "Her somewhat inconvenient charm was, in fact, that of behaving in the household not so much like a girl as like a domestic animal which comes into a room and goes out again and is to be found wherever one least expects to find it, and she would often - something that I found profoundly restful [*un repos profond*]- come and lie down on my bed by my side, make a place for herself from which she never stirred, without being in my way as a person would have been" (III, 525). On this subject, it is worth considering Ladenson's argument comparing the ice-cream scene with the famous *casser le pot* scene. According to Ladenson, Marcel is pleased when Albertine describes to him in a rather explicitly erotic Marcelian fashion the pleasure she experiences while eating an ice-cream. Contrarily, he despairs when he hears the beginning of the confession of Albertine's sexual desires because the language she uses was "clearly acquired, but not from him; rather, her use of the vulgar expression points to her having escaped his influence (...) It is the linguistic otherness of her eroticism that appalls him" (Ladenson, 108).

that a separation is possible, which seems to be Marcel's ultimate goal⁴¹. Whenever Albertine is awake and physically or spiritually away from his jurisdiction, Marcel feels desperate and understands that he is the one being tamed⁴².

This theory of pleasure is, indeed, explicitly stated at least twice in the novel. One occurrence is in *La Prisonnière*, when, while depicting Charlus' relationship with Morel, Marcel claims that "the possession of what we love is an even greater joy than love itself." (III, 560). The other time this theory is formulated happens as early as in *À L'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs*, when Proust seems to preemptively attempt to clarify the confusion which generated Compagnon and Battaille's theory regarding *À La Recherche*. Narrating the end of Marcel and Gilberte's relationship, Proust writes that

⁴¹ Here Proust echoes one of Freud's theories, this time a theory formulated in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Paraphrasing Fechner, Freud counterintuitively asserts that pleasure is related with the diminution of the amount of excitement one feels ("The facts which have caused us to believe in the dominance of the pleasure principle in mental life also find expression in the hypothesis that the mental apparatus endeavors to keep the quantity of excitation present in it as low as possible or at least to keep it constant" (Freud (1961), 3)). Freud will afterwards trace a parallel with the sexual act that is also an accurate image of Proust's picture of how pleasure works, according to our suggestions: "We have all experienced how the greatest pleasure attainable by us, that of the sexual act, is associated with a momentary extinction of a highly intensified excitation. The binding of an instinctual impulse would be a preliminary function designed to prepare the excitation for its final elimination in the pleasure of discharge" (Freud (1961), 56). Proust would also agree with Freud's description of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in the last section of the book, where he writes that the book is about the universal characteristic of our instinct "to restore an original state of things" (Freud (1961), 56), a sentence that would work perfectly as an epigraph of *À La Recherche*.

⁴² When asleep, Albertine's domestic side prevails to such an extent over her animality that she is no longer compared to a pet, but to a plant: "Stretched out at full length on my bed, in an attitude so natural that no art could have devised it, she reminded me of a long blossoming stem that had been laid there; and so in a sense she was: the faculty of dreaming, which I possessed only in her absence, I recovered at such moments in her presence, as though by falling asleep she had become a plant. In this way, her sleep realized to a certain extent the possibility of love: alone, I could think of her, but I missed her, I did not possess her; when she was present, I spoke to her, but was too absent from myself to be able to think of her; when she was asleep, I no longer had to talk, I knew that I was no longer observed by her, I no longer needed to live on the surface of myself. By shutting her eyes, by losing consciousness, Albertine had stripped of, one after another, the different human personalities with which she had deceived me ever since the day when I had first made her acquaintance. She was animated now only by the unconscious life of plants, of trees, a life more different from my own, more alien, and yet one that belonged more to me. Her personality was not constantly escaping, as when we talked, by the outlets of her unacknowledged thoughts and of her eyes. She had called back into herself everything of her that lay outside, had withdrawn, enclosed, reabsorbed herself into her body. In keeping her in front of my eyes, in my hands, I had an impression of possessing her entirely which I never had when she was awake. Her life was submitted to me, exhaled towards me its gentle breath" (III, 578). When she escapes, through those hidden thoughts and regards, Marcel is filled with the horror of all possibilities, a horror that, even though being related with love, has nothing to do with pleasure: "alas, Gomorrah was disseminated all over the world. And partly out of jealousy, partly out of ignorance of such joys (...) I had arranged unawares this game of hide and seek in which Albertine would always elude me" (III, 533). It is worth noticing here that despair comes associated with dispersal, with the realization that Gomorra is too spread to be contained (an idea that echoes "Un Amour de Swann"'s metaphor of Swann's love as a cancer that is now too spread out through the body to be operable (cf. I, 303). Unsurprisingly, this oncological metaphor is used to depict Swann's despair).

What makes us so happy is the presence in our hearts of an unstable element which we contrive perpetually to maintain and of which we cease almost to be aware so long as it is not displaced. In reality, there is in love a permanent strain of suffering which happiness neutralizes, makes potential only, postpones, but which may at any moment become, what it would long since have been had we not obtained what we wanted, excruciating (I, 571)

Here, Proust is stressing that the level of gladness we feel depends on our ability to arrange and stabilize something unstable which, while remaining so, brings permanent suffering. Thence, joy is precisely the neutralization and postponement of excruciating suffering, which is in this way controlled and restrained. It is precisely through the understanding of this mechanism that sadomasochism enters the novel.

Krafft-Ebing wrote about Sacher-Masoch, the Austrian writer after whom Krafft-Ebing coined the term masochism, that “whenever he eliminated his perversion from his literary efforts he was a gifted writer, and as such would have achieved real greatness had he been actuated by normally sexual feelings” (Krafft-Ebing, 132). The admiration one feels for Krafft-Ebing’s work shouldn’t lead us to follow his diagnosis of Sacher-Masoch’s craftmanship, as he became famous for his atypical sexual preferences and not despite them. *Venus in Furs* is a novel where Sacher-Masoch not only shows limited talent as a writer, but also where he fails to capture the essence of his own sexual preferences. The description of a sadomasochist relationship made by Severin assumes that, in a couple with those preferences, there is always a quest for power, in which the masochist repeatedly subjugates himself to the sadistic, who thus becomes infinitely loved and rapidly loses interest. This is obviously a simplistic view of how relationships work (inside or outside the sadomasochistic world), as things are never so clearly defined. In fact, believing Sacher-Masoch’s word would make us believe that a couple made up of a masochist and a sadist should necessarily be doomed to failure, since there would be no reason for a sadist to continue in a relationship of that kind. This confusing binary portrait of sadomasochism’s power balance is refuted by Proust but is also refuted by most contemporary descriptions of the paraphilia.

Sadomasochism seems to depend on an exercise of flattery. However, flattery doesn’t go in the direction Sacher-Masoch imagined and would be more intuitive for a lay person, at least according to the descriptions found in *À La Recherche* and in an anthology of contemporary perspectives on sadomasochism, *Safe, Sane and Consensual (SSC)*, edited by Darren Langdrige and Meg Barker. A description of sadomasochism

as an exercise of flattery would suggest that the flattery be conducted by the masochist towards the sadist⁴³, as it would intuitively be the sadist's desire to believe that someone was utterly subject to his/her will that would be flattered by the masochist, leaving the alleged dominator in control of the couple.

This binary formula for the power structure of a sadomasochist couple, which makes the sadist the center of the scene and the masochist a sexual slave, is utterly rejected in *SSC*, where the emphasis is on masochism⁴⁴. Besides the power structure considered above, it is crucial for the analysis of sadism in *À La Recherche* to consider two other characteristics, which are emphasized both in *SSC* and in *Psychopathia Sexualis*: the theatricality of sadomasochism and what could be called the underlying bestiality of sadism.

The theatrical side of sadism in *À La Recherche* was pointed out by numerous critics⁴⁵ and echoes Krafft-Ebing's definition of sadism as "an excessive and monstrous pathological intensification of phenomena" (Krafft-Ebing, 86). Even if contemporary scholars would reject adjectives such as 'monstrous' and 'pathological', which Krafft-Ebing uses to describe sadomasochistic behavior, they would most certainly agree with the idea of theatricality. This idea is fundamental for BDSM⁴⁶ not only because role-playing is obviously one of the key aspects of the experience, but mainly because the idea of forcing a catharsis through Aristotelian methods is instrumental for those amongst the sadomasochist community who argue in favor of engaging in these sexual practices as a form of therapy, by restaging traumatic events in a safe environment and with a predefined plot⁴⁷.

In *SSC*, one of the most enhanced virtues of sadomasochism is the possibility of evading the world thus provided, as sadomasochism offers "a temporary and powerful

⁴³ To make the point clearer and in order to simplify the argument without any significant loss, let us consider a couple consisting of one sadist and one masochist, as is the case in *Venus in Furs*, and not by two sadomasochists.

⁴⁴ According to Sophia, a professional dominatrix, the focus is wholly on the masochist: "one might see one partner in chains and another wielding the whip, but this can conceal a multileveled power structure within the scene that is far more complex than meets the eye" (Langdridge, 278); "the submissive meanwhile is the center of the top's attention; it all revolves around them. This is one of the fundamental dichotomies of BDSM: the submissives have given up their power, are serving their dominant's every whim and desire, but in fact it's an illusion" (Langdridge, 280). This idea is stated elsewhere in similar terms: "the emphasis here is on the appearance of dominance and submission, because the actual power in the relationship is much more subtle" (Langdridge, 44).

⁴⁵ Cf. Rivers (1983), 120; Compagnon, 172-3; Schaffner, 213.

⁴⁶ BDSM is an overlapping abbreviation that stands for Bondage and Discipline (BD), Domination and Submission (DS), Sadism and Masochism (SM).

⁴⁷ This therapeutic idea would be very dear to Proust himself, as it will become clear ahead. For examples of the association between theatricality and sadism, cf. Langdridge, 34; 235-246.

escape from high-level awareness of self as an abstract, temporally extended, symbolically constructed identity, to a low-level, temporally constricted awareness of self as physical body, focusing on immediate sensations”, so that “individuals could escape the ‘burden of selfhood’ and achieve respite from the demands of modern society” (Langdrige, 33). Thence, sadomasochism would provide the experience furthest from urban cordiality, allowing sadomasochists to behave exactly as primitive creatures or animals for a while, and get rid of the problems brought by quotidian social interactions.

If all these characteristics of the sadomasochistic experience appear both in the sadistic and in the masochistic variation, it is often claimed in *SSC* that masochists, due to being unconcerned with safety issues and with the following of a plot, are more persuaded by the enactment. Therefore, flattery can flow in both directions, but masochists seem to be the ones who are flattered the most as they convince themselves that an escape from the burden of selfhood is possible and they can rewrite old traumatic events on their own terms. It is also important to point out that the pain felt in the BDSM experience is perceived as enjoyable not because the pain itself is pleasant, but because it represents the masochist’s full submission to the sadist. Thus, the pain inflicted would be simultaneously flattering to the sadist, who would persuade him/herself of his/her partner’s willingness to submit entirely to the dominator’s wishes, and the masochist, who would persuade him/herself of his/her willingness to suffer unconditionally in the hands of the dominator. Under this perspective, the concept of *safeword* proves this an illusion after all, making it an exercise of flattery and not limitless devotion⁴⁸.

This description of sadism as a theatrical escape from ourselves allows us to handle a problem that Schaffner appears to have neglected. Schaffner, trying to prove that cruelty appears constantly throughout *À La Recherche*, points out the example of the repeated humiliations Saniette suffers at the hands of Forcheville and the Verdurins. If cruelty undoubtedly plays a role here, Saniette never feels anything resembling pleasure for the suffering inflicted upon him by the people he seems to admire⁴⁹. Accepting the hypothesis we would like to put forward would mean that Saniette might have been

⁴⁸ *Safeword* is a concept used in BDSM relationships. As, in this context, asking for the violence to stop is a part of the roleplay, there is the need for some word, previously agreed upon that makes everything stop. Usually, the words used are in no way related to the context of a sexual relationship, like ‘marshmallow’ or ‘river’.

⁴⁹ Bataille, Compagnon and Schaffner correctly maintain that characters immersed in evil become numb to pleasure, making of them more sadians than sadists, according to Bataille’s description (cf. Bataille, 106). Nonetheless, this is not the case of Saniette, who is portrayed as having a good heart (Cf. I, 200).

prevented from feeling pleasure in those interactions because they were not done in a safe environment and under his thorough control, contrarily to Charlus' experiences at Jupien's brothel, as we will see in the following chapter.

Chapter 3

Sadomasochism III: After Nightfall

Let us now turn to one of the two sadistic episodes in *À La Recherche*, whose analysis has been so far systematically deferred. The interpretation that follows will essentially try to justify why Proust describes Mlle. Vinteuil as an “artist in evil” (I, 162), and why he states in *Le Côté de Guermantes* that “sadism is needed to extract any pleasure” (II, 471-2) from a cruel scene, like the ones we will be looking at.

In *Du Côté de Chez Swann*, Marcel falls asleep near the Montjouvain pond, in front of the Vinteuil’s window, and after waking up sees Mlle. Vinteuil arranging the sadistic scene to follow, by placing a portrait of her recently deceased father near the canapé where she laid in wait for the girl with whom she lived, just like M. Vinteuil did with his music sheets when Marcel’s parents came to pay him a visit. Afterwards, Mlle. Vinteuil, unaware of Marcel’s presence, silently directs a sadistic scene in which her friend spits on the portrait, while referring to M. Vinteuil as an “old monkey [*villain singe*]” (I,160). Despite all this staging, I would like to argue that Mlle. Vinteuil is an ‘artist in evil’ in a deeper sense than suggested by the simple fact of her enacting this sadistic scene, even if this scene does indeed conduct us to the theatrical side of the sadistic experience alluded to earlier. Marcel himself points out to this theatrical aspect of the scene he glimpses at Montjouvain, by stating that “it is behind the footlights of a Paris theatre and not under the homely lamp of an actual country house that one expects to see a girl encouraging a friend to spit upon [*faire cracher*] the portrait of a father who has lived and died for her alone” (I, 161).

Following Proust’s formulation in the letter where he explains the play he intended to write with René Peter, the scene at Montjouvain can best be described as a deliberate effort of Mlle. Vinteuil to stain her own good sentiments, namely her “virtue, respect for the dead, [and] filial affection” (I, 162). Just like contemporary sadomasochists claim to face their sexual preferences as ‘a temporary and powerful escape from high-level awareness of self’ and as an attempt to ‘escape the ‘burden of selfhood’’, Mlle. Vinteuil is unsuccessfully trying to escape from the sorrow she felt for the death of her father, a death she feels responsible for⁵⁰. Throughout the scene, we notice that Mlle. Vinteuil’s friend only consents in taking a part in these profanations because she clearly understands

⁵⁰ This correlation often comes up in Proust’s work, as can be observed in “Sentiments Filiaux d’un Parricide” for example.

the importance her lover attributed to these rituals in the overcoming of her grief. To enhance the bizarre generosity and kindness of Mlle. Vinteuil's friend, Marcel describes the kiss the unnamed girl gives Mlle. Vinteuil as an expression of the affection she felt for her lover, but mainly of "the desire to bring what distraction she could into the dull and melancholy life of an orphan" (I, 161). Mlle. Vinteuil is therefore a sadist who like any other is trying to escape from herself and the burden of selfhood she carries with her. She is trying to "gain the momentary illusion of having escaped beyond the control of their own gentle and scrupulous natures into the *inhuman* world of pleasure" (I, 162, my emphasis). Thus, for her, evilness is not so much sadism for sadism's sake, but the farthest place from her own self she could imagine, and hence, precisely for that reason, the place she wanted to take shelter in⁵¹. However, she can run but she cannot hide because, as we are constantly reminded, the more immersed in sadism she becomes, the closer she gets to her father. In this scene, she can't help but reenact movements and behaviors that recall M. Vinteuil⁵², leading Marcel to conclude that what she was aiming at was impossible to achieve⁵³.

So, before trying to understand why she did not succeed, it is important to further understand what was she aiming at after all. It has already been established that Mlle. Vinteuil was heartbroken due to her father's death and, like the *jeune fille*, felt responsible for his demise and was trying to 'be thought the very antithesis of her father'. But it hasn't yet been sufficiently explained why she took shelter in sadism. This topic will now be the focus of our attention.

By diving into evil, Mlle. Vinteuil was trying to free herself from the guilt she felt, attempting to become numb to pain. She intended to be someone who did not care about her father or about what had happened to him. In order to do that, she thought she had to become a diabolical creature, different from her usual self. According to our earlier formulation, Mlle. Vinteuil was, hence, trying to control, reduce and restrain the suffering

⁵¹ "She reached out as far as she could across the limitations of her true nature to find the language appropriate to the vicious young woman she longed to be thought" (I, 161).

⁵² "Despite the brusque and hectoring familiarity with which she treated her companion, I could recognize in her the obsequious and reticent gestures and sudden scruples that had characterized her father." (I, 158-9); "At the moment when she wished to be thought the very antithesis of her father, what she at once suggested to me were the mannerisms, in thought and speech, of the poor old piano-teacher. Far more than his photograph, what she really desecrated, what she subordinated to her pleasures though it remained between them and her and prevented her from any direct enjoyment of them, was the likeness between her face and his, his mother's blue eyes which he had handed down to her like a family jewel" (I, 162).

⁵³ Cf. I, 162.

inflicted upon herself by the one she loved (M. Vinteuil), in order to exempt herself from sorrow and thus allow her to rewrite her own narrative in terms that better suited her.

Marcel concludes this episode by suggesting that “Perhaps she would not have thought of evil as a state so rare, so abnormal, so exotic, one in which it was so refreshing to sojourn, had she been able to discern in herself, as in everyone else, that indifference to the sufferings one causes which (...) is the most terrible and lasting form of cruelty” (I, 163). Marcel, as so often occurs in *À La Recherche*, is simultaneously right and wrong. He is correct because if Mlle. Vinteuil had realized she had in herself the evilness she so desperately sought, she would have understood that finding shelter in evil would not alienate her from herself. Yet, Marcel is also wrong because, through ‘the intensification of phenomena’ enabled by sadism, Mlle. Vinteuil might have been able to restrain the sorrow she felt and induce that same sorrow to herself in a close and safe environment, thus exorcizing it. That way, Mlle. Vinteuil would control the plot and the exact amount of grief she administered herself in each dosage, making evil a place so ‘soothing to migrate to’⁵⁴.

The spitting on her father’s portrait is, besides an effort to believe she is no longer suffering with his absence, Mlle. Vinteuil’s clumsy attempt to persuade herself that her so musically gifted friend despised the old piano teacher while loving her tenderly. In a sense, this would equate to the devoted daughter overcoming her father, symbolizing thence Mlle. Vinteuil’s superiority towards the person she loved and admired the most⁵⁵. Mlle. Vinteuil’s attempt to evade herself and to become immune to the suffering caused by M. Vinteuil’s death is underlined by Marcel’s statement that the goal of this role-play seemed to be exactly the elimination of the filial bonding between Mlle. Vinteuil and her father:

Springing on to her friend’s lap [Mlle. Vinteuil] held out a chaste brow to be kissed precisely as a daughter would have done, with the exquisite sensation that they would thus, between them, inflict the last turn of the screw of cruelty by robbing M. Vinteuil, as though they were actually rifling his tomb, of the sacred rights of fatherhood. (I, 161)

⁵⁴ While presenting Mlle. Vinteuil’s perspective problem, Proust is again offering us arguments against Bataille’s theory, since he presents the confusion between cruelty and pleasure as a metonymic confusion: “And as, each time she indulged in it, it was accompanied by evil thoughts such as ordinarily had no place in her virtuous mind, she came at length to see in pleasure itself something diabolical, to identify it with Evil” (I, 162).

⁵⁵ “But she could not resist the attraction of being treated with tenderness by a woman who had shown herself so implacable towards the defenseless dead” (I, 160).

Nonetheless, Mlle. Vinteuil failed. This failure in obtaining the pleasure she aimed at can be justified through her inability to keep up with the plot she imagined for herself and for her friend. The sadistic failure of this exorcism is a result of Mlle. Vinteuil's excess of courteousness and virtue but equally due to the monstrous image she had of pleasure and cruelty, which scarred her terribly and didn't allow her to follow through her intuitions, paralyzing her.

Like the *jeune fille* and the protagonist of "Avant La Nuit", Mlle. Vinteuil is afraid of giving in to pleasure, since she imagines it as a fiendish creature completely detached from the everyday world⁵⁶. Still, dissimilarly from her two predecessors, the question is not so much of letting herself give in to pleasure's incitements but rather of firmly imposing her will, which is, as we have been suggesting, the fundamental feature of sadism according to Proust. At some point of the narrative, Marcel describes Mlle. Vinteuil's moral hesitation as the struggle in which "a shy and suppliant maiden entreated and reined back a rough and swaggering trooper" (I, 159). In the terms of this metaphor, the sadistic urge is the trooper that Mlle. Vinteuil's shyness forces to retrieve, preventing her from obtaining the pleasure of the suffering's restriction. While her friend, contrarily to Charlus' companions in the brothel of *Le Temps Retrouvé*, is reasonably capable of following through Mlle. Vinteuil's imagined plot⁵⁷. Mlle. Vinteuil herself is depicted as an unexperienced and inhibited actress⁵⁸, which ultimately leads to the failure of the exercise of self-persuasion and flattery they were both engaging in.

Before moving on to the other sadistic scene of *À La Recherche*, it is important to address a terminology issue which has already been noticed by Hendrika C. Freud, Douglas B. Saylor and Carl Niekerk, but that has never been, to the best of our knowledge, satisfactorily developed. Similarly to what happened in the story of the sadistic husband, Proust at all times describes Mlle. Vinteuil as a sadist. Nevertheless, it is hard for us to understand why. If sadism consists in the sexual gratification felt in inflicting pain in

⁵⁶ "It was not evil that gave her the idea of pleasure, that seemed to her attractive; it was pleasure, rather, that seemed evil" (I, 162). Similarly to what occurs in "La Confession d'une Jeune Fille", Mlle. Vinteuil's demoniacal vision of pleasure is shaped by M. Vinteuil's extremely conservative worldview

⁵⁷ "she went on, feeling bound to annotate with a fond and mischievous wink these words which she recited out of good-naturedness, as a text which she knew to be pleasing to Mlle. Vinteuil" (I, 159).

⁵⁸ "Her sensitive and scrupulous heart was ignorant of the words that ought to flow spontaneously from her lips to match the scene for which her eager senses clamored" (I, 159); "To which Mlle. Vinteuil replied in words of gentle reproach - "Come, come!" - which testified to the goodness of her nature, not that they were prompted by any resentment at hearing her father spoken of in this fashion (...), but rather because they were a sort of curb which, in order not to appear selfish, she herself applied to the gratification which her friend was attempting to procure for her" (I, 160).

others and masochism the sexual gratification felt in having pain inflicted by others⁵⁹, then it is hard to trace distinctions in the case of Mlle. Vinteuil and any term we end up choosing will depend on the perspective through which we look at the episode⁶⁰.

In order to see Mlle. Vinteuil as a sadist, we have to imagine that she is the one inflicting pain on someone else (in this scenario on M. Vinteuil) and that her friend is merely an extension of herself. Going back to what was said about tear-drinking on “Rêve”, if we choose to interpret M. Vinteuil’s daughter as a sadist, then her friend would be spitting Mlle. Vinteuil’s own spit onto M. Vinteuil’s portrait.

If, on the other hand, we refuse Proust’s suggestion and imagine Mlle. Vinteuil as a masochist, we would have to imagine that she is metaphorically projecting herself onto the portrait of her father, making her friend’s spit directed towards Mlle. Vinteuil herself.

Finally, a third option, which seems wiser and makes the utterance of ‘artist in evil’ intelligible. Interpreting Mlle. Vinteuil as a sadomasochist would make of both her friend and the portrait mere puppets. Mlle. Vinteuil being the one simultaneously punishing and being punished, simultaneously spitting and being spat upon. More relevantly, this depiction of Mlle. Vinteuil as a sadomasochist allows us to trace a parallel between this scene and the act of writing *À La Recherche*.

Our argument owes a great deal to Riffaterre’s “Prosopopeia”, where onanism is regarded as being very similar to the act of writing, since they are both based on an effort to control the world and to subjugate it to one’s will. Riffaterre goes so far as to argue that the onanistic scene of *Du Côté de Chez Swann* is a “sensory triumph over the universe” (Riffaterre, 117), that reveals an “identity between the solitary orgasm in which he is his own master, and the writer’s inspiration” (Riffaterre, 118). In order to accept Riffaterre’s argument, we must take it with a pinch of salt, since the masturbation scene, as we will soon see, is clearly depicted by Marcel as a sterile exercise, and not in any way as “the inner taking over the outer” (Riffaterre, 116). What we understand in this scene is

⁵⁹ Here we are following Krafft-Ebing’s definition (cf. Krafft-Ebing, 131).

⁶⁰ “It may however be far more appropriate to understand the events taking place between Mlle. Vinteuil and her girlfriend as acts of ‘masochism’” (Niekerk, 57). Yet, Niekerk will argue the exact opposite of this thesis, as he suggests that this masochism is in fact a way for Mlle. Vinteuil to get closer to her deceased father, which it is done “in order to attract the attention and love of the father figure” (Niekerk, 58), instead of an attempt to run away from that love and attention. Resembling Schaffner’s argument that sadomasochism simply reproduces life’s patterns, Niekerk also claims that writing is an escape from the masochistic bind imposed by human relations, while we sustain that masochism has stronger ties to writing than to general human relations, given that the reproduction of those patterns of behavior is, in a way, done with cathartic intentions, as we will go on to argue.

that Marcel is completely unable to take over either the Roussainville woods or his own desires.

Marcel locks himself into the *petit cabinet* and, while looking outside, masturbates over a wild blackcurrant. Just like the literal act of masturbating over a plant can never bear fruit, Marcel's masturbation is in no way able to produce the fruits Riffaterre suggests, as what we come across in these pages is Marcel's frustration for the lack of communication between his intentions and the reality outside of himself. Thrice during the paragraph dedicated to this episode, Marcel resumes his experience at the *petit cabinet* as having been "in vain [*en vain*]" and a little later in the same paragraph, he will describe the fruits of his fantasies as "the purely subjective, impotent, illusory creatures of my temperament." (I, 156), which leads him to feel utterly enraged and frustrated:

it was without hope now that I concentrated my attention, as though to draw up from it the creatures which it must conceal, upon that sterile soil, that stale, exhausted earth, and it was no longer with exhilaration but with sullen rage that I aimed blows at the trees of Roussainville wood, from among which no more living creatures emerged than if they had been trees painted on the stretched canvas background of a panorama (I, 156)

This sterility of onanism shouldn't, nonetheless, hurry us into distinguishing masturbation from writing, since, for Proust, as we shall claim, literary creation is something that can only be achieved once one accepts one's impotence and recognizes one lives on sterile soil and exhausted land. Surprisingly, Riffaterre seems to concede this argument a few pages later, when he portrays the blindness of Marcel, when trying to look through Jupien's *vasistas*, as the failure of "the ultimate realization of the self as an artist", since "this spectacle, half-understood, only overheard, this apparent defeat of the eye, is in fact the closest one gets to reality- it is a replay of the primal scene" (Riffaterre, 120).

Thence, grasping the similarity between sadism and writing forces us to ignore the distinction between Marcel and Charlus traced by critics such as Anna Katharina Schaffner or Germaine Brée, according to whom Marcel used artistic creation as a way out of a vicious cycle, while Charlus remained stuck in sadism. The difference is never that drastic as it is not in any way certain that Marcel finds a safe haven in literature or that Charlus is, at Jupien's, simply the victim of "the compulsion to repeat childhood patterns" (Schaffner, 217).

Through the sadomasochism implicit in the Montjouvain scene, we realize that, similarly to Proust while writing *À La Recherche* and Charlus at the Jupien's brothel,

Mlle. Vinteuil places herself in a safe and sterilized environment. Such is the environment where she forges the illusion of getting hurt by others for her own gratification while completely controlling the pain inflicted upon her, by deciding the tone and the offenses that head her way. If the pains of war, love and loss are uncontrollable and lead to serious suffering and grief, sadomasochism offers a solution in which pain is no longer ignorable, but in which it is carefully dosed so that it can only hurt the masochists according to their own terms and conditions⁶¹. They may be flogged and offended, they may have their father's picture spat upon, they may witness the tragic death of the fictionalized version of their loved ones, but they can at any moment use their *safeword*, they can at any given time say 'Come, come' and make everything stop. They can always twist the plot and change what is said to them, and how it is said, to accommodate these sadomasochistic scenes according to their own will and design, thus making sure that the frontier between what they find acceptable or not is never surpassed, even if this frontier is hard to trace for a voyeur like ourselves, the readers⁶². Thus, just like in "Rêve", they are able to make their own tears run down the face of the person under their control and they may, for their own pleasure and entertainment, drink them up.

Proust underlines this parallel between creative writing and sadomasochism by stating twice during *À La Recherche* that Charlus might have been a great writer. It could have been argued, when we read Marcel claiming this for the first time⁶³ that this commentary is directed not towards Charlus himself but towards one of his models, Robert de Montesquiou, about whom Proust repeatedly suggested the same in his correspondence. However, the second time this argument is presented, it dismisses this interpretation, as Proust sustains that it is precisely the path leading Charlus to sadomasochism which would make him a gifted writer (a path that Montesquiou, as far as we can tell, never treaded). It is exactly the trail which leads him to inflict pain upon himself and to suffer that would make him able to write good poems and novels, even if, in order to do that, he should increase the risk of his behaviors and subject himself to

⁶¹ As will be argued in the twelfth chapter, this is the major difference between *Jean Santeuil* and *À La Recherche*. In his first (unfinished) novel, Proust still believed that grief and suffering were somehow avoidable.

⁶² An obvious example of what is here being suggested is Proust's refusal to include his parents' death in the novel, keeping them alive until the end (even if his father suddenly disappears from the novel, as will be argued in our fourth chapter).

⁶³ Cf. III, 716.

further pain, so that he could afterwards write about that untamed suffering, thus taming it:

Listening to Jupien, I said to myself: ‘How unfortunate it is that M. de Charlus is not a novelist or a poet! Not merely so that he could describe what he sees, but because the position in which a Charlus finds himself with respect to desire causes scandals to spring up around him, and compels him to take life seriously, to load pleasure with a weight of emotion. He cannot get stuck in an ironical and superficial view of things because a current of pain is perpetually reawakened within him (...) A slap in the face or a box on the ear helps to educate not only children but poets. If M. de Charlus had been a novelist, the house which Jupien had set up for him, by reducing so greatly the risks—at least (for a raid by the police was always a possibility) the risk emanating from an individual casually encountered in the street, of whose inclinations the Baron could not have felt certain—would have been a misfortune for him’ (IV, 410)

No study of the role of sadomasochism in *À La Recherche* would, therefore, be credible without a closer look at this character around whom sadomasochism seems concentrated in the novel.

In the famous opening scene of *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, where his homosexuality is revealed, the Baron de Charlus confesses to Jupien that he feels attracted to “a strange little fellow” who appears to be none other than Marcel himself, “an intelligent little cit who shows with regard to myself a prodigious want of civility. He has absolutely no idea of the prodigious personage that I am, and of the microscopic animalcule that he is in comparison.” (III, 13-4). Nevertheless, it is this prodigious want of civility that leads M. de Charlus to feel attracted to this strange little fellow, as the Baron undoubtedly realizes⁶⁴.

Further ahead, in the same volume, while informing the reader that Morel and Charlus had a relationship whose outlines are however never explicitly clarified, Marcel says that the couple went to restaurants regularly (certainly chosen by Charlus) “where M. de Charlus was taken for an old and penniless servant and Morel, whose duty it was to pay the bill, for a too kind-hearted gentleman” (III, 395). In those restaurants, M. de Charlus would unceasingly protest against the decoration or the sparkling wine the waiters imagined to be champagne.

In *La Prisonnière*, Charlus devotes himself to trying to arrange a marriage between Morel and Jupien’s niece. According to Marcel, while orchestrating his plan, Charlus was thinking:

⁶⁴ “As soon as, instead of leaving my letters unanswered, a young man starts writing to me incessantly, when he is morally, as it were, at my disposal, I am assuaged, or at least I would be were I not immediately seized with an obsession for another” (III, 13).

His wife too will be mine just as much as he is; they will always behave in such a way as not to annoy me, they will obey my every whim, and thus she will be a sign (hitherto unknown to me) of what I had almost forgotten, what is so very dear to my heart—that to all the world, to everyone who sees that I protect and house them, to myself, Morel is mine (III, 560)

which will lead Marcel to conclude, as quoted before to justify a prior argument, that the possession of what one loves is more important than love itself.

These three scenes are essential to the understanding of what Marcel will glimpse at Jupien's brothel. M. de Charlus seems, as the episode of the 'strange little fellow' shows, always aware of love's mechanism prevailing in *À La Recherche*, which impels characters towards fleeing objects of desire, precluding them from controlling the people they fall in love with. Moreover, even if they were able to subject those runaway characters to their will, they would be pleased only for a moment, as before long those loved ones would reveal themselves hopelessly unsatisfying, forcing them to move perpetually on to yet another object of desire.

Still, Charlus won't give up. The Baron will make every effort to believe that the control and subjection of those he feels attracted to is possible, and that it is possible for him to find some satisfaction, while desperately trying to convince himself of his superiority over those he wants to seduce. According to this perspective, the two other above-quoted scenes appear to follow a plan carefully drawn by Charlus. Firstly, Charlus tries to persuade himself and those around him that Morel is not the son of Marcel's uncle's valet, but instead a 'very kind gentleman', someone worthy of the Baron's company, who would thence make him capable of fulfilling his master's desire. Afterwards, Charlus will try to prove to himself and to Morel that the places they visit are, in fact, slums unbecoming for such noble characters like the two of them. The final step would then consist in imprisoning both the generous aristocrat (embodied by Morel) and his noble wife (the tailor's niece) in a marriage engineered by Charlus.

Naturally, this plot fails⁶⁵. This domination plan, with slight variations, will be reproduced numerous times by Palamède during *À La Recherche*, at the evening Charlus

⁶⁵ As it can be logically inferred from the reasoning above, the plan had to necessarily fail, since one of two things would have to occur: either the object of desire would reveal itself inferior to the subject desiring it and, for that reason, inferior to the desire that generated it, leaving it unfulfilled; or it would prove to be superior, which in that case would be unconquerable by nature, thus remaining in flight. Only a self-flattery mechanism, which could convince Charlus that an object of desire was big enough to fulfill him while being, as a matter of fact, small enough to be tamable would, theoretically and provisionally, be able to set Charlus free from his own desire. However, that flattery is a fraud about which Charlus, like Marcel, never fails to be aware of. Morel's case is an example of

organizes at Verdurin's house for instance. Significantly, and to Marcel's great surprise, the failure of that evening leaves the Baron "speechless, dumbfounded, measuring the depths of his misery without understanding its cause, unable to think of a word to say", a stupefaction owed mainly to "his dread of greater anguish to come" (III, 820).

It is the urge to protect himself against future sufferings, combined with the awareness of the theatricality associated to sadomasochism, which seems to steer M. de Charlus towards Jupien's brothel. After witnessing the flagellation Charlus suffers at the hands of Maurice (the gentle prostitute which the Baron unsuccessfully tries to believe to be a concierge-killer), Marcel informs us that the Baron de Charlus considered "no one was smart enough to be numbered among his social acquaintances, no one sufficiently a ruffian to be worth knowing in other ways" (IV, 409). In these two lines, Marcel resumes the discovery that makes of Charlus, like Mlle. Vinteuil, an 'artist in evil'⁶⁶.

Here Palamède seems to be struggling with a problem Freud devoted much attention to. In one of the most famous passages of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud describes a game he called 'Gone' and his one-year-old grandson enjoyed playing, which consisted in making an object disappear from his sight by throwing it away. Freud argues that the pleasure his grandson derived from the repetition of this play-acting is an example of our somehow unaccountable compulsion for repetition. Freud suggests that this compulsion can have numerous justifications, which precludes him from choosing just one. However, at one point, he imagines that this compulsion for repetition might be due to "an instinct for mastery" (Freud (1961), 10). It might be due to the child's effort to

the second alternative, since Charlus is deluded by the possibility of completely controlling a person, a mistake Marcel would repeat with Albertine.

⁶⁶ At the end of the episode, Marcel sustains that Charlus was the victim of a serious illness at Jupien's brothel, which was slowly but steadily killing him. An illness that made him 'a fool' and an 'aberration' (IV, 417), forcing him to ignore social conveniences and become completely egotistical. However, what we find here is just one more of Proust's many efforts to downplay the things that were most dear to him, rather than the actual picture of Charlus during the war (even if, as it will soon be argued, a relation could be established between Charlus' behaviors and a form of illness). The vocabulary used to describe Charlus is very similar to that used by Proust to depict love, homosexuality and the creative process, for instance. Proust regularly recurs to this strategy of firstly greatly enhancing something that would seem monstrous to his readers, so he can later subtly downsize its strangeness ("Yet I have perhaps been inaccurate in speaking of the rock of Pure Matter. In this Pure Matter it is possible that a small quantum of Mind still survived" (IV, 417)). Furthermore, the idea of Charlus being "this consenting Prometheus [that] had had himself nailed by Force to the rock of Pure Matter" (IV, 417) echoes the idea of escaping the burden of selfhood which was developed earlier on, bringing him closer to an 'artist in evil' than to a lunatic. As we will come to argue, this idea of enhancing the strangeness and aberrant side of what constitutes Proust, so that he may decrease this strangeness through a narrative and reduce it to a tamable and understandable size, can also be perceived as a form of sadomasochism. A form of regaining control over his life and over his own feelings through violence against himself. On this subject, cf., for instance, the seventeenth chapter.

subjugate the fear he felt when his mother actually disappeared from his sight during the day that he repeated this childish game. Further ahead, he adds that “in the case of children's play we seemed to see that children repeat unpleasurable experiences for the additional reason that they can master a powerful impression far more thoroughly by being active than they could by merely experiencing it passively. Each fresh repetition seems to strengthen the mastery they are in search of” (Freud (1961), 29).

What led Charlus to search for pleasure in bizarre places such as Jupien’s brothel was the realization that, since pleasure is not in direct correlation with suffering but with our ability to tame it, the staging of what hurts us in a safe environment and under our active control is a possible way to redeem us from grief, bringing us pleasure. So, what Schaffner refers to as Charlus’ ‘compulsion to repeat childhood patterns’ is nothing more than a subtler and more elaborate version of Freud’s grandson’s game.

Just like in that game, the event that caused Charlus to feel abandoned and sorrowful is reproduced according to Charlus’ plot and recurring to a substitute of the absent mother, which, in this case, is not a mother at all but Morel⁶⁷. Charlus would, thence, be intensifying his idea of dependence through a substitute, like Krafft-Ebing suggested⁶⁸.

Through sadism, Charlus is trying to avoid becoming a Verdurin, someone who blindly follows his habits and through them becomes completely numb to cruelty. By being a prisoner to the impositions dictated by a life of unexamined cruelty, the Verdurins’ existence becomes an anonymized set of cruel explosions towards the ones they exercise some influence over, namely Odette in the beginning of her relationship with Swann, and Saniette, all through their lives.

Contrarily, the Baron is somehow able to remain above this vicious cycle of cruelty, precisely by not finding anyone smart enough for his worldly relations neither base enough for the others. Charlus is in a permanent quest for the most elegant people

⁶⁷ “[Maurice and another prostitute] were in a vague way substitutes for Morel. Was I to conclude that M. de Charlus, at least in a certain aspect of his loves, was always faithful to a particular type and that the desire which had made him select these two young men one after the other was the identical desire which had made him accost Morel on the platform at Doncières station; that all three resembled a little the ephebe whose form, engraved in the sapphire-like eyes of M. de Charlus, gave to his glance that strange quality which had alarmed me on the first day at Balbec? Or that, his love for Morel having modified the type which he pursued, to console himself for Morel’s absence he sought men who resembled him?” (IV, 420). In *Le Temps Sensible*, Julia Kristeva proposes something similar, by claiming that, “inside his own lacerated body, Charlus kills Morel, who he had incorporated in himself and was no longer capable of possessing or desiring” (Kristeva, 122).

⁶⁸ Cf. Krafft-Ebing, 209.

in and around Paris because he is convinced that none of them could ever elevate themselves above him, leading the Baron to perpetually reiterate, recurring to his extraordinary heraldic erudition, the nobiliary superiority he had over the most illustrious Parisians of *la belle époque*⁶⁹. Thus, through his vast knowledge, he controls the heraldic narrative of the *faubourg Saint-Germain* and avoids seeing himself overcome by any other rival in a field to which, as his superiority was beyond doubt, the Baron attributed enormous significance. The suffering imposed by love is, however, harder to control and requires from the Baron a stronger effort and a more complex answer.

The most illustrious of the Guermantes, perceiving that, as we have been arguing, the mechanism of pleasure comes from one's ability to control and circumscribe suffering, heads towards a safe shelter, towards a locked-up room governed by the person he most trusts: Jupien. There, Charlus, like Proust and Mlle. Vinteuil, writes his own scripts, prepares the dosage of suffering he will have inflicted upon himself, defines boundaries not to be overstepped, makes up a past for the gentle young men gathered by Jupien, and flatters his bravery, while he unsuccessfully tries to deceive himself⁷⁰ regarding the control he might exercise over his destiny, the influence he has over what comes his way and how it affects him. Through sadism, he hopes to artificially generate a catharsis which persuades him of his ultimate victory against his own self in an environment that appears to be bloody and barbarous but is, after all, sterilized and harmless. Particularly when compared to what goes on simultaneously on the streets of Paris during the War.

Proust establishes a direct correlation between the safe violence that goes on inside the brothel and the uncontrolled and dangerous violence that goes on in Paris during the World War. The crowd that gathers at Jupien's seems to wish to find a place where the war is just a game, where they may overcome the fear caused by such a tremendous tragedy so close to themselves, and where those who had been mutilated by the war become not a motif for concern and despair, but a mere sexual attraction⁷¹. A place where the soldiers on a license argue, as if in front of a court, in favor of their chances of survival

⁶⁹ In this respect, Charlus' behavior is very similar to the Evil Queen in *Snow White*. He is repeatedly asking his mirror who's the fairest (or, in this case, the noblest) of them all because he is certain that the mirror will tell him it is the Baron himself.

⁷⁰ Cf. Landy.

⁷¹ "an old man in whom curiosity of every kind had no doubt been satisfied was asking insistently to be introduced to a disabled soldier" (IV, 402).

at war⁷². When portraying the area around the brothel this idea is stated very clearly, as since the start of the bombings the old hotel had been surrounded by closed-down hotels and stores whose scared owners had left Paris, leaving behind a neighborhood inhabited exclusively by “poverty, dereliction, [and] fear” (IV, 389). In many ways, this is the perfect neighborhood for a brothel of this kind⁷³. Thence, the brothel exorcizes not only the grief caused by runaway lovers, but more broadly, by the war, offering an area perceived as secure, where the killings stop for a second, becoming merely a topic of conversation as trivial as any other⁷⁴.

The attempted taming of his own feelings seems very dear to Charlus and is revealed not only in this scene but in many ways during *À La Recherche*. One of the first times Marcel meets the Baron de Charlus, may be the most exemplary case of how we find ways of dealing with life, outside erotic interactions, which are very similar to the sadomasochistic approach.

In *À L'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs*, Marcel depicts Charlus' attitude towards the young men of his days. In this brief description, we see Charlus unsuccessfully trying to exhaust, drown and freeze to death what Marcel perceived as his effeminacy:

I gathered that the particular fault which he found in the young men of the period was their effeminacy. ‘They’re nothing but women,’ he said with scorn. But what life would not have appeared effeminate beside that which he expected a man to lead, and never found energetic or virile enough? (He himself, when he walked across country, after long hours on the road would plunge his heated body into frozen streams.) He would not even concede that a man should wear a single ring. But this obsession with virility did not prevent his having also the most delicate sensibilities. (II, 121)

⁷² “Well, you can be jolly sure I don’t mean to get killed’, was the reply of another, who evidently was going on the next day to a dangerous post (...) ‘I reckon, at twenty-two, after only doing six months, it would be a bit hard’, he exclaimed in a voice in which could be heard, even more plainly than the desire to go on living, the assurance that his reasoning was correct” (IV, 390).

⁷³ The War not only instigates Jupien’s clients to find a relief from the anguish it generates, but also sets them free to enjoy, in a deserted street of Paris, the pleasures they didn’t allow themselves to experience otherwise (“The siren with its warning of bombs troubled Jupien’s visitors no more than an iceberg would have done. Indeed, the threat of physical danger delivered them from the fear which for long had morbidly harassed them” (IV, 412)). For a contemporary perspective on the complex relation sadomasochism establishes with the outer world, see Langdrige, 97.

⁷⁴ One could maintain that the evenings offered by the Verdurins try to provide a similar service to their regulars, as is suggested by the narration of how tragedies like the war going on inside Paris, the death of their dear friend, Mme. Sherbatoff, or the *Lusitania*’s sinking never make their hearts skip a beat. They never stop their gatherings, allying themselves with the habit of keeping horror at a safe distance. A reading of habit as a different solution for the same problem sadomasochism seems to be dealing with in *À La Recherche* can be found both in my 2014 thesis and (very briefly) at the end of the seventh chapter.

Even the flagellation episode can be read both as an attempt to brutally get rid of Charlus' effeminate side and as a demonstration of his extreme physical bravery and virility, a virility so accentuated it can endure any violence exercised upon him⁷⁵. According to this reading, Charlus would here be trying to prove to himself that no suffering could actually hurt him, and showing to himself that he could endure worse things than the way Morel and the world at large treated him.

Yet, as one would expect from any plan traced in the novel, Charlus' plan fails. At the end of the novel, as Germaine Brée pointed out, homosexuality usurps "his personality and finally absorbs him completely" (Girard et al., 86). This failure was expected and has to do with the idea of illness alluded to some pages above. The description of sadomasochism we will somehow arrive at suggests that sadomasochism is something the characters recur to throughout their lives. However, the question remains if this is a strategy or a pathologic behavior they cannot avoid. As a matter of fact, once more, it seems to be both, depending on the chosen perspective.

If we look at sadomasochism through the eyes of Charlus or Mlle. Vinteuil, they perceive themselves as simultaneously patients and doctors, with sadomasochism being the healing process they find suitable for their private illness. From this perspective, sadomasochism is nothing more than a strategy. However, an external perspective (our voyeuristic perspective upon these characters) shows us they are not only doctors and patients, but that sadomasochism is a symptom disguised as therapy. This attempt of self-diagnosing and self-healing is, paradoxically enough, ultimate proof that their disease is, like Swann's love, no longer operable⁷⁶. Their doctor's impersonation shows that both Mlle. Vinteuil and (especially) Charlus are utterly lost in their helpless attempt to regain control over their own lives. While imagining they are on their way to a complete recovery, Mlle. Vinteuil and the Baron de Charlus are, in fact, lost. As the last chapter will try to argue, this particularity, identifiable in these two characters, once more fails to distinguish them, as many critics would imagine, from Marcel at the Guermantes party in the last volume of *À La Recherche*. In *Le Temps Retrouvé*, Marcel occupies the exact same position as Charlus while he was being whipped by Maurice. The only difference between the two is that there was no time to refute Marcel's illusion of the control literature might exert over life, since the book ends shortly afterwards.

⁷⁵ "at the bottom of all this there persisted in M. de Charlus his dream of virility, to be attested if need be by acts of brutality" (IV, 419).

⁷⁶ Cf. I, 303.

Lastly, no analysis of sadomasochism in Proust's work would be complete without even briefly mentioning the sadomasochistic episodes Proust reportedly experienced at least after 1917. After the argumentation above, and following the inventory of these experiences, by Painter in *Proust* for instance, let us now try to understand how they can be, in fact, reconciled with the theory here stated. Proust allegedly, according to Albert Le Cuziat, hired butcher-boys and had them briefed by Le Cuziat himself so that they knew the plot. He then asked them to desecrate pictures of his mother and "dear and illustrious lady-friends" (Painter, 586). Proust would also, according to numerous sources, have rats tortured with hatpins while masturbating or simply looking on. If the first story could be explained in terms similar to the ones used to explain the episode at Montjouvain, the second one seems to be related not with Proust's mother at all, but with his father, the famous hygienist Adrien Proust. Gide claimed that "Proust explained to me his desire to conjoin the most disparate sensations and emotions for the purpose of orgasm" (Painter, 586). Even if we can't assume these stories to be true, it could be argued that these enactments were ways for the sick and fragile Proust to prove to himself the fatal diseases brought by rats, which his father feared so much, weren't able to destroy the great writer. Proust intended, by undertaking these peculiar sadomasochistic experiments, to overcome his father and the grief his death obviously caused him, again in terms not so different than the ones used by Mlle. Vinteuil, if we imagine those rats to be simultaneously Mlle. Vinteuil's musically gifted friend and the portrait of M. Vinteuil⁷⁷.

⁷⁷ The apocryphal and extremely bizarre story told by Maurice Martin du Gard that Proust, after the war, visited brothels, where he "took pleasure in having a chicken killed in the next room, with a young man dressed as a policeman beside him for protection" (Painter, 587) should not be given much credit. Nonetheless, it matches perfectly with the idea of restraining the suffering felt for the irreparable loss of the past where, in Illiers, Ernestine killed chickens in the yard of Proust's family's house, as Painter proposes.

Chapter 4

Adrien Santeuil

Two of the most celebrated biographers of Marcel Proust, George D. Painter and Edmund White, share the same idea regarding the way Proust's parents are portrayed in *Jean Santeuil* and in *À La Recherche*. According to White, "whereas in *Remembrance of Things Past* the parents are presented as wise, refined, melancholy beings who want nothing but their ailing, neurasthenic son's health and happiness (both parents were dead and sanctified by memory by the time Proust wrote *Remembrance*), in *Jean Santeuil* they are vulgar bullies and obstructionists who stand in the way of their son's social and artistic ambitions." (White, 61). Painter goes so far as to say that "in the last chapters of Part X (...), Jean shows a new compassion and understanding for his ageing father and mother. Proust had begun to forgive his parents, and the way was now open for the conception in *À la Recherche* of the Narrator's family as a symbol of absolute goodness, a counterbalance to the original sin which corrupts and sexual love" (Painter, 238)⁷⁸.

If White is merely suggesting a drastic transformation in the way both parents are depicted in the two novels, Painter is trying to define this alteration as one of the major discoveries made by Proust between 1899 and 1909, and which allowed *Jean Santeuil* to become the masterpiece *À La Recherche* undoubtedly is. However, they seem to agree that the representation of the main characters' parents changes abruptly.

There are many ideas worth considering regarding White and Painter's arguments. First, it seems rather strange to suggest, as Painter does, that one of the main discoveries made by Proust, and which allowed him to start writing *À La Recherche*, was that Marcel's family could be a "symbol of absolute goodness", when the seven volumes constantly remind us that there is no such thing. The different perspectives that Marcel and the remaining characters are repeatedly confronted with when facing one object (an object that can be a building as well as themselves) seem to be showing both Marcel and the reader that no one can be described as simply being one thing. Throughout the book, Proust is always pointing to the fact that every person is simultaneously good and bad, that their virtues live together with their vices and they are often both shown at the same

⁷⁸ Tadié, another of Proust's famous biographers, also suggests the protagonists' attitude towards their parents changes drastically from one novel to the other: "In *Jean Santeuil*, all his resentment towards them is expressed, in *Recherche*, they become the symbol of moral purity, while, by a phenomenon of balance in the transposition, the narrator ceases to have all the virtues Jean Santeuil had" (Tadié (1986), 24).

time. It is, therefore, hard to grasp how someone could be the portrait of absolute goodness without the whole book being destroyed in the process.

It is nonetheless obvious that the character who most directly seems to represent Proust's mother somehow eludes the writer, being represented as virtually perfect⁷⁹. Still, this should not be interpreted as the mark of pure virtue which left her, and only her, untouched by sin, but rather as the representation of a limitation of the Narrator's vision. Marcel's inability to see his mother's faults lies in the fact that he can never detach himself from her. Furthermore, as it is constantly argued throughout the book, it is only when we are able to see things from afar that we can truly see them – or at least we can avoid being completely blind to them⁸⁰.

However, even if we can agree upon the idea that the fictionalized version of Mme. Proust in *À La Recherche* seems to represent her as truly virtuous, it is hard to grasp any relevant difference on this subject between the representation of the mother of the protagonists of both novels. Contrarily to what both Painter and White suggest⁸¹, there is scarcely any hint of animosity towards Jean's mother in the unfinished novel. Mme. Santeuil is repeatedly (and not only in the last chapters of the book) described as a devout wife of "superior intelligence and tact" (*Santeuil*, 212), with "plenty of taste in matters of literature, much practical good sense in the ordinary affairs of life, a fund of humor which found expression in the telling of even the simplest story, a gift of tact, warm affections and considerable skill in the running of a household" (*Santeuil*, 277). The affection and devotion she has for Jean Santeuil is so altruistic that

compared with him she counted as nothing. In this tiny scrap of splintered voice could be heard the gift of a whole life, a gift which she had made to him, now and always, a tenderness which was meant for him alone, without a single fragment kept for herself. The voice was as pure as a tiny piece of ice, scarcely a voice at all. In it there sounded no

⁷⁹ The only vices that Marcel's mother is reluctantly shown to have are vices introduced as forms of distorted virtue, as when, referring to the recent death of M. Vinteuil, which led to Mlle. Vinteuil's ostracization, Marcel explains that his family "had not gone to see her; my mother had not wished it, by reason of a virtue which alone set limits to her benevolence - namely, modesty" (I, 157).

⁸⁰ "And indeed the jealous lover, like the contemporaries of an historical event, is too close, he knows nothing, and it is for strangers that the chronicle of adultery assumes the precision of history, and prolongs itself in lists" (III, 804). Regarding this, it is peculiar to notice that Marcel seems to be more detached from himself than from his own mother, being thus better able to analyze and interpret his own behavior and character than his mother's. This, as we will try to argue, can be explained not only through the distance and detachment that is brought by sudden discoveries and the passing of time, but also through various other reasons, such as his willingness to see his own faults and his attempt to justify and purge them by making them ubiquitous.

⁸¹ Unfortunately, neither Painter nor White quote or mention any episode of Jean Santeuil where this animosity and obstructionism appears, making it impossible to understand exactly from where this idea of them being 'vulgar bullies' is extracted.

strength, no pride, no egotism nor personal desire nor self-interest, nothing but sweetness, a supernatural sweetness which had been close to him, though he had not noticed it (*Santeuil*, 361)

While Proust's biographers' description of Mme. Santeuil fails to ring true, the same does not apply to Jean's father. Although at times he is described as an excellent husband and father, there are various moments when M. Santeuil is openly demeaned. Indeed, when Mme. Santeuil is praised, that praise is often accompanied by a comically ironic depiction of her husband⁸². There is an example of this enhancement of Mme. Santeuil by means of an open mockery of her husband, which is particularly curious. When Proust praises Mme. Santeuil's "taste in matters of literature", as quoted above, it is stated that she was nevertheless "ignorant in matters of meteorology, geography, statistics and others of the sciences, [and] was always amazed that Monsieur Santeuil should know that Easter would be early in any given year and found in this evident proof of his superiority yet one more reason for silently renewing her admiring praise" (*Santeuil*, 277). Proust is here openly depicting Jean's mother's train of thought to show not only her humility and devotion to her husband, but also to point out the absolute banality of M. Santeuil's interests and conversations. Yet the most peculiar fact about this passage is that it was recycled for *À La Recherche*, where it comprises one of the few parodies of Marcel's father, when Marcel states: "My father would shrug his shoulders and study the barometer, for he took an interest in meteorology, while my mother, keeping very quiet so as not to disturb him, looked at him with tender respect, but not too hard, not wishing to penetrate the mysteries of his superior mind" (I, 11).

The idea that one should not penetrate the imagined virtues of Adrien Proust's alter egos for fear that those exact same virtues would just fade away runs through both *Jean Santeuil* and *À La Recherche*. The main difference between the depiction of Jean and Marcel's father is not, therefore, in how they are perceived, but in how their image is conveyed. In both novels, there is a similar spite towards the father figure, even if in *À La Recherche*, as we will see, this spite is communicated in a subtler and more indirect fashion. It will, henceforth, be argued that there is no relevant variation regarding the way Proust looks at his own father when *Jean Santeuil* becomes *À La Recherche*. It is only the strategy to communicate this vision that changes. Therefore, we will try to describe that

⁸² "Much cleverer than he was, endowed with artistic taste, a wide-ranging intelligence, tact and a lively sensibility - qualities which he almost completely lacked - Madame Santeuil had remained convinced that these gifts must be trivial, seeing that so superior a man as her husband could get along very well without them" (*Santeuil*, 213).

strategy as accurately as possible, as it will reappear in many different disguises throughout the novel.

In the chapter dedicated to Jean's quarrel with his parents regarding his friendship with Réveillon⁸³, one is able to understand the striking difference between the way the protagonist relates to his parents. A difference neglected by both Painter and White. The rage against his mother comes solely due to "how unfair his mother had been" to Jean and Réveillon on that particular night, but despite all that anger, he is never unaware of the fact that "Madame Santeuil would gladly have given her life for her son" and that "the reason for his mother's nervous state was that she had had much cause for grief, and that for part of that grief he, himself, had been responsible" (*Santeuil*, 421)⁸⁴. When peace sets in again, his mother is once more tender and compassionate towards her son.

As for Jean's father, the case is quite different. Jean's quarrel with his father seems to go beyond this specific concern regarding his friendships. In these four pages where the fight is described, we are told that "he thought his father stupid [*bête*]" (*Santeuil*, 418). He recalls "his father's stupid harshness [*dureté stupide*]", and when he apologizes to both his parents, he "had to exert great strength of mind to say the same words" to his father that he had used for his mother, having also to "overcome a slight feeling of repulsion" (*Santeuil*, 423) when he decides to kiss M. Santeuil's forehead.

As it has been suggested, M. Santeuil is repeatedly attacked on the grounds of his stupidity, his unnecessary harshness and his lack of taste, which make Jean feel a slight repulsion for his own father. It is no surprise then, to find Proust himself describing his father in the same terms that Jean would, as doctor Adrien Proust seems to be the only source for the character of both Jean and Marcel's father⁸⁵. Dr. Proust has repeatedly demanded of his elder son that he chose a practical career, instead of devoting his life to literature or pure idleness, two synonyms in the mind of the hygienist. Dr. Proust also insisted that his son prove his virility, giving him ten francs to go to a brothel, money Proust spent in paying for a vase he accidentally broke⁸⁶. Dr. Adrien Proust's harshness and its impact on his eldest son was so intense that Proustian critics have abundantly suggested Proust's notorious fear of rats, which he would later explore in order to obtain

⁸³ This scene will be further discussed in the eleventh chapter.

⁸⁴ This problem was already the subject of our chapters on sadism.

⁸⁵ Stating this does not mean that both characters perfectly correspond to Adrien Proust's character or to the image Proust had of his father. It simply suggests that no other of Proust's acquaintances seem to be used as a direct model for both characters.

⁸⁶ Cf. *Correspondance*, XXI, 550-1.

sexual pleasure, was in fact induced by Dr. Proust's professional obsessions. Proust's father shared with M. Santeuil (and curiously with Proust himself) the much-mocked passion for meteorology⁸⁷, and was a confirmed anti-Dreyfusard, which in the mind of the young Proust showed stubbornness and an inability to think critically⁸⁸.

The absence of taste M. Santeuil is frequently accused of cannot be neglected, as it allows us to better understand what will follow in *À La Recherche*. Furthermore, it elucidates us regarding one of the most important mechanisms through which Proust operates. Concerning the house his family lived in during his childhood at 9 Boulevard Malesherbes, White writes: "Dr. Proust was delighted with the airy apartment (...). He judged it to be hygienic, modern, and comfortable – his highest praise. Marcel himself considered their family salon to be of 'an ugliness completely medical'" (White, 18). As he does in this description of his first house, in *À La Recherche* Proust will transfer "the immense longing he felt to strike his father" (*Santeuil*, 859)⁸⁹ to the things that surround Adrien Proust.

From our perspective, the central discovery made by Proust in the years between *Jean Santeuil* and *À La Recherche* is, thus, not the above mentioned "absolute goodness", but the fact that he could exorcize the resentment he had for his father through metonymy. Anna Katherina Schaffner, in 'Sadism: Marcel Proust and the Banality of Evil', an essay where she acutely points out the influence of medical and psychological studies of Proust's time in *À La Recherche*, claims that "Marcel's father is indeed curiously absent throughout the novel" (Schaffner, 211). What occurs in *À La Recherche* is not so much an absence but a transference. It is true that Marcel's father starts, as the volumes pile up, to subtly vanish from the novel⁹⁰, but Proust's opinion regarding his father remains

⁸⁷ Cf. Painter, 185. The fact that Proust is here mocking an interest which he also shares can be understood within the system of exorcisms which we will develop further on.

⁸⁸ It would nevertheless be a mistake to suppose that Proust's vision of his father is utterly absent of admiration or love. Proust seems to feel genuine pain at the time of his father's death and is constantly exalting Adrien Proust's generosity and altruism, also infinitely praising his merits as a doctor, as it becomes clear when Céleste Albaret, in *Monsieur Proust*, claims that Proust once vented: "Ah Céleste, if only I were sure of doing as much with my books as Father did for the sick" (Albaret, 133).

⁸⁹ Jean's longing to harm his father will reappear under disguise in *À La Recherche* in the scene where Charlus suggests that Marcel could arrange a fight between Bloch and his father, where his friend would "smite him as David smote Goliath." (II, 584). The subtle mechanism of exorcism we will allude to in this chapter was already very explicitly present in this passage of *Jean Santeuil*, as Jean, after confessing his longing to strike his father, admits that he used to find relieve for it "by advancing violently upon his table and kicking the walls of his work-room" (*Santeuil*, 860).

⁹⁰ According to <http://www.proust-personnages.fr>, Marcel's father is mentioned 172 times in the first two volumes, while only 103 in the last five volumes, not being referred at all in *Le Temps*

unchanged and very present. Proust still considers his father a brute with absolutely no taste in arts, but instead of directly attacking doctor Adrien Proust, who had died in the meantime between *Jean Santeuil* and *À La Recherche*, he decides to exact revenge elsewhere. Wanting to conceal the banality of his father from his friend Réveillon, Jean compares M. Santeuil's habits with Flaubert's, while the narrator explains to the reader that "whether from a motive of self-pride, or out of respect for his father, Jean drew a hasty veil across the triteness of the latter's conversation, much as a charming woman will tirelessly labor to set to rights her husband's blunders, or as a painter will envelop the badly drawn portions of his picture in deep shadow" (*Santeuil*, 437). The deep shadow onto which Proust drags his father in *À La Recherche* goes by the name of medicine and its personification, Dr. Cottard, a character who is often pointed out in the novel as one of the ultimate examples of stupidity and lack of spirit⁹¹.

In *À La Recherche*, there are multiple episodes in which Marcel ironizes about the reliance people attribute to medicine, leading him to cynically conclude, when narrating the death of Marcel's grandmother, that medicine is "a compendium of the successive and contradictory mistakes of medical practitioners, when we summon the wisest of them to our aid, the chances are that we may be relying on a scientific truth the error of which will be recognized in a few years' time. So that to believe in medicine would be the height of folly, if not to believe in it were not greater folly still" (II, 594). Cottard tries to cure Marcel's grandmother with a milk diet that does not work because of the damaging effects of the excess of salt, unknown at the time of her death. He prescribes a detoxifying regime to a man who had simply a grain dust in his eye. Despite all this, we come to realize "that this imbecile was a great physician" (I, 490). Dr. Cottard seems thus to portray Dr. Adrien Proust, a great practitioner who, despite that, is seen as an imbecile by Marcel, also representing Proust's pessimistic vision on medicine⁹².

Retrouvé. Marcel's mother, on the other hand, is referred twice as much and regularly throughout the novel.

⁹¹ Possibly the best of the many examples of Cottard's imbecility throughout the novel appears in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, when while discussing Socrates' *oeuvre* Cottard states: "*Gnothi seauton*, He was quite right, excess in anything is a mistake. But I am dumbfounded when I think that those words have sufficed to keep Socrates' name alive all this time. What does his philosophy amount to? Very little when all is said. When one thinks that Charcot and others have done work that is a thousand times more remarkable and is at least based on something, on the suppression of the pupillary reflex as a syndrome of general paralysis, and that they are almost forgotten. After all, Socrates was nothing out of the common. Those people had nothing better to do than spend all their time strolling about and splitting hairs. Like Jesus Christ: 'Love one another!' it's all very pretty" (III, 439).

⁹² The suggestion that Proust's depiction of medicine and doctors is nothing but a way to portray Adrien Proust can also be found in Gabrielle Rubin's "Ambivalence et Défi, Marcel Proust et Son Père", where it is suggested that even Proust's disease is a way of Proust defying both medicine and his

We will later observe that this exorcism is not the only one carried out by Proust. Proust's main discovery, which allowed him to begin the novel, and that sets it apart from *Jean Santeuil*, was exactly this mechanism through which he was able to control and purge life. In fact, Marcel's mother is also the target of one of these salvific exorcisms. Jeanne Weil is set free from the weight of forcing Proust to choose a practical career, to develop healthier sleeping habits, and to lead a more active and useful life so that he could overcome his neurasthenia. This liberation of Mme. Weil is achieved precisely by expelling that guilt in the direction of Marcel's father, who in the novel is most often the one trying to enforce these changes on young Marcel's life. When Marcel grows up, that role becomes obsolete and Marcel's father vanishes, leaving him alone with his mother, as he desired all along.

father. According to Rubin, Proust's rebellion against his father can be traced back to the famous goodnight kiss episode, where Dr. Proust resigns from his position as a father by allowing Mme. Proust to spend the night with their son. Rubin will also go on to argue that in the biographical version of the episode, Adrien Proust is openly undermined by his wife, as Mme. Proust (always so submissive to her husband in both novels) refuses to allow her son to undergo the treatment Adrien Proust tries to impose on Proust for a slight indisposition. It becomes thus very clear in this anecdote the confusion between Adrien Proust's father and doctor role, a confusion that, as we have suggested, would later be explored by Proust in *À La Recherche*. Cf. Rubin, 640.

Chapter 5

Le Syndicat

There is another unusual form of exorcism which takes place with Jeanne Weil and is very much related with the argument we have just put forward. Jeanne Weil was the daughter of Nathé Weil, the director of the Temple and vice-president of the Israeli Committee of Paris but, in the novel, there is absolutely no reference to her Jewish heritage. White suggests that, due to the increasing anti-Semitism in Europe, and particularly in France, in his days, Proust tried to become a ‘sort of Esther’, concealing his true identity until he was in the position to save his people. However, as White also points out, there are many moments where Proust’s behavior is strikingly close to that of an anti-Semite.

Despite being very involved in the defense of Alfred Dreyfus, Proust will always claim that he is not doing so due to his Jewish heritage but simply as an act of the most elementary justice⁹³. Proust will get angry for being included in a list of Jewish authors and, in 1892, he will write a letter to Fernand Gregh complaining about the decision to include an article complacent with Judaism written by a Jew in *Le Banquet*⁹⁴. If all these decisions can somehow be understood by the enormous pressure imposed upon Jews by the Gentiles, who wanted to force Jewish people into becoming Jewish stereotypes, it is harder to understand the subtle anti-Semitic insinuations we find in passages like the one where, describing Albertine, Marcel states that

when she was lying completely on her side, there was a certain aspect of her face (so sweet and so beautiful from in front) *which I could not endure, hook-nosed* as in one of Leonardo’s caricatures, seeming to betray the *malice, the greed for gain, the deceitfulness* of a spy whose presence in my house would have filled me with horror and whom that profile seemed to unmask. At once I took Albertine’s face in my hands and altered its position (III, 587, my emphasis)

More than trying to save his people, in moments like these Proust seems to be trying to save himself from the stain the Gentiles imposed on the Jews’ doorframes.

Proust will also go far beyond making Jeanne Weil’s character appear to be a Gentile. In *À La Recherche*, Proust places Marcel’s mother in the midst of an anti-Semitic household, as Marcel’s maternal grandfather will always dislike the narrator’s Jewish friends, ironically singing Jewish hymns in their presence. Even though the narrator tells

⁹³ Proust always considers himself a Christian with Jewish blood more than the other way around.

⁹⁴ Cf. *Correspondance*, I, 167-9.

us that Marcel's grandfather did not dislike Jews as a principle, this violent denial of his Jewish heritage, coupled with the constant reiteration of anti-Semitic behavior by *À La Recherche*'s characters, needs to be better understood, as its appearance throughout the book certainly hints at something very pressing for Proust, something that in one way or another we've been trying to better understand in all these chapters.

In *Profils Juifs de Marcel Proust*, Jean Recanati makes a persuading inventory of the episodes in *À La Recherche*, which leaves little doubt regarding Proust's grudge towards his Jewishness. A grudge that would, according to Recanati, lead him to try to hide or dissimulate his Weil heritage. Recanati will also argue that the absence of money is perceived by Proust as another form of Judaism, in the sense that they both lead to an exclusion and to a loss of affection⁹⁵.

In an essay in *The French Review*, Isabelle Monette Ebert claims that the presence of what she refers to as 'the Jewish theme' serves for Proust to provide us "unparalleled insights into the situation of Jews" (Ebert, 208), as "no other writer records this aspect of Jewish and French history with such finesse and such depth" (Ebert, 216).

Despite the pertinence and acuteness of Recanati's book, the argument that presents poverty (and bourgeoisie and sickness) merely as alternative ways for Proust to address his own Jewishness, can be perceived as the same mistake that Ebert commits in her essay. Proust never seems to be interested in creating a 'Jewish theme' in his novel, as he doesn't appear to want to create an 'homosexual theme' or any other theme that would compartmentalize his book, thus forcing *À La Recherche* to become a novel with theories, something that for Proust was like "an object which still has its price-tag on it" (IV, 461)⁹⁶. Besides, as will be shown, *À La Recherche* is primarily a quest for unity around Proust's life, a unity that doesn't conform with thematic divisions, such as the one suggested by Ebert. Whichever reason Proust had for including Jews and Judaism in his book, we may be sure that it has to be articulated with the novel as a whole, not constituting a separate and independent theme, explained only through historical or biographical reasons⁹⁷. Thus, if Proust records the years of the Dreyfus affair as no other

⁹⁵ "Even if it doesn't truly unlock the right to love, money opens the right to another form of love, which is consideration (...) in his fantasy Marcel Proust seems to have elaborated a value scale where the absence of money is of the same order as the Jewish disgrace" (Recanati, 46).

⁹⁶ It could be argued that 'Sodome et Gomorrhe I' and 'Le Temps Retrouvé' are precisely these objects with the price tag on. But the manifest theorization we find there never compromises the novelistic tone, being instead completely articulated with it. The theory is always there at the novel's service and not the other way around.

⁹⁷ In "Proust. His Jews and his Jewishness", John K. Hyde states something very similar to what we have here been suggesting when he writes that "it appears (...) that anti-Semitism, far from being a

thinker could, it is not because he is the new Michelet but precisely because he is not concerned with historicizing or registering the way Jews were treated, but rather in integrating those years, characters and episodes in a much broader history: his own.

One could claim that this attack on Recanati is not entirely fair. When suggesting that poverty and sickness are iterations of Judaism, Recanati seems to be proposing that, more than a 'Jewish theme' in *À La Recherche*, we should talk about *À La Recherche* as a Jewish novel, being precisely Judaism and Proust's (conscious or unconscious) attempt to escape from the center of it.

So, before going any further, it is important to understand if Proust's escape from his Jewishness is deliberate or unconscious, as Recanati's opinion regarding this subject is not always entirely clear⁹⁸. Taking the analysis Recanati makes of the Stermaria episode into consideration, the doubts we might have on the topic are scattered.

Recanati notes that, after being abandoned by Mme. Stermaria, Marcel is constantly resorting to Jewish imagery. He starts by hiding his head in a carpet and "swallowing its dust together with my own tears, as the Jews used to cover their heads with ashes in times of mourning, I began to sob." (II, 688). A few minutes later, Marcel is invited to dinner by Saint-Loup at a restaurant which Marcel enters alone. This restaurant had been indicated amidst the fog "like the pillar of fire which guided the Hebrews" (II, 694). The restaurant is crowded precisely with Jews, who remained separated from the aristocratic clientele by a revolving door. Marcel will then proceed to the aristocratic division of the restaurant, being expelled from it by a rude employee, who seats him in a room in between the Jew's and the aristocrat's. A room described as being horribly cold due to the constant activity of the revolving door. The episode would then end with Marcel being rescued by Saint-Loup, who brings him to the aristocratic compartment of the restaurant and away from the dreadful Jews.

The obvious and explicit parallel between the refusal of the rendezvous with Mme. Stermaria and the denied access to the aristocratic room, which made him an hybrid creature living between the Jewish world and the *faubourg Saint-Germain*, combined with the explicit references to Judaism, forbid us from considering Proust might have been unaware of the implications of the episode. As a matter of fact, Proust is always so

message or a theme in the novel, is simply a technique used to illustrate real thematic material in the work - that of human inconstancy and human foible" (Hyde, 845).

⁹⁸ However, the violence of the transformation of the Jewish Weils into anti-Semites should erase any hesitation we had on this particular subject.

obsessively analytic of every inch of his life that the possibility of there being any subconscious aspect left out becomes rather unlikely.

Therefore, to make Recanati's argument sound, it could only be the case that this attitude towards Judaism in the novel is deliberate. Understanding Recanati's claim, we grasp that his argument's problem is one of perspective. Recanati suggests that characters undermined in society are projections of Judaism when, in fact, Proust is only interested in the dynamics of power established between characters with the upper hand and those who are somehow stained. A stain that can be imposed upon them by Judaism just as easily as by poverty, sickness, bourgeoisie, sadism or homosexuality. However, it is not the stain that concerns Proust but rather its effects, and how to transform the stain into a medal.

Understanding this requires we analyze the reasons behind the drastic transformation which occurs on the Weil side of Proust's family. Not because of the nuclear role Judaism has in *À La Recherche* (homosexuality, for instance, is considerably more present than Judaism), but because Judaism, being an iteration of many other variants activating differences in the dynamics of power in the novel, is as good as any other subject to recognize the mechanism Proust is here so obviously trying to delineate.

John K. Hyde argues that, instead of trying to "palliate the guilt of his Jewish blood" (Hyde, 102), as suggested by Painter, Proust's gentilification was an attempt to detach himself from Judaism so that he could better depict the way Jews were treated by Gentiles. However, according to Hyde, the Jewishness of the novel is not an exposure of the injustice of anti-Semitism, but a way to offer the reader a good perspective on human weakness. Hyde goes on to argue, rightly in our perspective, that any other explanation of Proust's abandonment of his own Judaism (and homosexuality) should also explain why he would allow himself to remain neurasthenic, "a quality just as anguish-producing and in need of being transferred as homosexuality, and possibly as Jewishness" (Hyde, 838).

As always happens with Proust, there is more than one cause for this apparent blood gentilification, but the main reason why Marcel can be neurasthenic and not a Jew or homosexual is that, contrarily to neurasthenia, homosexuality and Judaism cannot be purged. Doctor du Boulbon fails to cure Marcel's grandmother, but his presence in the novel happens to save Marcel and, in a way, Proust himself. While he wrongly diagnoses the grandmother's illness by praising neurasthenics, he is making Marcel's illness become a distinction, something that makes him simultaneously inferior and superior to the rest

of the world, superior precisely through his inferiority⁹⁹. Du Boulbon tells the grandmother she belongs to the “splendid and pitiable family” of the nervous, who are the “salt of the earth. Everything we think of as great has come to us from neurotics. It is they and they alone who found religions and create great works of art” (II, 601), a commentary we cannot help but notice to appear to apply more to Marcel than to Du Boulbon’s patient. As was already argued in the discussion of “La Confession d’une Jeune Fille”¹⁰⁰, Proust often recurs to two contradictory, sometimes even antithetical, adjectives when describing an object. This is not due to some rhetorical attraction to paradox but because Proust is probably the most anti-Manichean mind one could think of. For Proust, there is nothing peculiar or contradictory in something being simultaneously wonderful and pitiful. What is more, it is often through pitifulness that one might aim to achieve one’s own greatness, as will be shown.

There is finally one last problem with John K. Hyde’s suggestion that Proust takes a step back from his Jewishness in order to take a better look “beyond the simple contingencies of interpersonal relationships”, making him “better able to impose upon the chronology of the novel a higher order of organization” (Hyde, 839). Even though Proust’s outlook intends to see things as through a telescope, he will always start his observation from his own life. Proust begins by recognizing that the patterns he is discovering in other people are present also in himself, which then leaves him, therefore, better equipped to describe his life (his own description being the only one that Proust seems to be really interested in). Only then will Proust start to pay close attention to what he sees. It is true that Proust is always aiming at a detached perspective, but such detachment can only come after the identifying with the observed object. A scientific, telescopic and objective approach to these characters, which would allow him a better perception of human weakness, would never interest Proust if that weakness were not strictly related to his own life and experience. So, Judaism can only interest him if, somehow, he could perceive himself as a Jew.

As it was argued before, Proust is never interested in making Marcel a Jew in the novel because he knew that as soon as he made Marcel the grandson of a devout Jew, his novel would be read as a pro-Semite novel, thus categorizing and reducing it rather unfairly, as it would happen if Marcel were homosexual in *À La Recherche*. It is exactly

⁹⁹ We will get back to this idea in the eighteenth chapter.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Chapter 1.

this that Proust seems to be trying to explain to Andre Gide when he claims that one can say anything regarding homosexuality if one refrains from saying 'I'.

Hyde argues that anti-Semitism is used in the novel to "explain characters and interpersonal relationships" (Hyde, 847), while pro-Semitism has "an aura of extra-temporality". According to Hyde, Marcel is only presented as an anti-Semite so that we could see him as being entirely "caught up in the social milieu which he frequents". He is, therefore, only anti-Semitic when he is within his social circles. However, if that tends to generally be the case in *À La Recherche*, this theory is unable to explain the above-quoted passage where Marcel's anti-Semitism seems more endemic than Hyde suggests. Marcel is not in society, he is not just sharing some small prejudice regarding a community of which he knows nothing about. He is lying on his bed with Albertine by his side and he blatantly tells us that Albertine had a hook on her nose which revealed greed, wickedness and deceit, something he could not endure as much as he tried. Hyde claims that Proust's remarks "take as point of departure a precise gesture or word on the part of a character and *invariably* give way to sweeping generalities" (Hyde, 848 my emphasis). We tend to agree in general terms with Hyde's argument. Yet, in this particular case, Proust will say absolutely nothing regarding Marcel's subtle but undeniable anti-Semitism. It is therefore very revealing that no other essay (at least as far as we know) on Proust's Judaism comments this episode. So, in order to understand Proust's relation with Judaism, a slightly more complex theory than Hyde's is necessary.

When Marcel and Saint-Loup are taking a seat at Balbec's beach, they hear Bloch, Marcel's Jewish friend, complaining that one "can't go a yard without meeting them [*Jews*] (...) I am not in principle irremediably hostile to the Jewish nation, but here there is a plethora of them" (II, 97). In *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, Swann meets precisely Saint-Loup and Marcel and greets them saying: "Heavens! All three of us together - people will think it's a meeting of the Syndicate¹⁰¹. In another minute they'll be looking for the money-box!" (III, 96). In these two episodes, not only the anti-Semitic commentaries regarding Jewish characters, but also their obvious implications, should be noted.

Bloch, being a Jew, makes the absurd comment that he is not "in principle irremediably hostile to the Jewish nation". More than underlining Bloch's stupidity or

¹⁰¹ "Le Syndicat" was the name of Zola's article in *Le Figaro*, in which he argued for the creation of a group supporting the revision of Dreyfus' conviction and, due to the divisions caused by the entire process, would come to be a derogatory way to refer not only to Dreyfusards but also to Jews, and to what was believed to be the Jewish influence in French society. This is underlined in the novel by the reference, immediately prior to this quotation, to the 'Jewish gaiety' of Charles Swann. Cf. Drake, 19.

snobbish behavior, Proust is pointing out the description he made of Nathé Weil's character, Proust's Jewish grandfather, who is magically transformed in *À La Recherche* into a gentile anti-Semite. As Bloch, Marcel's grandfather is said not to be "irremediably hostile" towards Jews, but disregards every single one of Marcel's Jewish friends, singing Jewish anthems in their presence. Therefore, the correlation between this story and the episode with Bloch in Balbec seems to call the alleged gentilification of Marcel's grandfather into question.

In the Swann episode, Proust once again surreptitiously brings up Marcel's non-Jewishness. When Swann argues that the reunion of himself with Saint-Loup and Marcel would seem like a meeting of the Syndicate, Marcel is obviously hinting to the reader that Marcel (and perhaps Saint-Loup also¹⁰²) may be more than just a Gentile Dreyfusard, or he is at least playing with our usual way of reading novels such as *À La Recherche*, in which one tends, as many critics did, to confuse the protagonist with the writer of the story.

This claim regarding Marcel's Judaism mixed up with the anti-Semitism of Jewish characters allows us finally to begin to grasp the meaning of Judaism (and, as we will argue throughout these chapters, homosexuality, and sadism, and bourgeoisie, and sickness) within the novel. In the two texts that could be interpreted as Proust's attempts to theorize homosexuality ("Sodome et Gomorrhe I" and "La Race Maudite"), he is constantly comparing Jewishness and homosexuality. In both, Proust states that it would be a mistake to form a sodomite movement to reinstate Sodom, because as soon as the sodomites arrived to Sodom, they would "leave the town so as not to have the appearance of belonging to it" (III, 33). Proust also argues, in "La Race Maudite", that

if in the depth of almost every Jew there is an anti-Semite whom we best flatter when we attribute every kind of fault to him but treat him as a Christian, so in the depth of every homosexual there is an anti-homosexual to whom we cannot offer a greater insult than acknowledging (...) the right to love in the form that nature allows us to conceive of it, if though respect for truth meanwhile compels us to confess that this form of love is strange, and that these men are not like other men (CSB, 253)

À La Recherche is a novel about the dynamics of power. As such, the role of homosexuality (as, for instance, the role of Judaism) is none other than to place homosexuals in a position of social inferiority regarding the ones perceived as being

¹⁰² It cannot be a coincidence that both these episodes, and the one of Mme. Stermaria, discussed above, happen in the presence of Saint-Loup, but it would be very difficult to withdraw any conclusions from it. It would certainly be problematic to read Saint-Loup as a Jew.

unstained. The main concern of absolutely everyone in the novel is to remain in control, to be able to allow themselves some form of superiority towards others around them. That is why a homosexual will always look disdainfully at another of his kind, denouncing the other's homosexuality if need be, as Bloch does with Jews in the episode above. In the Syndicate episode, Swann uses a strategy which is mainly used by Charlus throughout the novel: he talks openly about Judaism (as Charlus does about homosexuality), so he appears to despise what he fears the most, giving an illusion of control regarding something that cannot be tamed.

The quest for control we find in many characters of *À La Recherche* (but mainly in Charlus) is also ubiquitous in Proust's life. We should, at this point, remind ourselves of Proust's obsession with offering gifts to everyone he knows¹⁰³. Proust desperately needs to offer generous gifts to people he admires while refusing to receive any gifts in return precisely because he believes that being grateful will lead him to lose the edge he has over someone, which would result in an unbearable loss of control and domination. Thus, he always tried to have the upper hand, to keep those around him grateful to him in order to control and improve the vision they had of him. A vision he intended to one day share with posterity, as we will later observe¹⁰⁴.

If this quest for control, that denies any form of perceived inferiority is supposed to be universal, or if not universal at least correlated with Proust himself¹⁰⁵, then we can see why Marcel could never be portrayed as a homosexual or a Jew. Portraying himself as a Jew or as a homosexual would not be a moment of honesty for Proust but the exact opposite. According to Proust homosexuals and Jews tend to, by definition, run away from any public revelation of their true nature and perceive descriptions of themselves, which in any way point out how they differ from other people, as an insult. Therefore, Proust could never openly reveal his Jewishness and homosexuality to all the Gentiles and heterosexuals. Revealing himself would result in the disappearance of his identity. Thus, Proust can only somehow vaguely and subtly hint at the fact that, even though Marcel is not Jewish or homosexual, his creator most certainly is. More than concealing himself, Proust is following the only path he knew to make *À La Recherche* an accurate, even if fictionalized, autobiography of someone, in many ways very similar to himself.

¹⁰³ The very substantial tips he gave to every single person who in any way worked for him is a variation of these gifts.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Chapter 16.

¹⁰⁵ As we have already often suggested, any behavior in the novel appears in it only in order to allow Proust to better describe himself.

The only path that allowed him not to present himself as a better Jew and a better homosexual than all the others¹⁰⁶. Coming forward with his own homosexuality and Judaism would make Marcel a different creature from all others who populate his novel. A creature who, by some unfathomable divine decree, was exempt of this universal tendency to hide his own identity from the Gentiles and the heterosexual, while diagnosing everyone else's. And, as we will come to argue in the last chapter, it is a serious misreading of the novel to imagine that Marcel has a special status within it, to imagine that he is exempt, at any given point in the narrative, from the mistakes and faults that pile up around him.

¹⁰⁶ We will go back to this subject in the twenty-first chapter.

Chapter 6

Cher Maître

In *Du Côté de Chez Swann*, when Bloch makes his first appearance in the novel, Marcel explains that “It was in an ostensible vein of sarcasm that he had asked me to call him, and that he himself called me, ‘*cher maître*’. But, as a matter of fact, we each derived a certain satisfaction from the mannerism, being still at the age in which one believes that one gives a thing real existence by giving it a name” (I, 89).

There is possibly no better way to start understanding Bloch’s importance in the novel than by analyzing this episode of Marcel’s childhood. First, the ‘vein of sarcasm’: when Bloch asks Marcel for them to start calling each ‘*cher maître*’, he is not actually being sarcastic. The sarcasm here is not true sarcasm but just a ‘vein of sarcasm’ not intended to mean the opposite of what’s being said, but to pretend to mean the opposite of what’s being said, while meaning exactly what is said. Bloch’s intention is, of course, for Marcel to treat him as his master, even if that forces him to refer to Marcel in the same terms.

This strategy of appearing to despise what constitutes our deepest intentions is certainly the most common and the most widespread behavior in *À La Recherche* and will often reappear in our argument. Charlus uses this ‘sarcastic tone’ to refer to homosexuals, the Guermantes to talk about nobility and Marcel regarding a wide range of subjects, from Albertine to literature. As a matter of fact, this effort to apply a sarcastic tone to the things one cares most deeply about will lead many Proustian critics like Jean Recanati to be tricked into believing that simply because Marcel seems to despise the aristocratic life of the *faubourg Saint-Germain* more than Jean Santeuil did, he is less interested than Jean in forcing his entry into that world¹⁰⁷.

Indeed, it is precisely the discovery of the possibility of better obtaining the things we most deeply care about by pretending not to pay them any attention that constitutes one of the main differences between *Jean Santeuil* and *À La Recherche*, and which allows the latter to become the masterpiece that the former could never be¹⁰⁸. In the years which separate the writing of the two novels, Proust the writer understands what Marcel Proust

¹⁰⁷ “When he goes on to *À La Recherche*, Marcel Proust surpasses the stage he was at in the days of *Jean Santeuil*: his dream is not one of worldly success (...) Henceforth, the importance is not to appear but to be” (Recanati, 142).

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Chapter 12.

in his correspondence and in his life had understood long ago: the dynamics of power do not have as much to do with the relative positions we hold concerning the desired object but instead with the perceived position we have regarding it. This subtle but fundamental difference is responsible for many of the disguises the characters in the novel design for themselves. It is this subtlety that will lead Marcel (and Charlus) to understand that a position of apparent inferiority might be the best possible strategy to obtain the desired object.

There is a biographical event that seems to have inspired Proust when he made Bloch and Marcel refer to each other as '*cher maître*'. Between 1894 and 1896, Proust and Reynaldo Hahn, his lover at the time, corresponded abundantly and, in some of the letters, Proust referred to Hahn in different variations of the expression '*cher maître*' (dear master), while referring to himself as '*votre poney*' (your pony). However, in Proust, the biographical aspect should not be taken at face value. The biography, we can never stress this sufficiently, is only helpful in order for us to understand what exactly Proust is trying to purge from his life, what he is trying to regain control of, what he is trying to get rid of through writing, and what he is transforming into literature.

In this episode, by making the old lover become a friend and by completely removing any sexual innuendo from it, Proust is cleansing his correspondence, and introducing this biographical affair in a much more presentable light. Proust is here recurring to the strategy that confused critics like Recanatì, by stating that he had now overcome something which remains very much amidst his concerns. Proust states Marcel was, in the distant days of his first meeting with Bloch, at the long gone age when one believed that one can create things just by nominating them, when in fact it is exactly this creed that leads him to try and change his life through the process of writing about it.

The fact that the references to Reynaldo's pony are erased also deserves some careful consideration. It wouldn't be correct to assume that the submission suggested by Proust's self-description as his master's pony corresponds to some form of domination by Hahn over the writer, since in fact it is the other way around. Reading Proust carefully, we understand that for Proust there is only one way of gaining the much-craved superiority, one way of gaining absolute control in a love relationship, and it does not consist of aiming for the master's position but rather for the pony's. In the love relationships of *À La Recherche*, it is very often the one who appears to be at the lower end that is in control. Giving the illusion of domination to a lover is to become part of his/her enrooted habit, which will end up making that lover realize the impossibility of

ever controlling or truly knowing someone. Acting as a pony would towards its master is, after all, the unfailing recipe for the delusional master to end up marrying someone who, in the words of Swann at the end of “Un Amour de Swann”, “didn’t appeal to me, who wasn’t even my type!” (I, 375). As in any sadistic relationship, it is the submissive one that is in charge. It is Charlus, chained and whipped, not Jupien’s brutal employees, who dominates and controls the scenes that take place in the brothel. As outside the brothels, it is always the one who appears to be in the inferior position of a relationship who has absolute control over it¹⁰⁹. Hence, by naming himself Hahn’s pony, Proust is simply trying to create what he nominates, trying to become Hahn’s pony in order to better subjugate him, the way Odette, Albertine and Morel subjugate their lovers in *À La Recherche*.

Yet, contrarily to what had taken place in Proust’s life, Marcel will be on equal terms with his childhood friend, both being each other’s masters. One possible explanation for this anomaly might have to do with Marcel and Proust’s contempt for Bloch, which leads Proust to excuse himself from the humiliation of granting any form of explicit superiority over his own alter ego to someone like his first friend.

Many critics assume that Marcel despises Bloch because Bloch is a Jew like Proust himself or because Bloch is a projection of Proust in his youth. This is in many ways true. As was argued in the fifth chapter, Proust understood he could never be true to his own nature, of a Parisian Jew from the bourgeoisie at the beginning of the 20th century, if he didn’t portray his alter ego as someone who persistently tries to evade and deny Proust’s own Jewishness. Proust believed that Marcel would never be a credible character were he not depicted as someone who time and again tries to attack other Jews precisely because of their Jewishness (like Bloch does in Balbec), only so he can get the upper hand and distance himself from the stain Judaism is perceived to impose on what Proust refers to as the ‘race accursed’.

The similarities between Proust and Bloch are undeniable. Recanati convincingly demonstrated that Bloch inherits Proust’s nose and that Jean Santeuil, in the days of the *Dreyfus affair*, becomes Bloch in *À La Recherche*, even if Bloch, as Isabelle Monette Ebert correctly suggests, is considerably more courageous than Proust was in those days. And it is blatantly clear that the Homeric affectation of Bloch is nothing more than Proust parodying his younger years. In the last volume, when the Narrator finally understands

¹⁰⁹ On this subject, cf. Chapter 3.

the mechanism of the *faubourg Saint-Germain*, it is through Bloch, recently accepted in the celestial sphere of French high society, where he is finally treated as the *maître* he always aspired to be, that Marcel realizes many of the assumptions he had entertained in his youth were after all wrong, and what he thought eternal and immovable was in the end something very recent. It is Bloch who makes Marcel realize that, similarly to the anthropologists who involuntarily carried with them unharmed diseases which would forever destroy the American tribes they wanted to study, he himself was in part, just for his entry in the Guermantes' circle, the reason for the irreparable destruction of the world he used to love. Because as soon as an intruder enters this world, the exclusiveness of it is utterly lost¹¹⁰.

Yet, the main reason why Proust openly despises Bloch is vaster than what Proustian criticism suggests, as it has to do with a pattern that constantly reoccurs in Proust's *oeuvre*, as we will come to observe in later chapters. In *Time Regained*, in a direct allusion to Manet's famous painting, Proust states that

the cruel law of art is that people die and we ourselves die after exhausting every form of suffering, so that over our heads may grow the grass not of oblivion but of eternal life, the vigorous and luxuriant growth of a true work of art, and so that thither, gaily and without a thought for those who are sleeping beneath them, future generations may come to enjoy their '*déjeuner sur l'herbe*' (IV, 615)

Proust is typically shooting in many directions here, but it seems clear that this can be read as a description of his method for disregarding all respect for the sources, characters and inspirations of his work, using them in any way he needs to and making a meal over their corpses¹¹¹. Proust will do this with Montesquiou, with Flaubert, but mainly with Bloch.

Proust will use Bloch the same way Jesus, in Mark, uses the herd of pigs: he will exorcize into Bloch the demons he had to expel from himself and other characters, throwing Bloch from a cliff afterwards¹¹². The strange and otherwise incomprehensible episode of *Le Côté de Guermantes* where Charlus suggests to Marcel that he organize a

¹¹⁰ On this subject, it is important to notice that, as Monette Ebert points out, Bloch was one of the nicknames given to Jews in Proust's days. It could also be argued that it is an allusion to the Bloc des Gauches, the coalition of the radical and socialist French parties between 1899 and 1906. Be as it may, the name was certainly chosen to point out the fact that Bloch did not belong to the world he was trying to insert himself in, and to the fact that he was an alien in the *faubourg Saint-Germain*. It is also possible to suggest, even though it seems highly unlikely, that Bloch's name is a reference to Iwan Bloch, the German psychologist considered to be the first sexologist and responsible for the end of the pathological approach to homosexuality.

¹¹¹ Cf. Chapter 9.

¹¹² Mark, 5; 1-20.

fight between Bloch and Bloch's father becomes, if seen as an exercise of self-exorcism, finally understandable. Here, Proust is simply trying to purge "the immense longing he felt to strike his father" (*Santeuil*, 859)¹¹³, in a caricature of the theatrical performances that Charlus and Proust's sadistic scenes would come to represent.

But Bloch will become more than just a repository of Proust and Marcel's faults. Marcel's first friend will be something like an appendix, in the sense that he will be filled with the impurities he wanted to cleanse from other characters. The scene in which Marcel's grandfather is shown being anti-Semitic towards Bloch¹¹⁴ was firstly drafted including Swann in the Cahiers, as Julia Kristeva shows in her otherwise unconvincing apology regarding Marcel's first friend¹¹⁵. And, also according to Kristeva, there were many notes on the margin saying things like "'For Bloch perhaps', 'For Bloch or Gurycy', 'For Bloch or Saint-Loup or me'" (Kristeva, 57-8), making of Bloch a deposit more than a real character. Bloch is, therefore, Proust's way of allowing Swann to be a blond, rather Gentilized Jew, thus allowing Proust to get rid of his own Jewishness and affectation. He is, in fact, Proust's lamb, which will be sacrificed in holocaust to save the life of many. A lamb that Proust will gladly set on fire.

¹¹³ Cf. Chapter 4.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Chapter 5.

¹¹⁵ Cf. Kristeva, 53. One can also imagine that Marcel's hostility towards someone who seems to have been Marcel's only friend for a few years could be described as the very natural hostility one directs at our exile as soon as we are safely away from it. Gilberte's behavior towards her own father after her death seems to fall under this same category.

Chapter 7

Aristocracy and Orphanhood I: A Large Family of One

Over the last one hundred years *À La Recherche* has been repeatedly described, among other things, as a melancholy novel concerning the end of Parisian aristocracy and the ultimate corruption of noble lineages in the turn of the XX century. Proust himself, considering the correspondence he left, seemed obsessed not only with lineages and family trees but, more prosaically, with the health of his pen pals' family members. Leafing through the volumes of his correspondence, we cannot fail to notice the number of letters in which Proust asks for information regarding his friends' parents (particularly the mother), writing deeply felt eulogies and condolence messages at the time of their deaths and sometimes even soliciting their pictures.

Taking all this into consideration, it is rather startling to notice that, in *À La Recherche*, everybody seems to be born out of spontaneous generation. Even though Marcel is constantly moving in a world where everything appears to depend on the family one descends from, all the characters he meets appear from thin air. There is no information conveyed regarding the parents of any of the members of the Guermantes clan, for instance, apart from Robert de Saint-Loup¹¹⁶. However, to the best of our knowledge, this bizarre peculiarity of *À La Recherche* (which makes it more similar to a Walt Disney genealogy than to any of the typical *belle époque* novels) has never been noticed by any Proustian critic and, therefore, deserves some close attention.

Before stepping any further, it is important to look at the exact dimension of this alleged orphanhood in Proust's novel. First of all, amongst the novel's thirty-five main characters, who do not belong to Marcel's family, only Swann, Gilberte, Saint-Loup, Mlle. Vinteuil, Mme. de Villeparisis, Bloch and Morel have parents. Swann's father is mentioned briefly in the first volume, to justify Swann's familiarity with Marcel's household and to present him as someone who, like no other character besides Marcel, moved in very different worlds, thus giving the reader an exact perception of his rise in the Parisian society; Gilberte needs to be the daughter of Swann and Odette in order to metonymically introduce Marcel's first love and to prepare the ending of the novel, where

¹¹⁶ The only very subtle allusion to the existence of a generation of Guermantes prior to the one Marcel meets is when, in *À L'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs*, it is said that the Princesse Des Laumes became the Duchesse de Guermantes after the death of her father-in-law, a character that is never again named, described or mentioned.

Guermantes Way becomes indistinguishable from Swann's; Mlle. Vinteuil's father is instrumental to depict the Vinteuils as the exact counterpoint of Marcel's relation with his mother¹¹⁷; Mme. de Villeparisis' father is mentioned twice to enhance the unevenness of her marriage with M. de Norpois; Morel's father is Marcel's uncle's valet, being referred to in the novel in order to show Charlus' lover's humble origins¹¹⁸; Bloch's father's existence has been explained in the previous chapter¹¹⁹; and the short appearance of Saint-Loup's parents will be dealt with ahead. Therefore, it seems there must be a strong narratorial need for a character to be allowed to have (invisible) parents in *À La Recherche*, or else they get utterly erased from the novel.

If we expand this analysis to all the other characters of *À La Recherche*, roughly four hundred, the importance of orphanhood for Proust becomes even clearer, as there are only twenty other characters named in the novel allowed to be someone's son or daughter. Usually someone who the reader never gets to meet directly. Excluding from this list all the historical characters, like Princesse Mathilde, all the regional and very briefly mentioned characters from Balbec and Combray, and all the characters named only once in the entire novel (who certainly correspond to some very specific model or to a very pressing structural need), we are left with only six more characters whose parents are referred in the novel: Marguerite, Françoise's daughter, introduced to show the death of what Proust calls 'the France of Saint-André-des-Champs'; Octave, who is briefly said to be the son of an unnamed rich industrialist; Léonor de Cambremer, who will wed Jupien's nephew, and whose parents are presented to show the exact dimension of Jupien's achievement; Mlle. de Stermaria, who is always accompanied by her father in order to frustrate Marcel's advances; the Prince de Foix, whose father is homosexual, like the Prince himself, allowing Proust to superficially explore, without any relevant conclusion, the possibility of the genetic heritage of homosexuality, and the Marquis d'Argencourt¹²⁰.

¹¹⁷ Cf. the first three chapters of this thesis.

¹¹⁸ Like Swann and Mme. Villeparisis' fathers, Morel's father never actually appears in *À La Recherche*, thus underlining his virtual inexistence. Furthermore, out of the seven above mentioned characters, we only know something about both father and mother in the cases of Gilberte and Robert de Saint-Loup (about whose parents we know close to nothing). In all the other cases, Proust mentions only the father of the character, omitting the mother completely. A pattern that will be repeated in the cases discussed in the next paragraph.

¹¹⁹ Cf. Chapter 6.

¹²⁰ The Marquis d'Argencourt's mother is mentioned only once during the novel, possibly due to biographical reasons. Be that as it may, this anomaly in the Proustian scheme, like the existence of Octave's father, will be left unexplained.

In what would otherwise seem to be just another example of the often-alleged narrative incoherence in the last volumes of *À La Recherche*, we can read the definitive proof of the universal sterility of Proust's world. In *La Fugitive*, Marcel claims that, after Saint-Loup's marriage with Gilberte, Saint-Loup would "keep her continually supplied with offspring" (IV, 259). However, in the final pages of the last volume of the novel, we are told that the couple had only one daughter. The most extraordinary example of a large family in *À La Recherche* is thus reduced to a single-child couple¹²¹. What is more, when Proust tells us that Saint-Loup and Gilberte would form a prolific couple, this is not stated to show the couple's love for one another or their intimacy. The enormous dimension of Saint-Loup's dynasty comes simply out of Saint-Loup's desperate attempt to hide his homosexuality and the lack of erotic interest he undoubtedly has for his wife.

Since in the world of *À La Recherche* nothing ever happens for just one reason, as we have repeatedly pointed out, a fair amount of time will be required to explain the generalized sterility and orphanhood observed in the novel.

First of all, it is worth noticing that every couple in *À La Recherche* seems desperate to avoid moments of familiarity and intimacy with each other. They all evade situations in which their relations could be, at last, fruitful in any sense of the word. The Parisian aristocracy is described as having only a public version of themselves, running away from any private introspection or any truthful proximity with each other. Deleuze's *Proust and Signs* is very elucidating on this subject, showing how Proust very often points out the fact his characters are constantly emitting signs that have lost their previous correspondence with what could be described as a sincere feeling. They emit signs of laughter which never correspond to truthful hilarity, signs of introspection when there is only the most brutal superficiality, and signs of intimacy and friendship which replace the despair of being left alone with themselves¹²².

The Verdurins, being a counterfeit version of the Guermantes, are less apt to hide this horror of intimacy and introspection, providing us with considerably more examples of what is being argued here. Marcel repeatedly stresses the Verdurins' terror of any date

¹²¹ Robert and Gilberte's unnamed daughter is not, obviously, an orphan in the sense given to the word in this chapter. However, her existence in the novel is exclusively a result of the need to show how, in the end, the Guermantes Way becomes undistinguishable from the Swann's Way, as mentioned before. Their daughter was not considered in the list above as she could hardly be considered a proper character in the novel.

¹²² "Nothing funny is said at the Verdurin's, and Mme. Verdurin does not laugh; but Cottard makes the sign that he is saying something funny, Mme. Verdurin makes a sign that she is laughing" (Deleuze, 6).

which leaves them without their little clan lying around. Thus, “from the beginning of December she was sick with anxiety at the thought that the ‘faithful’ might ‘defect’ on Christmas and New Year’s Days” (I, 187). Any idea of explaining this behavior through actual love and friendship for the clan, which would lead them to, somehow understandably, try to indefinitely postpone the end of every *soirée*, must be rejected when we recall the episode of the death of Mme. Verdurin’s best friend: Princesse Sherbatoff. Princesse Sherbatoff’s friendship with Mme. Verdurin is apparently so strong that Mme. Verdurin, “anxious to make sure of one of her ‘faithful’ even after death, had made her promise that whichever of them survived the other should be buried by her side” (III, 271). Yet, when the day of Princesse Sherbatoff’s death eventually comes, Mme. Verdurin acts placidly like any other day, receiving all her regulars as if nothing had happened.

If, in the case of the Verdurins, the absence of any meaningful personal connection is undisputable, there are many moments when the Guermantes themselves fail to dissimulate that same absence. There is never the slightest allusion to love or faithfulness in the aristocratic marital relations of *À La Recherche*. In fact, Marcel repeatedly informs the reader of the number of lovers the Duc de Guermantes accumulates, but the mask under which the Ducs hide the true nature of their marriage definitively falls at the very end of *Le Côté de Guermantes*.

Due to the imminent death of a close relative, the Duc is nervous about the possibility of missing a masquerade ball (the irony of it couldn’t be more obvious). This nervousness makes Basin forget the rules and norms the Guermantes always deny to exist but nonetheless never fail to obey. Hence, the Duc is unable to bury the lack of intimacy and farce that permeates his marriage with Oriane. Swann shows up at the Ducs’ house to inform them that he too will soon die but, before being able to reveal this, the Duchesse asks him to explain a photograph he had just offered her as a token of their friendship¹²³. Angry due to the delay this explanation would cause (a delay that might very well ruin the whole night, as someone could at any minute bring news of the death of Basin’s cousin, preventing him from meeting his new mistress at the ball), the Duc’s composure and sense of decency momentarily abandon him. Asking Oriane where she would put such a large photograph, the Duc is told that she wants it in her own bedroom. Basin is

¹²³ This friendship would, immediately afterwards, fail to prove to have any meaning, since the Duchesse will run away from her dear friend when he confesses to be dying, in order not to be late to the masquerade ball.

then relieved and exclaims “Oh, just as you please; if it’s in your room, there’s a chance I shall never see it”, which leads Marcel to add that the Duc wasn’t aware of “the revelation he was thus blindly making of the negative character of his conjugal relations” (II, 881).

It is, however, perhaps the Marmets’ episode in *Jean Santeuil* that better exemplifies what Proust is trying to show regarding the nature of marital love in his *oeuvre*. In “La Conversion Proustienne”, René Girard rightly refers to this episode as the clearer illustration of the enormous difference between *À La Recherche* and *Jean Santeuil*. A difference which makes the first a masterpiece and the latter a lesser novel. Leaving Girard’s argument¹²⁴ aside for now, we can find in these pages the genesis of what would later be further explored in *À La Recherche*. Introducing the Marmet couple, Proust sketches with great detail the sign communication which would be later analyzed by Deleuze. The circle of Mme. Marmet is always saying things which need translation, things that could never be understood if taken literally. Proust will thus provide a translation himself, as after every ordinary sentence proffered in these salons he writes variations of the expression ‘which being interpreted meant’, explaining afterwards what they actually meant, which is unvaryingly something rather different from its literal sense. This codified language of the Marmet, which will be later recycled for the Verdurin’s salon, is a way for Proust to show us how one can never trust what appears to be said there. Hence, what we might perceive as a sign pointing to private intimacy between two characters is nothing more than a sign precisely replacing that suggested intimacy¹²⁵.

Nevertheless, the most revealing part of the Marmet episode concerning this issue of universal infertility happens a few pages later. In the scene of the opening night of *Frédégonde*, Proust glorifies himself through Jean Santeuil by making his alter ego become friends with the king of Portugal, whereas the Marmet, who mistreated Jean, are horribly embarrassed. Yet, all their embarrassment is caused by the severe idea the Marmet share on the impossibility of being seen alone (“I’d rather anything than that we should be seen alone together! Think what fools we should look! We should be a positive laughing-stock” (*Santeuil*, 680), says Mme. Marmet). Being seen alone as a couple sharing a moment of familiarity in the theatre is, thence, the ultimate humiliation possible

¹²⁴ We will get back to it in chapter 12.

¹²⁵ “The worldly sign appears as the replacement of an action or a thought. It stands for action and for thought. It is therefore a sign that does not refer to something else, to a transcendent signification or to an ideal content, but has usurped the supposed value of its meaning (...) One does not think and one does not act, but one makes signs.” (Deleuze, 6).

in the Proustian world, because it would suggest genuine intimacy in their private lives, something unanimously perceived as monstrous and completely alien to *À La Proust's* characters.

The idea of it being unacceptable to go to the theater solely as a couple is closely related to the idea of theater all of Proust's characters seem to have. An idea that is worth considering at this stage as it points out yet another reason for the sterility described in this chapter. In *À L'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs*, when describing the moment Marcel was at last allowed to watch La Berma acting, Proust writes abundantly about theatre as an artform and, even more, about theatrical performances. Being still young and outside of both the Verdurin and the Guermantes' circles, Marcel was able to actually pay some close attention (even if he could not, at the time, understand) to what was going on on stage. However, as time passes and Marcel grows up, becoming integrated in the Parisian aristocracy, the idea of going to the theater becomes a show in itself, where the stars are not on stage but on the balcony. Proust's focus on the idea of this role reversal in Parisian theaters is meant to show the reader that even privileged moments for introspection, elevation and silence become mere opportunities for snobbish behavior and the most trivial superficiality¹²⁶.

By facing theater as just another social event, characters are perpetuating themselves in a sterile position, hoping that nothing truly new might enter their lives, wishing to stay forever in a static position¹²⁷. A sterile position that Proust would further underline by making them childless¹²⁸.

¹²⁶ It would be a serious mistake to read episodes such as this, as many critics have done, as an attack on aristocracy, or even more specifically, on the Parisian aristocracy of Proust's days. During his lifetime, Proust was constantly trying to protect his work from readings that made of *À La Recherche* a historical novel, or a novel about a specific time and place. Proust's aim, as we will go on to argue, is always to look at what he knew best in order to extract from it universal truths that allowed him to describe life rather than the life of Paris in the years between the French-Prussian War and the First World War.

¹²⁷ Proust repeatedly talks about habit and his character's relation with it precisely because habit is perceived as a way to avoid change, a way to prevent them from facing the world and seeing themselves. Thus, more than something that simply blinds them, habit is faced as an ally by Proust's characters. As Samuel Beckett put it in his book on Marcel Proust, "habit is a compromise effected between the individual and his environment, or between the individual and his own organic eccentricities, the guarantee of a dull inviolability, the lightning-conductor of his existence" (Beckett, 19).

¹²⁸ Proust's idea of friendship can also be related with the idea of sterility, as for Proust, friendship is, like Beckett wrote in *Proust*, a function of man's cowardice and "an attempt to communicate where no communication is possible" (Beckett, 63). Cf. also Chapter 17.

Chapter 8

Aristocracy and Orphanhood II: Contre Sainte-Beuve

This absence of parents in *À La Recherche* could also be described as another attack on the figure of Sainte-Beuve. However, in order to understand exactly what this attack consists of, we first need to examine the nature of the diatribe, something that is often equivocally explained by Proustian criticism. Thus, at this point it is important to take a step back and analyze exactly in which sense Proust is *contre* Sainte-Beuve. At the end of this chapter, after pointing out the reasons behind this rejection, we will find another reason for the lack of parents in *À La Recherche*, thus closing the arch between these two chapters.

To better understand the way Proust rejects Sainte-Beuve, we need to realize that, contrarily to what several critics and Proust himself seem to advocate, this rejection is not absolute, as they both share significant similarities in the way they face literature and literary criticism. To the best of our knowledge, Proust's Beuvian side was never more thoroughly explored than by Patrícia Cabral, in *Proust, Selon Sainte-Beuve*. Thence, Cabral's thesis will be firstly lauded by its obvious merits, and then attacked and rejected, closely following Proust's pattern of behavior towards the things he admired the most.

One of Proust's strongest arguments against Sainte-Beuve's method¹²⁹ apparently has to do with its inability to accurately classify Sainte-Beuve's contemporary writers. Proust attacks Sainte-Beuve regarding that failure in "La Méthode de Sainte-Beuve", but he is more explicit about it in "À Propos du 'Style' de Flaubert". In this 1920 essay, Proust points out that Sainte-Beuve overlooked the talent of Flaubert, Baudelaire, Nerval, Stendhal and the Goncourts, praising them as friends but neglecting them as artists, while

¹²⁹ What we will henceforth refer to as the 'Sainte-Beuve's method' is the system proposed by Sainte-Beuve to classify, categorize and analyze writers described in his essay "Chateaubriand Jugé Par Un Ami Intime en 1803". Sainte-Beuve considered that the main aim of literary studies should be to "know a man who is something other than a pure spirit" (Sainte-Beuve, 158). In order to do so, Sainte-Beuve attempted to create "the science of the moralist". A science to be something like botany, that would allow "to one day discover the great natural divisions of spirit families" (Sainte-Beuve, 148). According to Sainte-Beuve, critics should try to answer a previously designated set of questions to understand the genius behind a work of art. Even if Sainte-Beuve recognizes this science was still very undeveloped in his days (naturally, as he considered himself to be the pioneer in the field), he had already prepared a thorough questionnaire, which would reveal the exact true nature of any writer: "Before addressing an author with a certain number of questions and having them answered, (...) we can't be certain of having a complete hold of him (...): What does he think regarding religion? How is he affected by the show of nature? How does he behave regarding women? And money? Is he rich, is he poor? How is his diet, how is his routine? etc." (Sainte-Beuve, 159). To these questions, Sainte-Beuve added a few concerning the author's friends, relatives and country.

instead acclaiming “fourth-class writers” (*E&A*, 292). This mistake is particularly serious, according to Proust, since Sainte-Beuve “never stopped repeating that it is easy to make a judgment on Virgil or La Bruyère, on authors recognized and classified long ago, what is hard [according to Sainte-Beuve], what is the critic’s proper role, what makes him truly deserve the name of critic, is to put contemporary authors at their rank” (*E&A*, 293).

However, Proust would give a strong argument against his own criticism of Sainte-Beuve on this particular subject both in 1905, in “La Foi Esthétique”, and in a letter of 1904 to Robert de Montesquiou. Defending Ruskin from his misjudgment of Whistler’s artistic value, he claims that “the mechanisms of our judgments are the only thing that matter and their application to this or that person varies [...] according to the époque and the country” (*Correspondance*, VI, 353), precisely mentioning, at the end of the letter, the case of Sainte-Beuve’s judgment of Balzac as one of those irrelevant application mistakes.

Patrícia Cabral adds to this point the similarity between Sainte-Beuve and Proust, since Proust himself was always praising ‘fourth-class writers’, who are nowadays completely forgotten¹³⁰.

The apparent difference between Sainte-Beuve and Proust regarding the role they attribute to gossip is also denounced by Patrícia Cabral. Even if Proust openly despises the conversations of the salons and the world of friendship and conversation, it is in rumors and hearsays that Marcel will trust to obtain the truth on Albertine after her tragic death. Cabral suggests that, for Proust, gossip (like the allegedly involuntary moments of voyeurism) very often brings sudden revelations regarding his characters. Furthermore, she will also rightly suggest that many passages of *La Fugitive* are nothing more than the explicit application of Sainte-Beuve’s method, not to a writer but to a deceased lover¹³¹.

However, Proust’s application of Sainte-Beuve’s method is not restricted to lovers or aristocratic homosexuals. Proust also uses variations of Sainte-Beuve’s systematic approach to literature with some of his favorite authors. Proust read all the correspondence of the writers he admired and, repeatedly, in his own correspondence, asked for information regarding the lives of writers as he was reading them¹³². Even in

¹³⁰ “Even in the choice of minor novelists, (...) Proust is similar to Sainte-Beuve” (Cabral, 24).

¹³¹ “*Albertine Disparue* offers a certain number of questions which belong to Sainte-Beuve’s biographical method” (Cabral, 191).

¹³² “[Proust] asked Billy (...) for information on the private lives of both Hardy and Barrie, apparently wondering whether they shared his own two principal vices: ‘are they society men, and do they care for women?’” (Painter, 473).

his fiction, we find Jean Santeuil, Proust's alter ego, writing to Paris when on holidays asking "for all the works of [one] particular author, as well as for information about his life" (*Santeuil*, 367).

The best example of Proust's Beuvianism is given in "Sainte-Beuve et Balzac", where, according to Proust, analyzing Balzac's work requires an analysis of Balzac's life, as the two realms of Balzac's existence become highly intertwined. In this chapter of *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, Proust proposes that some aspects of Balzac's novels are written strictly to point out Balzac's accomplishments in his social life¹³³. Furthermore, Proust will argue that Balzac was only able to become such an extraordinary writer due to his absolute vulgarity in the social scene¹³⁴. In this particular article, the attack on Sainte-Beuve isn't focused on his method but on some flaws in his analysis of Balzac, especially on his insistence in constantly turning away from the writer to focus on uninteresting banalities¹³⁵. It is therefore hard to argue against Patrícia Cabral's suggestion that "it was Sainte-Beuve who, in his articles, prepared Proust's observation that the work of the best novelist before him (...) authorizes and even requires its confusion with his correspondence" (Cabral, 33).

Having granted all this in what concerns the proximity between Proust and Sainte-Beuve, we would like to suggest that the difference between Proust and the XIX century critic is, in fact, radical. Proust's problem with Sainte-Beuve's method is not so much that it does not bring any light to any subject at all, but that it claims to perpetually illuminate everything. According to Proust, the problem with Sainte-Beuve's method is not that it doesn't allow one to understand some aspects of Balzac's prose, but that it claims to allow one to get 'a complete hold of' Balzac.

In "A Origem da Obra de Arte Literária: o Caso de Proust", Miguel Tamen argues that *Contre Sainte-Beuve* is a condemnation of "one of the critics who most considered himself to be perfect (Sainte-Beuve), written by a writer rather skeptical regarding the idea of perfection, in himself or in others" (Tamen, 150). It is this illusion concerning the ideas of perfection and gaining complete control over literature that is constantly being called into question in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*. Proust does not attack Sainte-Beuve for his

¹³³ "Does Balzac want us to construct from that triumph of de Marsay's narratives the triumph that he, Balzac, enjoyed in that evening party at which we were not present?" (*CSB*, 209).

¹³⁴ "To reach such a degree of truth to life, (...) perhaps was a privilege granted in return for, or even conditional on, the author precisely and quite naturally conceiving the noblest feelings in such a vulgar way" (*CSB*, 191).

¹³⁵ "About Balzac, Sainte-Beuve does as he always does. Instead of discussing Balzac's *Femme de Trente Ans*, he discusses women of thirty in general" (*CSB*, 219).

admiration towards authors that turn out to be ‘fourth-class writers’, but for his illusion of being an excellent critic, perfectly able to rank these authors and tell them apart from truly great ones.

The case of Albertine, in which Marcel uses Sainte-Beuve’s methods, is particularly illustrative of this topic. What is relevant in this case is not the use of the method itself but its absolute failure. Marcel pays people to gather information regarding Albertine’s last days¹³⁶, questions everyone who knew her and, yet, is completely unable to be certain of anything, also being unable to control and imprison Albertine, who remains a fugitive even after her death. More than giving us evidence of Marcel’s Beuvianism, *La Fugitive* is Proust’s demonstration that there is no safe method for us to be certain of really knowing anyone or anything.

Therefore, Proust’s attack on Sainte-Beuve is focused essentially on his hubris, not due to any moral reasons, but simply because of Proust’s problem with the idea of perfection. The nature of Proust’s dissidence with Sainte-Beuve is easy to understand if we take into consideration Sainte-Beuve’s motto: *tel arbre, tel fruit*. The presumption which lies underneath Sainte-Beuve’s usage of this motto is that once we get to know the tree, the fruit is unable to keep any secrets from us. Proust distrusts the possibility of a work of art being fully understood, regardless of the chosen method, but he even further distrusts the idea that one can completely know a tree, that there could be anything slightly resembling a science that would allow us to group authors (or anyone else, for that matter) in ‘families of spirit’.

In “La Méthode de Sainte-Beuve”, after quoting key passages of “Chateaubriand Jugé Par Un Ami Intime en 1803”, where Sainte-Beuve explains his method, Proust very blatantly adds that “Sainte-Beuve’s great work does not go very deep” (CSB, 126). The trust Sainte-Beuve places in himself, in conversation and in his puzzle like approach to literature is, in this violent and brute sentence, ridiculed by Proust. It would be important at this point to further understand why.

¹³⁶ Joshua Landy suggests that Marcel sends inept emissaries instead of going himself so that he can feed his jealousy while remaining in a comfortable position to discredit all the news they would bring. The point of this argument is not to question Landy’s argument but to claim that even if Marcel went to Touraine and talked directly to the girls that Albertine met there, even if he could travel back in time and see what they did together, even then Marcel would not be able to fully understand and capture Albertine’s essence. Thence, contrarily to what Patrícia Cabral argues, the failure in Marcel’s resource to the application of Sainte-Beuve’s method with Albertine would not be circumstantial but necessary.

Sainte-Beuve should not trust in himself because he was not, as Proust repeatedly argues, more apt than anyone else to tell writers of genius apart from mediocre authors. Unsurprisingly, on the topic of Sainte-Beuve's lack of insight, Proust is in no way alone. In their diaries, the Goncourt brothers fiercely mock Sainte-Beuve again and again for his inability to understand literature or human characters in general¹³⁷. In one of the best entries of their journals, the Goncourts write that one of Sainte-Beuve's mistresses had convinced Sainte-Beuve, the king of distinctions, the wise master of human botany, that she was Spanish just because she refused to go to bed without a dagger¹³⁸.

Sainte-Beuve's trust in conversation to offer him an accurate depiction of men of genius is also denounced as naïve by Proust. Sainte-Beuve considered that, before 1848, he devoted himself to what he considered to be 'the sole felicity': to become a dandy, "to keep one's finest, most sensitive part, the cream of oneself, for private life, to employ, discreetly (...) in happy interchanges of intellect and feeling" (*CSB*, 131). Proust was famously skeptical about friendship and conversation, and would maintain, as he also did in the preface of his translation of Ruskin, that "what one bestows on private life - in conversation, that is, however refined as it may be (...) is the product of a quite superficial self, not of the innermost self" (*CSB*, 131). He would consequentially argue against the illusion that an artist's friend is somehow capacitated to grant us access to the artist's true self: "Why so? In what way does the fact of having been a friend of Stendhal's make one better fitted to judge him? For those friends, the *self* which produced the novels was eclipsed by the other, which may have been very inferior to the outer selves of many other people" (*CSB*, 128). This argument that an artist might be, and usually is, less interesting in social life than many other less talented people is what legitimates critics such as White and Bernard de Fallois to describe characters such as Bergotte, Elstir and Vinteuil as

¹³⁷ "We were amazed to hear Sainte-Beuve mangling captions as he read them out, showing a total ignorance of every Parisian idiom. In the drawings themselves he saw nothing, perceived nothing, failed to see the point of the picture, and could not make out which of the characters in the dialogue was which. He went so far as to take the shadow of one of them for a third character (...) He snatches at your ideas, your remarks, your knowledge, catching it on the wing and gulping it down without understanding or digesting any of it. We were horrified and embarrassed at the depths of latent stupidity in that man" (Goncourt, 85-6).

¹³⁸ "Levallois told us about that mistress of Sainte-Beuve's, Mme. de Vasquez, whom he firmly believed to be Spanish and consulted about all the Spanish literature that came his way (...) She had persuaded him that she was Spanish (...) by going to bed with a dagger (...) Her papers showed that she was a native of Picardy" (Goncourt, 97). This is a perfect example of Sainte-Beuve's theories on literature: to imagine that any given Spanish person is the best possible source of information regarding Spanish literature.

outbreaks against Sainte-Beuve's philosophy. It is also this superficiality that justifies Proust's description of Sainte-Beuve as a shallow writer.

Finally, Proust distrusts Sainte-Beuve's proposal of approaching literature and literary studies as a form of puzzle-solving, as a scientific attempt to group writers in families of literary *genera*. Proust doesn't agree with Sainte-Beuve on this subject because, according to Proust, there are no economies of scale in what understanding people is concerned. We do not get an inch closer to understanding Charlus if we know his heritage or if we discover exactly to which 'great family of spirits' he belongs, because Charlus (and Swann, and Odette, and all the others) is more than an utterly individual man, he is a race of his own, as Proust often claims in *À La Recherche*¹³⁹.

Having stated all this, we can understand that the attack on Sainte-Beuve's hubris is mainly based on the different levels of success literary studies might hope to achieve according to Sainte-Beuve and Proust. For Sainte-Beuve, literary studies aim at fully succeeding in explaining characters, books and authors. For Proust literary studies are, as literature itself, an intellectual activity and, as all intellectual activities, are by definition doomed to failure.

It has been often pointed out that Proust attacked intellect on the basis that it wasn't the accurate tool for recovering the past. However, Proust's claim goes farther than that. It is not merely that intellectual attempts to see the world constitute the wrong gradation to see it or, if we prefer, that these steps are taken in the wrong direction, it is rather that, for Proust, approaching our past intellectually ultimately results in the total destruction of the past one aims to recover¹⁴⁰. According to this description, which will later be developed in the last chapter, *À La Recherche* can only be read not as the triumphant masterpiece it is constantly described as, but as the recognition of a complete failure and of an insurmountable impotence: the failure and impotence of attempting to capture beauty through a work of intelligence. *À La Recherche* is then, on the terms of Proust's attack on Sainte-Beuve (which are precisely the same terms in which *Le Temps*

¹³⁹ Proust remarks something very similar to this in *Du Côté de Chez Swann*, in the famous description of Combray's church. There, Proust states that describing the church demands a vocabulary of its own. It cannot be made based simply on metonymic relations with its surroundings (a further development of this subject can be found on the third chapter of my 2014 thesis).

¹⁴⁰ "it is not merely that intellect can lend no hand in these resurrections; these past hours will only hide themselves away in objects where intellect has not tried to embody them. The objects which you have consciously tried to connect with certain hours of your life, these they can never take shelter in" (*CSB*, 46).

Retrouvé was written), an attempt to hold water with a sieve. It might only hope to point at beauty, but it will never be able to capture it¹⁴¹.

Patrícia Cabral was not alone in noticing that Proust's diatribe against Sainte-Beuve was also a way for Proust to question some of the merits of the writers he allegedly tried to defend, such as Flaubert and Balzac¹⁴². However, the attack we find on *Contre Sainte-Beuve* is not restricted to French authors of the XIX century, as *Contre Sainte-Beuve* is also *contre* an author Proust praised as one of his childhood heroes¹⁴³: Socrates.

Contre Sainte-Beuve can also be read as *Contre Socrate* or, more specifically, *Contre Ion*, as Proust seems to develop, in his long essay, an argument which attempts to destroy both Ion and Socrates' arguments in Plato's dialogue. Proust is against Ion due to the obvious similarities one finds between the great rhapsody and Sainte-Beuve, which we have already discussed: Ion's arrogance of considering that no man before him "had so many and such fine comments to offer on Homer as [he had]" (Plato, 530d) and his certainty of having what Sainte-Beuve would describe as a 'complete hold' of Homer. Socrates would refute Ion's illusion that he knew all there was to know about Homer by showing him that, in order for that to happen, the rhapsodist would have to be, among other things, a charioteer, a doctor, a general and a specialist on Hesiod. Nonetheless, Proust would also repudiate Socrates' arguments as they oppose what is being argued in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*.

Regarding "Monsieur de Guermantes' Balzac", it was claimed that Mme. de Villeparisis caricatures Sainte-Beuve's arguments¹⁴⁴. However, looking at passages such as the one where Mme. de Villeparisis' universal method to evaluate literature is explained ("and in what way can it interest me to read a treatise about things I know quite as much as [Balzac]? People say, it's so like a country town. By all means; but I know all

¹⁴¹ The influence that William James' *Varieties of Religious Experiences* had on this particular aspect of Proust's philosophy is undeniable. Even though there is no textual evidence of him having directly read William James, we know that Proust, under the influence of his father, paid great attention to psychological and medical investigations of his time, and there was no one more important on the field of psychology in his days, apart maybe from Freud and Krafft-Ebing, than James. Furthermore, Proust was certainly aware of the works of Henry James (who spent the last year of his life annotating *Du Côté de Chez Swann*) and Bergson, who translated and was influenced in his studies by William James. It is therefore hard to imagine Proust not having been contaminated by Jamesian ideas such as the prevalence of instinct and sentiment over intelligence, which according to James only serve as a shy companion to passion in the human experience.

¹⁴² "Proust uses Sainte-Beuve's method to 'deflate' Balzac, destroy Sainte-Beuve and empty himself along the way" (Cabral, 36). This Proustian strategy will be used in many other instances. On this subject, cf. Chapter 10.

¹⁴³ Cf. *E&A*, 32.

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Brian G. Rogers, "Deux Sources Littéraires d'À la Recherche du Temps Perdu: L'Évolution d'un Personage".

about that, I've lived in the country, so why should I be interested in it?" (CSB, 236)), we sense that the shoe also fits Socrates. By mocking Mme. de Villeparisis, Proust is mocking Socrates' idea that understanding Homer has something to do with understanding the charioteer's job or having any knowledge of medicine. Proust's idea, repeated throughout *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, that technical mistakes (such as the inaccurate depiction of a medical treatment) should be completely neglected by the reader, can also be read as another way to state this dissidence from Socrates.

Finally, Proust would also reject Socrates' description of the artist as someone possessed by the gods. For Proust, a writer is not an interpreter the gods took control of, but an uninspired interpreter who tries, always unsuccessfully, to be possessed by them. Socrates places writers near the gods, in direct contact with them, while Proust creates a clear demarcation which separates them completely. Thence, the writer's job is not to give voice to the gods, but to sing the songs of Zion, when Zion is utterly lost. Thus, the effort required from a writer is to attempt to approach the stone of Heraclea when his metallic ring is enchained in a set of rings, only allowing him to glimpse at the stone from a considerable distance.

If for Proust there might be a moment when the author is in fact out of himself, that moment happens before the writing takes place¹⁴⁵. Thence, writing is not an ecstatic moment, but something posthumous in relation to it, an attempt to recover something that one has already lost sight of. As we will try to develop in future chapters, an author's work is the intellectual attempt to recover and describe an aesthetic experience. According to Proust, writing is an effort similar to karaoke singing, where one tries to remember and imitate the notes one has heard somewhere before. And, as everyone who has heard karaoke singing painfully knows, it never quite works.

After this interlude, we should finally be able to take one step back and understand the last and possibly most important reason for the omnipresent orphanhood in *À La Recherche*. If Proust is contesting Sainte-Beuve's argument on conversation by suggesting, in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, that there is no scaling up, that no inferences can be made regarding artistic skills based on social talents, he is, in *À La Recherche*, expanding his argument. In his novel, by removing all the direct lineages, Proust is showing us that even at the most basic level, one never knows anyone. Marcel doesn't know the first thing regarding the people he spends all his time with¹⁴⁶. That happens because the experience

¹⁴⁵ For more on this subject, cf. Miguel Tamen's essay above quoted.

¹⁴⁶ Even the birth names of many of the characters closer to Marcel are unknown to him.

of literature *par excellence* is not the accurate description of the world and its characters, as Sainte-Beuve arrogantly believed, but to be wrong and misinformed all the time, as Proust suggests.

In *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, Proust quotes a passage of a description by Taine of Sainte-Beuve's method, where we read that in order for us to get to know a person, we need to know "first, his race and his inherited traditions, which can often be made out by studying his father, his mother, his brothers and sisters; then his early upbringing, his home surroundings, the influence of family life and of all that shapes childhood and youth" (CSB, 123). Reading *À La Recherche*, we can't fail to notice that practically all the above information is erased. Marcel knows the names of Saint-Loup and Bloch's parents, his two best friends, and that is it. All the other characters' family history is unknown to Marcel. This makes of Marcel's attempts to successfully describe anyone or anything something very similar to the first pages of *À La Recherche*, where Marcel wakes up in an unfamiliar room and, drowsily, fails to identify the objects surrounding him.

By being unable to look back into the lineages of his characters, Proust is raising a substantial doubt (but not substantial enough for many Proustian critics to notice) concerning the past. In the final volume of *À La Recherche*, we are faced with the ultimate destruction of aristocratic lineages, as Mme. Verdurin becomes the Princesse de Guermantes. However, by not knowing who the parents of his friends and acquaintances were, Marcel (and, by extension, the reader) cannot exclude the possibility of the characters, whose lineages he trusted to go back to the Middle Ages, being nothing more than the heirs of the past Verdurins¹⁴⁷. Even where the Baron de Charlus is concerned, there is no textual evidence for us to exclude, without any reasonable doubt, the possibility that the character who was meant to represent the purest imaginable lineage might be nothing more than the son or grandson of someone's gardener. It is possible that someone who is simultaneously the Duc de Brabant, the Damoiseau de Montargis, the Prince d'Oléron, de Carency, de Viazeggio, and des Dunes, might be a fraud just as big (in fact, considerably bigger) as Mme. de Verdurin herself.

The distrust the reader of *À La Recherche* should have in what lineages are concerned is so absolute and ubiquitous that even Marcel himself loses his virginity with

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Chapter 6.

a cousin¹⁴⁸, thus eroding any desire one might have felt of tracing clear distinctions and frontiers in what defines a family.

In *À L'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs*, Marcel finds out that Albertine, like all the members of her family, attributes huge importance to spelling her surname with just one 'n'. Proust, as per usual, tentatively tries to provide many explanations for this concern with a simple letter. He suggests that there might have been a Simonnet involved in some strange businesses, or that the love for the single 'n' was a result of Albertine's snobbishness. However, maybe what makes them so unwilling to accept the double 'n' is the fact that they were "the only Simonets in the world with one 'n' instead of two" (II, 201). This is exactly what distinguishes Proust from Sainte-Beuve: while Sainte-Beuve tries to group authors in families which simplify their genius, Proust, like Albertine, repudiates all simplifications. While Sainte-Beuve looks for communities of spirit, Proust knows that the task of a writer, as well as that of a critic, is to individuate and describe people instead of families, Simonets instead of Simonnets.

¹⁴⁸ Cf. I, 578.

Chapter 9

Qu'as-tu fait de moi!

On the 1st of February, 1907, *Le Figaro* published a front-page article written by Marcel Proust on the grotesque van Blarenberghe affair, which had shocked Paris a week earlier. Henri van Blarenberghe, the son of the recently deceased former President of the Administrative Board of the Compagnie des Chemins de Fer de l'Est, had stabbed his mother to death, taking his own life immediately afterwards. As Proust's parents (also recently deceased) were friends with the van Blarenberghe couple and Proust himself had met Henri a few times in society, Gaston Calmette, the newspaper's editor, invited him to write an article on the story. This article would suggestively be named "Sentiments Filiaux d'un Parricide" and was somehow sympathetic towards the murderer.

On the same day, Proust wrote two letters to Calmette, in which he thanked him for publishing "Sentiments Filiaux" while regretting to see "your charming *Figaro* obstructed by the compact mass of my hefty article" (*Correspondance*, VII, 53). Still in February, in a letter to the art critic Auguste Marguillier, Proust described the text as something done "without a draft, without any corrections, and where the repetitions of the improviser came together with the layout designer's mistakes for a disastrous result" (*Correspondance*, VII, 89). Later, in December of that same year, Proust would write to Daniel Halévy, his long-time friend, saying "Sentiments Filiaux" was "so bad that I didn't want to sign it" (*Correspondance*, XXI, 626). Proust would go even further in that letter, describing the article as "badly written, cold and declamatory" (*Correspondance*, XXI, 626) and ranking it by far the worst he ever wrote for *Le Figaro*. Despite this apparent rejection of the creature by its creator, it is possible to argue that 'Sentiments Filiaux' is one of the most important texts of Proust's *oeuvre*, being a crucial moment in the build-up for the writing of *À La Recherche*, which Proust would start two years later. Therefore, the aim of this chapter will be to try and show exactly how "Sentiments Filiaux" was crucial to the genesis of both Proust's masterpiece and his literary theory.

Understanding this article thus implies having a clear notion of the context within which it was written, as well as the reasons that led Proust to, in his correspondence, violently reject a text that is here argued to be one of the most decisive in his *oeuvre*.

On the above quoted letter to Calmette, Proust begins by criticizing his own work and praising the newspaper that published it. Yet, knowing the first thing about Proust, we should not take this exercise of self-criticism very seriously. A few lines later, after

the customary initial flattery to his addressee, which serves to sugarcoat what would follow, Proust gets to the point of the whole letter: the expression of his discontentment with *Le Figaro*'s assistant director's decision to suppress the last paragraph due to moral considerations¹⁴⁹, as Proust considered it to be the most important part of the whole article¹⁵⁰. The importance Proust attributes to the last paragraph isn't due to its approval of parricide, as in many other passages of "Sentiments Filiaux" Henri is more exaltedly praised¹⁵¹. Proust wanted the last paragraph to remain unaltered because those few lines allowed "the word parricide, that had opened the article, to close it" (*Correspondance*, VII, 53). Hence, Proust seems to confer a strong sense of textual unity to his work for the first time, tying the end with the beginning. Thus, Henri van Blarenberghe is no longer the lunatic son of Mme. Proust's friend but a character in Proust's fiction. The parricidal is no longer a horrifying criminal, no longer the least among men, but someone overwhelmed with filial love. A love perhaps stronger and more sincere than the reader's own. This strong unity, which re-describes life, molding it into his fictional interests, and transforms people into characters, would obviously be crucial for *À La Recherche*.

In the letter to Marguillier, Proust's lamentation is even easier to understand. As arguably no other writer in history, Proust was obsessed with the revision of galley proofs, which could last for years. Thence, it isn't strange to find Proust regretting having had only three hours, 'without a draft, without any corrections', to conclude the article Calmette had asked him to write.

It will require a lengthier explanation, however, to justify the letter to Halévy. Understanding Proust's diatribe against himself in that particular letter will occupy the remaining pages of this chapter. After stating his perplexity that someone "as remarkable as [Halévy] likes the article" (*Correspondance*, XXI, 626), Proust tones down the attack on "Sentiments Filiaux" and provides a psychological justification for the shame he felt:

¹⁴⁹ "Let us remind ourselves that for the Ancients there was no altar more sacred, surrounded by a veneration, a superstition more profound, token of a bigger greatness and glory for the land that possessed them and that hardly disputed them than the tomb of Oedipus, in Colonus, and that the tomb of Orestes in Sparta, the same Orestes that the Furies had pursued up to the feet of Apollo himself and Athene, while saying: 'We chase away from the altars the parricidal son'" (*Correspondance*, VII, 53).

¹⁵⁰ "They suppressed the only thing I told M. Cardane to be essential, I told him he could cut down everything he wanted instead of omitting the last lines" (*Correspondance*, VII, 53).

¹⁵¹ Cf., for instance, the lines where, after comparing Henri to Ajax, Oedipus and King Lear, Proust goes on to state: "I wanted to show the pure, religious atmosphere of moral beauty in which that explosion of madness and blood, which splashed without staining, took place. I wanted to ventilate the crime scene with a breath from heaven, show (...) that the poor parricidal was not a brutal criminal, a being outside humanity, but a noble example of humanity, a man of enlightened spirit, a tender and pious son" (*P&M*, 221).

“I am not saying it doesn’t include ideas that are quite truthful. They are such a part of my reasoning that they might have for my own self a kind of banality they wouldn’t for someone else” (*Correspondance*, XXI, 626). Here, Proust is considering the hypothesis of his rejection of the article being based not on its banality but on it being too close to himself, too Proustian for Proust to appreciate it. Surely, this is not surprising. There are many other instances where this pattern is repeated, when Marcel feels Caliban’s rage at seeing himself in the mirror and opens fire against what most deeply constitutes him¹⁵². But realizing what is Proustian in “Sentiments Filiaux” might provide us an interesting vantage point to better understand *À La Recherche*.

In June, 1905, Proust had concluded his translation of Ruskin’s *Sesame and Lilies*. Three months later, Mme. Proust died, which led Proust to suddenly withdraw both from society and from all literary activities. Not considering the play he allegedly intended to write with René Peter in 1906¹⁵³, of which there is no evidence he ever actually started working on, “Sentiments Filiaux” was the first text Proust had written in over a year. As would be expected from Proust, the coming back from that trauma and from the long absence which followed made the article a particularly autobiographical one. We find biographical moments, for example, in the description of the old friendship the van Blarenberghe’s and his parents shared, or in the story of the ‘friend’ who was interested in a railroad worker, a friend we can’t help imagining to be Proust himself¹⁵⁴.

Nonetheless, even if the difference is often very subtle, it is not the proximity to his life but to his ideas which lead Proust to so vehemently repudiate “Sentiments Filiaux”¹⁵⁵.

Although it is not the center of the article, one of the ideas close to Proust that we find being explored here is the link between past and present, a link which, as it will be

¹⁵² Cf., for instance, Chapter 6.

¹⁵³ Cf. Chapter 3.

¹⁵⁴ “Having recently asked [Henri] for some information on an employee of the Chemins de Fer de l’Est (...), in which one of my friends was interested, I got the following answer from him” (*P&M*, 215)

¹⁵⁵ The very fact of the Commissioner of Police in charge of the investigation being an officer named M. Proust seems the perfect illustration of the confusion we always find between fiction, theory and biography when it comes to Proust, as if reality itself was already fictionalized and oriented by Proust. Unsurprisingly, again maybe partly due to the violence against himself that permeates Proust’s work and life, this Commissioner (who remains unnamed in “Sentiments Filiaux”) is the only person whose behavior Proust criticized in the article: “I can’t help finding rather cruel (...) the behavior of the Police Commissioner (...) To that cruel Commissioner, I would like to quote Kent’s words...” (*P&M*, 221).

argued, has led to many misreadings of *À La Recherche* and particularly of the last pages of *Le Temps Retrouvé*¹⁵⁶.

In a characteristic digression, Proust rambles on about how Princesse Mathilde's eyes sometimes looked beyond the room she was in and, "through a short and mysterious line (...) connected the present to the past" (*P&M*, 214), and about how "the rusty look of elderly people, (...) going through 'the shadow of the days' bygone, lands some feet beyond them, or so it seems, but in reality fifty or sixty years ago" (*P&M*, 214). These lines might suggest that it was possible to observe the past as we can observe a Chinese vase or a plant. They might suggest that, in certain favorable conditions, if we go through the right gestures, the past might be as accessible as it once was. An idea that echoes through most of Proustian criticism. However, Proust's vision is subtler than that. The past is, according to "Sentiments Filiaux" and, as it will be later argued, also according to *À La Recherche*, a place neglected when first encountered. It is a place that can no longer be visited, which is utterly destroyed and that we might only tentatively reconstruct and reinterpret, knowing fully well that our vision of it is certainly biased and incomplete. In a sense, Henri seems to be a personification of Proust's past. In "Sentiments Filiaux", the parricidal son plays the role Combray will play in *À La Recherche*. Proust met him in his youth and didn't pay much attention to him in the years that followed. After the death of Henri's father, Proust writes him a condolence letter, not because of any particular sympathy he had for Henri or for his departed father but because he wanted to write letters as if his own parents were still alive, until he could persuade himself that they indeed were. Henri becomes therefore a way for Proust to try to go back to times he perceived as simpler, when no one was dead and he was still only his parents' son¹⁵⁷. When Henri answers that letter, Proust is surprised with its tenderness and reconstructs the vision he had of him¹⁵⁸. Of course, this idea of Henri will once more be changed after the violent homicide. This makes it clear that, for Proust, the past isn't stable, objective and visitable. It shows us that the past is something subject to constant reinterpretations, but it also makes it very clear that those reinterpretations occur not only due to new information

¹⁵⁶ Cf. Chapter 22.

¹⁵⁷ "After my parents' death, I am (...) less myself than their son. Without detaching myself from my friends, I more willingly turn to theirs. And the letters I now write are mostly those I believe they would have written, those that they can no longer write and I write in their place" (*P&M*, 211).

¹⁵⁸ "This letter changed, to a more pleasant version, the memory I had of him" (*P&M*, 213) "But after having received that letter, I mended the image at the back of my remembrance, by interpreting and giving it a deeper sensibility, a mentality less mundane, exalting certain elements of his look or his traits which might accommodate a description more interesting and more generous than the one I had at first came up with" (*P&M*, 215).

gathered on people and places where the past took place but mainly due to our own disposition. Hence, we can't help but imagine that the "image deposited in [Princesse Mathilde]'s retina and in her memory by those great men, those great performances of the beginning of the century" (*P&M*, 214) was somehow enhanced by her old age and by the tediousness of her present. What is more, we can't get rid of the prevailing suspicion that those great men of the beginning of the century were as great as the people she now spends her time with, that they were in fact only Verdurins and Cottards in different clothing.

Another idea very close to Proust's heart, which we find in "Sentiments Filiaux", is the possibility of overcoming the fear and trembling the world causes us by putting them into words, by reducing them to a narrative¹⁵⁹, in this case the narrative of a news article in *Le Figaro*. In "Sentiments Filiaux", in a couple of lines, Proust discusses the relief, the 'morning delight' of seeing tragic and menacing events reduced to a newspaper's article, where bombings and wars appear side by side with divorces and theater premieres¹⁶⁰. This peculiar form of relief would be expanded in the last volumes of *À La Recherche* where the imminent hazard of a German invasion or the sinking of an ocean liner costing thousands of lives is pacified in the minds of the Verdurins by becoming just a page of their morning newspaper. It is as if, by entering the newspaper, those events had transformed not into life itself, but into a peculiar form of unthreatening fiction. The war and its terrible outcomes become, therefore, something completely unrelated to their lives, something distant, even if the Germans are only an hour's drive away from their homes¹⁶¹.

Yet, the nuclear idea of "Sentiments Filiaux", which could easily be described as being so close to Proust's reasoning that it became banal for him, is the recognition that

¹⁵⁹ Cf. our first three chapters.

¹⁶⁰ "I wanted to take a look at *Le Figaro*, to execute that abominable and voluptuous act called *reading the newspaper*, thanks to which all the misfortunes and cataclysms of the universe which took place in the last twenty-four hours, the battles that cost the lives of fifty-thousand men, the crimes, the strikes, the bankruptcies, the fires, the poisonings, the suicides, the divorces (...) are transformed for our personal usage, for us who were not involved, into a morning delight, blending perfectly, in a particularly exciting and refreshing fashion, with the prescribed ingestion of some sips of latte" (*P&M*, 215).

¹⁶¹ "They thought certainly of these hecatombs of regiments annihilated and passengers swallowed by the waves; but there is a law of inverse proportion which multiplies to such an extent anything that concerns our own welfare and divides by such a formidable figure anything that does not concern it, that the death of unknown millions is felt by us as the most insignificant of sensations, hardly even as disagreeable as a draught" (IV, 351).

we are all, in a sense, Henri van Blarenberghe. We are all parricidal sons moved by filial sentiments:

‘What have you done to me! What have you done to me!’ If we think about it, there is not perhaps one truly caring mother who would not be able to, in her last day, often quite earlier, give this reproach to her son. In fact, we age, we kill those who love us by the worries we inflict upon them, by the restless tenderness we inspire and which leaves them in unceasing alarm (...) Perhaps someone who could see that in that belated moment of lucidity, which even the lives more bewitched by chimeras might have, as Don Quixote himself had, perhaps that person, like Henri van Blarenberghe, when ending his mother’s life by stabbing her, would retreat in face of the horror of his life and rush for a gun, to die right away (*P&M*, 223-224)

This suggestion had already been explored by Proust before 1907, particularly in “La Confession d’une Jeune Fille”¹⁶², where the center of the narrative is a young girl who feels guilty every time she gives in to pleasure. A guilt reinforced by her mother’s sudden and unexpected appearance in those climatic moments. The short story ends with the girl’s mother surprising her when she is having sex with her lover, while her fiancé is away, causing the mother’s death (the young girl, just like Henri, would shoot herself immediately afterwards). In the young girl’s mind, there seems to be no doubt that growing up consists merely of allowing the space her mother once occupied to be taken up by lovers, which leads to a metaphorical (and in both of these tragic stories, also literal) parricide¹⁶³.

This idea would also be reformulated in *Jean Santeuil*, where Jean is often described as being the cause of most of his parents’ grief. We can hear, in the narrator’s voice, the echo of Mme. van Blarenberghe’s reproach to her assassin. Passages like the one where Jean Santeuil is accused of knowing “that the reason for his mother’s nervous state was that she had had much cause for grief, and that for part of that grief he, himself, had been responsible” or when it is said that “madame Santeuil would gladly have given her life for her son” (*Santeuil*, 421), it seems like another way to say ‘Jean! Qu’as-tu fait de moi! Qu’as-tu fait de moi!’

¹⁶² Cf. Chapter 1.

¹⁶³ In “Confessions d’une Jeune Fille”, Proust is constantly overlapping the girl’s sexual initiation with things associated with her mother. She, for instance, tastes pleasure for the first time in *Les Oublis*, the place she claims to remind her of her mother more than any other in the world. During this interaction with a young cousin of hers, she gets scared and runs “in the park with an insane need of my mother” (*P&J*, 141), who the *jeune fille* finds shortly afterwards, despite the fact that the mother was thought to be in Paris at the time. In the last scene of the story, prior to being caught by her mother with her lover, and during their sexual intercourse, the young girl felt “an infinite sadness and desolation; it seemed to me that I was making my mother’s soul weep” (*P&J*, 151). Cf. Chapter 1.

The peak of this mixture between filial sentiments and parricide is situated, of course, in Montjouvain, where Mlle. Vinteuil, consensually described in Combray as being the cause for M. Vinteuil's early death, lived with her lover. Shortly before the sadistic scene of *Du Côté de Chez Swann*, this idea is reiterated when Marcel's mother is said to have first imagined M. Vinteuil's pain and then Mlle. Vinteuil's guilt:

My mother had not forgotten the sad last years of M. Vinteuil's life, his complete absorption (...) in the suffering [Mlle. Vinteuil] had caused him (...) [My mother] shuddered to think of that other grief, so much more bitter, which Mlle. Vinteuil must now be feeling, tinged with remorse at having virtually killed her father (I, 157-158)

The pain Marcel's mother imagines M. Vinteuil to feel here becomes (as it would be expected since M. Vinteuil's experience is, for Proust, a universal one) something very palpable for her in the fifth volume, when Albertine comes to live with Marcel in their family's house¹⁶⁴.

Antoine Compagnon, in *Proust Entre Deux Siècles*, praises "Sentiments Filiaux" because, there, Proust throws away the *clichés* that permeated earlier texts like "Confession d'une Jeune Fille" and "Avant La Nuit", for example. In the 1907 article, Compagnon found no sign of the exaggerated Christian guilt he accused Proust's earlier short stories of. According to Compagnon, "the liturgical setting almost disappeared" (Compagnon, 161) and Proust is now closer to Freud than he ever was.

Compagnon seems to greatly simplify the meaning of the text by assuming Proust is here merely stating that where there is love there is hate, and that "hate doesn't vanish even in the greatest love, it has its place, it is a necessary companion of love" (Compagnon, 163). He then compares "Sentiments Filiaux" to *À La Recherche*, by stressing that in the novel Marcel also feels somehow guilty for the death of both his grandmother and Albertine, and that, like Charlus, who desecrated his mother by looking like her, Proust's characters are inevitably desecrating their mothers by the simple fact of looking like them¹⁶⁵. The argument seems to be that characters like Charlus, Henri, Mme. Vinteuil and the *jeune fille* are killing their parents by growing up and having sexual intercourse. They are turning their similitude with their ancestors into something

¹⁶⁴ "all the people who saw her at that time have since told me that in addition to her grief at having lost her mother she had an air of constant preoccupation. This mental strife, this inward debate, had the effect of overheating my mother's brow, and she was constantly opening the windows to let in the fresh air. But she failed to come to any decision, for fear of influencing me in the wrong direction and so spoiling what she believed to be my happiness. She could not even bring herself to forbid me to keep Albertine for the time being in our house" (III, 523-4).

¹⁶⁵ Cf. Compagnon, 165.

grotesque by making them participate in moments of immoral erotic pleasure, since “every pleasure is an offense against the mother” (Compagnon, 165).

However, Proust’s theory is slightly more complex than Compagnon credits it to be. Oddly enough, we can perhaps better understand what Proust is arguing here regarding the universality of this form of parricide if we pay attention to some of the references and quotations present in “Sentiments Filiaux”. As it always happens in *À La Recherche*, Proust distorts by quoting and subjugating the authors he loved the most to his narrative needs. In a way, whenever Proust quotes someone, he is recognizing his admiration while intending to overcome the author he is using. Their work is now only valuable in so far as it helps Proust’s *oeuvre* and it is therefore molded to fit Proust’s best interests¹⁶⁶. Descombes recognizes this typical Proustian behavior in *Philosophy of The Novel*, where he claims that when quoting Mme. de Sévigné, Proust never troubles himself to offer the right tone of the author¹⁶⁷. Elisabeth Ladenson also very persuasively demonstrated in *Proust’s Lesbianism*, how Proust intentionally misread both Alfred de Vigny (whose “La Colère de Samson”, which Proust used as an epigraph in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, had no reference to homosexuality whatsoever, contrarily to what we are led to believe) and Baudelaire (who in “À Propos de Baudelaire” is compared to Vigny, thus seeming, as Ladenson claims, “to have deliberately set up an opposition that he knows to be false”, (Ladenson, 25)). Proust was repeatedly violent towards his ancestors, just like van Blarenberghe was with Mme. van Blarenberghe, making the parricide he is alluding to something more meaningful and metaphorical. He turns it into something that goes deeper than just the worries we cause our parents or the mixture between love and hate we find inside any of us, as Compagnon had suggested.

We find obvious instances of this violence against the writers he most admired in “Sentiments Filiaux” when Proust quotes H.G. Wells but, before doing so, explains that he will misread it¹⁶⁸. Or when he quotes Michelet, then praises him, but immediately adds that Michelet’s original quotation didn’t make much sense in context and the historian

¹⁶⁶ Cf. Chapter 10.

¹⁶⁷ “One can further observe that Proust interrupts his quotation at the point that serves his own interests. He carefully refrains from giving his reader the excellent commentary of the Marquise” (Descombes, 265).

¹⁶⁸ “the most beautiful eyes of the world no longer touch us with their beauty, they are no longer, to deviate a Wells’ expression from its actual meaning, “Time Machines”” (*P&M*, 215).

was probably just trying to impress his readers when he wrote such gibberish. According to Proust, the sentence is only intelligible if misread¹⁶⁹.

Proust's distortion of his sources goes yet even further. In "Sentiments Filiaux", it is not only the authors he quotes who are modelled according to Proust's fictional needs. Even Henri van Blarenberghe and the news of the story on which the article is based are re-shaped at Proust's will. While describing the moment when the house staff realizes what is going on, Proust quotes *Le Matin*'s version of the *fait-divers* word by word. Still, he would extract from that passage an expression that is neither in *Le Matin* nor in his quotation of it. Proust deliberately decides to misread the news article and add a 'de moi' to Mme. van Blarenberghe's tragic last words: 'Henri! Henri! Qu'as-tu fait!', making this new expression the nucleus of "Sentiments Filiaux". There can be no doubts regarding Proust's intentionality on this mistake since the variation Proust invented appears for the first time right before the quotation of *Le Matin*. What Proust is doing here, by adding a simple 'de moi', is forcing Mme. Van Blarenberghe and the coldness of facts to bow down to his fictional plot. He needs Mme. Van Blarenberghe to disappear into his fiction, to become merely a character who says not what she had in fact said but what she would say were she one of the protagonists of "Sentiments Filiaux". He will merge fact and fiction so that a news report can become one of his stories, so that the pages of *Le Figaro* are transformed into an introductory section of *À La Recherche*. Thus, from a certain perspective, we cannot help but hearing Mme. Van Blarenberghe, dying on the floor of her house, and screaming: 'Proust! Qu'as-tu fait de moi! Qu'as-tu fait de moi!'

After distorting the report of the event, Proust will also then significantly distort Henri van Blarenberghe's character, as the complete version given by *Le Matin* would have made of Henri's position a rather less universal one than suggested in "Sentiments Filiaux". Henri van Blarenberghe was a forty-two-year-old man with a long history of mental illness, someone who lived in a state of 'intermittent folly' and that had been the protagonist of a series of violent outbursts, with at least one among them involving a death-threat made to a concierge¹⁷⁰. Yet, in Proust's version, he becomes a "nice and

¹⁶⁹ "I find it hard to believe in death', says Michelet in an admirable page. It is true he says this about a jellyfish, whose death, so similar to their life, is in no way incredible, so much so that we can ask ourselves if Michelet hasn't merely used one of his 'handy recipes' in this particular sentence, those which great writers recur to so promptly and thanks to which they can assuredly and unexpectedly serve their customers the exquisite feast they ask from them" (*P&M*, 222).

¹⁷⁰ Cf. *Le Matin*, 1907, January, 25th, "Il Tue Sa Mére et se Suicide", p.1.

rather distinct" (*P&M*, 213) young man, someone "with an unconventional outlook" (*P&M*, 213) perhaps, but undoubtedly tender-hearted and full of filial love.

By changing both Mme. van Blarenberghe's dying words and Henri's character, Proust is refusing to see the dramatic end of a lunatic, of a deranged middle-aged man, in this story. Instead, he chooses to see in Henri and in its tragedy "a noble example of humanity, a man of enlightened spirit, a tender and pious son" (*P&M*, 221). Henri, by now a character in Proust's fiction and no longer an actual person, is led exclusively by filial sentiments to parricide. He is a parricidal son like any of us, someone different from us only to the extent that he had the courage to face the monstrosity of his actions, which were just more blatant than usual, fully accepting their consequences afterwards. By erasing any sign of insanity from his version of the affair, Proust is calling attention to his idea that growing old necessarily involves some form of parricide. Hence, the adulteration of the story allows Proust to make Henri someone less like Ajax and more like Oedipus.

Proust is thus doing with Wells, Michelet and the van Blarenberghes what he would also do with Flaubert, Sainte-Beuve, and Swann. He is using them, distorting them without asking permission, in order to speak about himself and his own ideas. As he does with the characters of his novel, Proust takes van Blarenberghe's life away from him and ventilates the crime scene with a fresher air, not from heaven but from Combray. In "Sentiments Filiaux", he places Henri in a "religious atmosphere of moral beauty" (*P&M*, 221). Proust compares Henri to Oedipus and Orestes (the most venerated Greek heroes, as the last paragraph claims) only to later hint that Henri is, in fact, a version of Proust himself and of the guilt he felt for the way he behaved towards his mother while she was still alive. Because, for Proust, the biggest tragedy is always the one that concerns him more deeply.

The hypothesis we would like to put forward here is that Proust sees literature as a way of violently subjugating the world, of dominating everything he touches to such a degree that characters, events and even other writers drastically change and simply become images of Proust himself. Henri is no longer Henri but Proust¹⁷¹, Wells no longer says what he intended to say but what Proust needs him to have written.

This deliberate and professional misreading seems to be, for Proust, what constitutes the process of becoming a writer, but also, more prosaically, of becoming a

¹⁷¹ It might be more accurate to say that Henri is no longer Henri but rather Marcel, a fictionalized version of Proust who, precisely due to being fictionalized and living in a fictional world, allows Proust to more easily remain in control.

person in his own right. According to Proust, we all misread the world to place ourselves in it, at its center. We all reinterpret the past, as well as everything else, in order to arrive at a more consistent (or at least more comfortable) description of it. Thus, literature is not an activity so different from many others. In this process of becoming ourselves, it is extraordinarily important to kill our lineage, to evade the filial position and allow ourselves to subjugate what we were used to being subjugated to in order to become more ourselves and less our parents' sons and daughters, to stop writing the letters they would write if they were alive and start writing *À La Recherche*.

In order to fully grasp this argument, it might help taking a closer look at the pages that come right before the famous Martinville steeples episode in *Du Côté de Chez Swann*.

While taking a stroll through Guermantes way, Marcel stops to admire a water lily that was floating on the Vivonne. Describing what followed, Proust writes:

Such as these was the water-lily, and reminiscent also of those wretches whose peculiar torments, repeated indefinitely throughout eternity, aroused the curiosity of Dante, who would have inquired about them at greater length and in fuller detail from the victims themselves had not Virgil, striding on ahead, obliged him to hasten after him at full speed, as I must hasten after my parents (I, 167)

Marcel is, thus, in this episode, occupying the position he attributed to Dante in the abovementioned quotation; he is the writer who is curious about the world, who wants to look more carefully at his surroundings so that those surroundings may, at a later stage, be incorporated in his work. His parents, on the other hand, play Virgil's role, but here Virgil is not the guide who leads Dante to safety and offers him the opportunity to write *La Divina Commedia*, as he was referred to in a passage of *La Prisonnière* (III, 710). In this passage of *À La Recherche*, Virgil stands for the person who doesn't allow Dante to find the truth he was seeking by forcing him to keep his pace.

A few pages later, still at Guermantes way, Marcel comments on the humid paddocks near Guermantes castle and adds:

I would stop before them, hoping to gain some precious addition to my experience, for I seemed to have before my eyes a fragment of that fluvial country which I had longed so much to see and know since coming upon a description of it by one of my favorite authors. And it was with that storybook land, with its imagined soil intersected by a hundred bubbling watercourses, that Guermantes, changing its form in my mind, became identified, after I heard Dr. Percepied speak of the flowers and the charming rivulets and fountains that were to be seen there in the ducal park (I, 172)

Further below in the same paragraph, Marcel struggles with the idea of not being able to become a writer for not having a subject to write about and confesses that

Sometimes I would rely on my father to settle it all for me (...) perhaps this lack of genius, this black cavity which gaped in my mind when I ransacked it for the theme of my future writings, was itself no more than an insubstantial illusion, and would vanish with the intervention of my father, who must have agreed with the Government and with Providence that I should be the foremost writer of the day (I, 173)

At this point of *À La Recherche*, Marcel is still at an embryonic stage of his writer's career, still unable to create anything. The reason for this stagnation seems to be that he is waiting for a revelation to be handed to him. He believes that beauty is not within himself but in the objects surrounding him, and looks for translators who might be able to explain to him how to speak their language, how to extract from those objects the beauty which lies inside them. Marcel is trying to 'gain some precious addition to my experience', he aims to discover beauty just like an explorer discovers a new country and relies on his favorite writers, on his father, and on doctor Percepied to offer him a road map.

Thus, his parents and, more generally, the people he loves and admires are the ones holding him back. Like Virgil, they are forcing him to walk, to keep moving on instead of stopping for a while to collect his thoughts and find that beauty, which is simply a matter of perspective, of looking at things from a truly individual point of view. Beauty is not, as Marcel would find out, in the steeples themselves but in the variations of perspective through which they are seen, and which reveal something new about the Martinville steeples, that is in fact something new about Marcel.

Before the steeples passage (and afterwards as well), Marcel tries to avoid these moments where he could explore and understand his own perspective of things. In the pages prior to that epiphany, we find the young narrator repeatedly trying to keep pace with his family while they are taking strolls through Combray¹⁷². Proust seems hence to be suggesting that what was keeping Marcel from becoming a writer was the fact that he simply followed the track his parents were treading. In order to become a writer, he needed to tell Virgil to go on and allow himself to contemplate the water lilies a little longer.

¹⁷² "And if I then had to hasten after my grandfather, to continue my walk [*ma route*], I would try to recapture them by closing my eyes" (I, 176). It is clear on this passage that what Marcel by now referred to as '*sa route*' was actually his family's. His own route was the one he had left behind to catch up with his grandfather.

Even in the steeples' episode, Marcel is very reluctant to be alone and allow himself to discover his own perspective¹⁷³. Like the narrator of "Sentiments Filiaux", Marcel is pleased in remaining just his parents' son and not escaping their supervision and guidance, not allowing himself to kill those who love him by the worries he would inflict upon them. It is only when every other possible companion abandons him that he is capable of concentrating on objects for a while and finding where their beauty truly lies. It is only then that the Martinville steeples become Marcel's steeples¹⁷⁴.

Therefore, the lesson the steeples taught Marcel seems to be no different than the one Proust learned from Henri and his crime. What shocked Proust in the van Blarenberghe's tragedy was not so much the death of Mme. van Blarenberghe as it was the death of M. and Mme. Proust. In the beginning of the article, Proust seems willing to act and write as if his parents were alive, as if he were more his parents than himself. However, van Blarenberghe showed him they were irretrievably dead, that it was, in a sense, he who killed them, and that the honorable thing to do was to simply accept the facts and tread his own path, a path which runs over his parents' tomb. Thence, the movement of the article begins with the pathetic resuscitation attempt in the first paragraph, and follows through with the heroic identification with Oedipus, the greatest hero of Ancient Greece, in the last. It is the movement from the writing of a condolence letter in the name of his parents to the writing of "Sentiments Filiaux d'un Parricide" (which is, of course, nothing else than a steppingstone to the writing of *À La Recherche*).

¹⁷³ "As good luck would have it, my parents called me; I felt that I did not, for the moment, enjoy the tranquility necessary for the successful pursuit of my researches, and that it would be better to think no more of the matter until I reached home"; "I did not know the reason for the pleasure I had felt on seeing [the steeples] upon the horizon, and the business of trying to discover that reason seemed to me irksome; I wanted to store away in my mind those shifting, sunlit planes and, for the time being, to think of them no more."; "I got down from the box to talk to my parents while we waited for the doctor to reappear" (I, 177-178).

¹⁷⁴ "The coachman, who seemed little inclined for conversation, having barely acknowledged my remarks, *I was obliged [force me fut]* in default of other society, to fall back on my own, and to attempt to recapture the vision of *my steeples*" (I, 178, my emphasis).

Chapter 10

Denis Revolles and the Violence of Gratitude

One of the first texts Proust wrote and is available to us is a *devoir de français* in which, at a very early age, Proust tells the story of a construction worker called Jacques who cuts his safety rope and dies in order to save the life of his co-worker, Denis Revolles. This short composition would be negligible were it not for its conclusion, where Proust explains to the reader that, contrarily to what we would expect, Denis came to hate Jacques precisely because he saved his life. What he owed Jacques was so much and so unpayable that Denis became enraged instead of thankful¹⁷⁵. As this chapter will try to establish, Proust himself seems to have felt Denis' rage several times, and in different ways, during his life. A rage Montaigne perhaps described best in "De L'Art de Conférer": "kindness is welcome to the extent that it seems the debt can be paid back. When it clearly surpasses it, hatred takes gratitude's place" (Montaigne, III, 229)¹⁷⁶.

In the biography he wrote of Proust, Pietro Citati says that when Paul Helleu offered Proust one of his paintings, the author refused and insisted on buying the painting instead of simply receiving it for free. This anecdote could be just the portrait of Proust's prodigality, but it seems to be more than that. It appears to perfectly depict Proust's vehement refusal to be on the receiving end of anything, or, in other words, his rejection of gratefulness due to his fear of being in debt. What this chapter intends to suggest is that Proust is only willing to assume the role of the master's pony when he might throw down that master, just like the horse threw down Albertine in the most tragic scene of *À La Recherche*.

In the introduction to *Essais et Articles*, Thierry Laget claims that the prefaces Proust wrote for Jacques-Émile Blanche and Paul Morand's books were less concerned with praising the authors of those books than with discussing Proust's literary theory, while also sustaining that Proust's love for controversy "didn't spare neither his masters, nor his allies, nor his admirers" (*E&A*, VII). Yet, Laget is perhaps missing the point here. It is not so much that Proust loved controversies to the point that he was blinded by them

¹⁷⁵ It was in this early text, that for the first time, as far as we know, Proust deliberately misquoted an author to better suit his interests. In the first paragraph of the text, Proust misquotes Pierre Corneille's *Le Cid* and adds "with all due respect for Corneille, I didn't want to raise Denis' satisfaction to such heights by leaving the verse intact" (*E&A*, 11). Cf. Chapter 9.

¹⁷⁶ In fact, Montaigne is here quoting Tacitus. Pascal would afterwards quote Montaigne's quote in his *Pensées*.

and couldn't separate friends from foes or the people he admired from those he didn't. On the contrary, Proust chose to attack only the ones he admired most, sparing the second-rate writers he unhesitatingly praised in his book reviews.

Even though Proust initially wrote it only as an article for *La Revue de Paris*, the text which would become the preface of Paul Morand's *Tendres Stocks* is one of the best examples of how Proust dealt with both his ancestors and his contemporaries. In this ten-page article, intended to praise *Tendres Stocks*, Proust only makes reference of Paul Morand and his *oeuvre* in the last two, still finding enough space in those two pages to criticize Morand's writing¹⁷⁷. The rest of the preface is allegedly dedicated to the refutation of Anatole France's idea that everyone wrote badly after the end of the XVIII century. While saying he will contest this argument, Proust actually agrees that philosophers and historians like Guizot, Thiers, Villemain, Cousin, Taine, and Renan aren't worth being read. Still, Proust will aim higher in this preface and, instead of defending his contemporaries, he will attack authors idolized by his contemporaries (and partially also by himself), such as Sainte-Beuve ("in Sainte-Beuve, where stupidity is so blatant that we ask ourselves if it is not a disguise for cowardice" (*E&A*, 305)), Flaubert ("But with Flaubert, for instance, the brightness, that is not perhaps astonishing,..."); "the ordinary smartness of Flaubert" (*E&A*, 308)), or Racine ("There is nothing so dry, so poor, so succinct as that. It has been filled with so little thought that it would be easy for it to be light and graceful. Yet, *Lettres Imaginaires* isn't that."; "Truly, those letters to the author of *Imaginaires* are almost as bad as the ridiculous correspondence in which Racine and Boileau exchange medical opinions" (*E&A*, 309)). Even when Proust is praising Morand by saying that "from time to time, a new original writer comes up (...) that new writer is usually tiring to read and hard to understand because he ties things up with new connections" (*E&A*, 311), we can't help but feel that Proust is, after all, simply praising himself.

Proust constantly feels the anxiety of influence and repeatedly tries to convince himself that the authors who shaped him the most and allowed him to become the writer he would be were, after all, almost irrelevant. As Proust suggested in "Journées de Lecture"¹⁷⁸, in order to be autonomous, he had first to acknowledge what he owed to the

¹⁷⁷ "The only reproach I am tempted to address to Morand is that sometimes he recurs to images that are not unavoidable" (*E&A*, 312).

¹⁷⁸ Unsurprisingly, this idea appears in the preface to his translation of Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies*, a preface in which Proust praises his old master while criticizing several of Ruskin's ideas, like he would do in "En Mémoire des Églises Assassinées". Again, as it would be expected, when very close

great masters, allowing them to guide him and then abandoning their path to find his own voice. Just like aspiring painters use to pile up in Florence to imitate Michelangelo's *David*, Proust wrote pastiches of the writers he admired and most desperately wanted to exorcize in order to acquire his own style.

In "À Propos du 'Style' de Flaubert" (in which he manages to criticize not only Flaubert but also Balzac, Renan, Saint-Simon and Sainte-Beuve), Proust explains the importance he attributes to pastiches by saying:

In what concerns the Flaubertian intoxication, I couldn't recommend the purgative, exorcizing virtue of pastiche highly enough. When we finish reading a book, we would not only like to keep on living with its characters, with Mme. de Beauséant, with Frédéric Moreau, but also with our interior voice, which has been disciplined for the entire duration of the reading to follow the rhythm of a Balzac, a Flaubert, and would like to continue speaking like them. It is important to allow it to do just that for a while, let the pedaling prolong the sound, that is, to make a voluntary pastiche, so that we can then become original once again, and not create involuntary pastiches for the rest of our lives (*E&A*, 290)

Proust is therefore recommending the therapeutic virtues of the pastiche. Through the pastiche, he intends to exorcize the influence he feels hanging over him, and spit it out by means of parody. But, in the meantime, just like Denis, Proust seems to understand that the debt he owes can never be paid, and gets enraged.

We find this typical Proustian movement in a letter to Robert Dreyfus where, while discussing Renan's vocabulary, Proust explains his pastiche method: "I had set my interior metronome to [Renan's] rhythm and I could have written ten volumes like that (...) but now it is over and I'll do it no longer. What a stupid exercise" (*Correspondance*, VIII, 67). Hence, Proust initially sets the tone to the writer whose influence he intends to exorcize and appropriates his voice in such a way that Proust and Renan become one. However, as soon as the exercise is over, Proust becomes infuriated and despises not only the writer¹⁷⁹, but the activity of writing pastiches as well, since the exercise itself had become by now crucial for him and therefore had to be burnt in holocaust.

to the end of his life, in 1922, Proust would refer to John Ruskin in a letter to Sydney Schiff as "that old imbecile who sometimes said wise things" (*Correspondance*, XXI, 363).

¹⁷⁹ Proust's attack on Renan can be found, as it was said some paragraphs earlier, for example, in the preface of *Tendres Stocks* where we read, among other things, that "if, for the expression of moral truths, we keep M. Renan, we need, however, to confess that he at times writes very badly" (*E&A*, 303). Unsurprisingly, in *Monsieur Proust*, Céleste Albaret claims Proust told her how much he admired Renan, going so far as to say that one sentence of Renan was "the sort of thing I would like to have written" (Albaret, 151).

As such, the cycle that constantly repeats itself in Proust's work seems to be one that converts the authors he loves into the authors he imitates, and the authors he imitates into the authors he despises.

Proust's descriptions of Balzac are possibly the most obvious instance of this behavior. The influence Balzac had over Proust was already profusely pointed out by Proustian criticism¹⁸⁰. Proust surely felt this influence and tried to avoid it in the only way he knew. Proust admired and had profusely read Balzac's *oeuvre*, yet, every time he refers to the author of *Illusions Perdues*, he cannot avoid openly criticizing him, even when the article is not at all about Balzac¹⁸¹.

In the dialogue with his mother, included in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, which served to defend Balzac against the unfair judgment Sainte-Beuve made of him, the narrator starts by stating that his mother didn't love Balzac and had good reasons for it¹⁸². Despite condemning Sainte-Beuve's contempt for Balzac, the narrator of *Contre Sainte-Beuve* never stops attacking the defendant and the criticism he makes of Balzac is often based on arguments he felt could also easily be used against himself, thus suggesting that those accusations, if made directed at him, had no shadow of truth. Proust constantly ridicules Balzac's snobbish behavior and, at one point in the dialogue, the narrator even suggests Balzac used his fiction to draw his life with more flattering colors, making it better and more triumphant than it in fact was, just like Proust did with *Jean Santeuil*¹⁸³. Still, when Proust praises Balzac he is backhandedly complimenting himself, like he did with Morand, as he describes Balzac in a way that makes Balzac and himself indistinguishable. Furthermore, this is done in a way in that Vautrin, while addressing Lucien, becomes the description of the day Marcel met Charlus in Balbec:

Every word, every incident, has an underlying significance that Balzac gives the reader no hint of. These implications arise from such a specialized psychological study, and one which no one, Balzac excepted, has carried out, that it is a rather delicate task to point them out. But everything, from the way Vautrin stops Lucien on the road, when he does not know him and so could only be attracted to him by his good looks, to the involuntary gestures with which he takes his arm, doesn't it betray the very different, very definite significance of the theories about domination, about a pact of friendship, etc. by means of which the

¹⁸⁰ Cf., for example, the preface Bernard de Fallois wrote for *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (CSB, 36).

¹⁸¹ Cf., for example, the essay on Tolstoy, where, in the opening lines, Proust states: "nowadays, people raise Balzac above Tolstoy. It's pure madness. Balzac's *oeuvre* is unfriendly, repulsive, full of absurdities, where humanity is judged by a man of letters desirous of making a great book. In Tolstoy, it is judged by a serene god" (E&A, 353).

¹⁸² Cf. CSB, 161.

¹⁸³ "Does Balzac want us to construct from that triumph of de Marsay's narratives the triumph that he, Balzac, enjoyed in that evening party at which we were not present?" (CSB, 209). Cf. Chapter 12.

pretended Canon glazes to Lucien's eyes, and to his own, maybe, an unadmitted thought? (CSB, 212)

Patrícia Cabral points in the right direction when she claims that "Proust uses Sainte-Beuve's method to 'deflate' Balzac, destroy Sainte-Beuve and empty himself along the way" (Cabral, 36). However, if Proust is emptying himself only so he might be able to reach what Richard Rorty, in "Self-creation and Affiliation: Proust, Nietzsche and Heidegger", describes as the ironist's perfect life: "the one which closes in the assurance that the last of his final vocabularies, at least, was wholly *his*" (Rorty, 97); then this voiding of himself occurs so that he can afterwards fill the empty space with his own self in a purer state. He "became autonomous by explaining to himself why the others were not authorities, but simple fellow contingencies" (Rorty, 102)¹⁸⁴.

It would be tiring to single out every occurrence of Proust's pattern of disrespectful exorcism towards the writers he once admired, but it is important to briefly point out just three relevant occasions which offer us a clear picture of Proust's method.

Both Marcel and Proust loved George Sand when they were young. The first book Marcel ever owned was *François le Champi* and he could never distinguish the charm literature had for him from the charm he found in George Sand's novel. In the famous questionnaire of around 1884, Proust declared George Sand to be his favorite prose author alongside with Augustin Thierry. Nevertheless, as an adult, Proust would vehemently attack George Sand, while the merit he previously attributed to *François le Champi* would become a symbol of youth's misjudgments regarding the world¹⁸⁵. Proust is thence exorcizing George Sand's influence and reneging on his previous opinions on literature. However, more importantly, he seems to be trying to set himself free from his mother's yoke and, as argued in the ninth chapter, allow himself to abandon the son's position to

¹⁸⁴ Proust himself stated something very similar in a letter to Mme. Strauss, where he claimed that "the only people who defend the French language (...) are the ones who 'attack' it (...) Each writer is forced to make his own language (...) they do not start writing well until they are original, until they create their own language by themselves" (*Correspondance*, VIII, 276-7).

¹⁸⁵ In "À Propos de Baudelaire", Proust claims that "the danger of articles as Sainte-Beuve's is that when a George Sand or a Fromentin have similar traits, we are not tempted to find them 'worthy of Virgil', as that doesn't mean anything" (*E&A*, 335). We find Proust once again exorcizing his old love for George Sand in a letter to Georges de Lauris, where regarding Marcel's love for *François le Champi* in *Du Côté de Chez Swann*, Proust explains: "Do not believe that I like George Sand. That is not a piece of literary criticism. It was like that *at that time*. The rest of the book will correct this" (*Correspondance*, 225). On this particular subject and on the intertextuality between Proust and Sand's *oeuvre*, cf. Nina Glaser's "Proust Du Côté de Chez Sand: 'Première Nuit D'Insomnie et de Désespoir'".

start treading his own path. He is decreeing the period in which his mother was the one to set the tone of his life as officially over¹⁸⁶.

Proust also makes a diatribe against the Goncourts. It is by reading a page of their journal that, in *Le Temps Retrouvé*, Marcel almost definitively abandons the idea of becoming a writer. The journal he happens to find while trying to catch some sleep was definitive proof that literature wasn't capable of revealing any kind of hidden deep truth to him, since it praised as clever and interesting people he had always considered rather stupid (even though he still cannot avoid considering the hypothesis that the fault may not be in the Goncourts' vision but in his own)¹⁸⁷. Proust's attack against the Goncourts seems to be partly due to the fact that he owed much of his celebrity to the Goncourt Prix, which was attributed to *À L'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs*, in 1919. However, it had more to do with

the profound repulsion that is inspired in us not so much by the people who are completely different from us as by those who are less satisfactory versions of ourselves, in whom are displayed our less attractive qualities, the faults of which we have cured ourselves, unpleasantly reminding us of how we must have appeared to certain other people before we became what we now are (III, 266)

Proust's rejection of the Goncourts occurs due to the perceived resemblances between himself and the two dandies who were too shallow to become real writers, since Proust feared that being looked at as just another Goncourt might damage the impact of *À La Recherche* in the literary world¹⁸⁸.

Lastly, Proust tries to exorcize the similarities he found between himself and Oscar Wilde, which he knew would undoubtedly be raised due to them both being semi-closeted homosexual writers attending the most elegant parties in Paris at roughly the

¹⁸⁶ George Sand was one of Proust's mother's, Marcel's mother's and Marcel's grandmother's favorite authors and, in *Du Côté de Chez Swann*, Marcel receives *François le Champi* as a gift from his grandmother. We are thus assuming, as most Proustian critics did, that in many occasions, but certainly in this one, both Marcel's mother and grandmother can be read as portraits (or exorcisms) of Proust's own mother.

¹⁸⁷ "Literature, if I was to trust the evidence of this book, had no very profound truths to reveal: and at the same time it seemed to me sad that literature was not what I had thought it to be. At the same time, the state of ill-health which was soon to shut me up in a sanatorium seemed to me also less to be regretted, if the beautiful things of which books speak were not more beautiful than what I had seen myself. And yet, by an odd contradiction, now that they were being spoken of in this book I had a desire to see them" (IV, 287).

¹⁸⁸ For more examples of this rejection, Cf. "Les Goncourts Devant Leurs Cadets: M. Marcel Proust" (E&A, 337). Proust's fear was entirely justified, as André Gide recognized, in a letter he wrote to Proust in 1914, that refusing to publish *Du Côté de Chez Swann* at N.R.F. was one of the biggest regrets of his life, but that he did so because "for me, you were the one that frequented Mme. X or Y and the one that wrote for *Le Figaro*. I thought you were, I confess, *du côté de chez Verdurin!* A snob, a socialite amateur, someone embarrassing to have in our magazine" (*Correspondance*, XIII, 53).

same period. Proust professed his disdain for Wilde in a letter to Jean Cocteau¹⁸⁹, but he would go even further in *À La Recherche*, where Charlus becomes, in many moments, a grotesque portrait of Wilde, as Morel becomes a version of Lord Alfred Douglas¹⁹⁰.

In his biography of Proust, George D. Painter argues that Proust usually placed characters and model side by side “as if to prove that they could not possibly be the same” (Painter, 634). Painter also argued that Charlus was “Proust’s revenge upon Montesquiou” (Painter, 125), and that the Baron was modelled on Wilde as well. Painter thus conceded that there was an exorcistic structure in “this novel of revenges” (Painter, 59), yet would never take the next natural step of seeing Charlus’ affectation as a revenge upon Wilde.

Every time Wilde is alluded to in *À La Recherche*, he is placed side by side with Charlus: it is Charlus who says “I forgot who the man of taste was who, when he was asked what event in his life had most distressed him, replied: ‘The death of Lucien de Rubempré in *Splendeurs et Misères*’” (III, 437-8); it is during the opening scene of *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, when Marcel understands that Charlus is homosexual, that Proust refers to the persecution homosexuals suffer and gives as an example: “the poet one day fêted in every drawing-room and applauded in every theatre in London, and the next driven from every lodging, unable to find a pillow upon which to lay his head” (III, 17), and finally it is through Charlus that Proust softens the embarrassing story of Proust and Wilde’s first (and probably only) meeting, in which Wilde allegedly left Proust’s parents’ house as soon as he entered it because of its hideous decoration¹⁹¹.

Therefore, what this chapter has tried to argue, is that Proust was incapable of building statues of his heroes without feeling the need to throw them down immediately afterwards. Proust’s feelings regarding intellectual admiration are, as we will come to see in future chapters, very similar to his feelings towards love, as they both constituted a threat which demanded of him an immediate and violent reaction.

¹⁸⁹ “I hate Wilde (or better yet, I don’t know him)” (*Correspondance*, XVIII, 268).

¹⁹⁰ On that topic, cf. Rivers (1983), 64.

¹⁹¹ Cf. Tadié (2001), 124 and III, 387.

Chapter 11

Tribal Violence and Saint-Loup

In *Violence and the Sacred*, René Girard argues that violence spreads speedily beyond man's control. For that reason, in order to appease their vengeful necessities and avoid the dangerous contamination and escalation of violence, primitive tribes chose, for their sacrifices, animals which in some way resembled themselves and were close to them, so they could replace the actual source and reason of the violent impulse¹⁹². For Girard, sacrificial rites have nothing to do with guilt or innocence but with protecting the community from outspreads of violence, therefore requiring a 'degree of misunderstanding' (Girard (2013), 6). The victim must be similar enough to the true object towards which the violence is in fact aimed, in order to replace it, but not so similar that the person who is tainted with violent impulses becomes aware of this system, therefore requiring a degree of self and communitarian illusion.

As such, sacrifice is not some sort of irrational behavior or based on blind idolatry, but something fundamental for the survival of small tribes so that they may avoid untamed violence. It is violence without the risks of vengeance. "If left unappeased, violence will accumulate until it overflows its confines and floods the surrounding area. The role of sacrifice is to stem this rising tide of indiscriminate substitutions and redirect violence to 'proper' channels" (Girard (2013), 10). Yet, if the agents of sacrifice become entirely aware of this mechanism, it will become unsatisfactory and fall apart, losing its effectiveness.

Proust seems to try to reproduce this Girardian scheme of sacrifice in his work, in a way that complements the argument we have tried to put forward in the chapters devoted to sadomasochism. The world is, for him, a place of untamed, savage violence and, so, he tries to introduce some order to the chaos through ritual sacrifices¹⁹³. Describing it in

¹⁹² René Girard quotes Joseph de Maistre on this subject: "the sacrificial animals were always those most prized for their usefulness: the gentlest, most innocent creatures, whose habits and instincts brought them most closely into harmony with man... From the animal realm were chosen as victims those who were, if we might use the phrase, the most *human* in nature" (Girard (2013), 4). Naturally, in some more fearful societies or in those societies where the need for vengeance was more palpable, animals could be replaced by actual people on the margins of the community, such as, for instance, young virgin girls.

¹⁹³ The Montjouvain scene, already analyzed in detail, is a perfect example of a scene that, read under the light of Girard's tribal theory, allows us a different perspective over the novel. From a Girardian perspective, in this scene, Mlle. Vinteuil would be, just like a tribe sacrificing goats, looking for a way to channel and restrict the pain she felt over the death of her father into a circumscribed, controlled environment, so that she could spare herself from the rage and despair that came her way due to the

terms he is able to control and define brings some relief to the pain life chaotically imposes upon him. Then, he is set free from the violence both life and other people impose upon him by carrying out small but strategic revenges in his *oeuvre*. Just like the tribes killed animals to get rid of the threat of unappeased violence, Proust built characters who resembled those he wanted to exorcize in his work, not allowing them to be exact reproductions of their models so the scheme wouldn't be so blatant it would lose all its efficiency. Nonetheless, similarly to those fearful tribes who resorted to people on the fringes of their community when animals were not enough to appease their need for blood, in many occasions, Proust needed to bring model and character to the same scene of *À La Recherche* so that he could better obtain the revenge he needed¹⁹⁴.

Leo Bersani has described the process of writing *À La Recherche* as the “effort to erase, repeat and redeem life” (Bersani (1994), 861) and Proust himself recognized, on different occasions, the redemptive quality of literature and this way of pacifying himself by expelling his faults towards his creations.

One of the many instances of Proust's acknowledgment regarding this therapeutic side of literature occurs in the epigraph used in “Fragments de Comédie Italienne”, where Emerson is quoted saying: “and as crabs, goats, scorpions, the balance and the waterpot lose their meanness when hung as signs of the zodiac, so I can see my own vices without heat in (...) distant persons”¹⁹⁵. Here, through Emerson's voice (the voice of a distant person), Proust is saying that things which would tend to scare him are no longer to be feared if they are placed in the characters he created instead of in himself or in those around him.

guilt of imagining herself to be the cause of M. Vinteuil's death. Similarly, Proust, by portraying himself, in a way, as Mlle. Vinteuil and by portraying his mother as M. Vinteuil, appears to also be channeling pain and sorrow to a place where they are molded to fit his own terms, thus reducing them to endurable dosages.

¹⁹⁴ It is always important to stress that it would be a serious mistake to assume things occur in *À La Recherche* for only one easily explainable reason like the one suggested above. Therefore, taking this argument as truthful should not, in any way, discard, for example, the validity of Painter's explanation for the proximity between models and characters that was pointed out earlier in the previous chapter. It would be an even worse misreading to assume it suggests that *À La Recherche* should be read as simply an exercise of self-therapy on Proust's part or that these scenes should be faced as being orchestrated exclusively so that Proust could obtain revenges from his contemporaries or, even more generally, to bring order back into chaos. The discussion this chapter tries to raise is just about a small ingredient of what composes both *À La Recherche* and the scenes here discussed. Confounding the ingredient with the whole recipe would make of our argument a Sainte-Beuvian one and of *À La Recherche* a neglectable novel. Two ideas that are infinitely distant from the goal and purpose of what follows.

¹⁹⁵ The quotation is extracted (and, near the end, slightly abridged to match Proust's version of it) from Emerson's “History” (Emerson, 124).

Proust seems to have understood this structural model of sacrifice early on in his life, since in *Les Plaisirs et les Jours* we already find him writing, in a segment of “Les Regrets, Rêveries Couleur du Temps” called “Présence Réelle”, about someone loved who is felt as present despite being physically absent:

There is, in an isolated inn, a book where [travelers] write their names. I wrote mine and, side by side, a combination of letters which was an allusion to yours, because it was then impossible for me not to offer myself material proof of the reality of your spiritual vicinity. By putting a little bit of you in that book, it seemed to me that I was relieving myself of all the haunting weight with which you suffocated my soul (*P&J*, 201)

This traveler’s book, in which the narrator of “Présence Réelle” writes the name of his loved one, is in certain aspects a prefiguration of *À La Recherche*. It is of course somehow striking to find Proust here announcing a scheme many optimistic readers have found in the novel: that of making the character’s name a combination of letters of the actual person the character was modelled on, basing these theories on the rather imperfect example of Alfred Agostinelli and Albertine Simonet’s name similarity. But what is most impressive in this passage is finding an allusion to the possibility of, by writing a person’s name in a book, obtaining both proof of his proximity and relief from the oppression such person imposes.

Even though this form of exorcism was not sufficiently explored by Proustian criticism, Edmund White found a very interesting example of this pattern of behavior in *Jean Santeuil*. According to White, “already in *Jean Santeuil*, Proust was ridding himself of Hahn by writing about him, since for Proust to paint the verbal picture of a friend was to give him the kiss-off” (White, 62), alluding, of course, to Jean’s friendship with his best friend, Henri de Réveillon, which in many ways echoed the one Proust had with Reynaldo Hahn.

Yet, when taking *Jean Santeuil* and that specific relationship in the novel as a case-study, it is the chapter on Jean’s quarrel with his parents that allows us to more deeply penetrate into this structure. The story can be summarized in a few lines: Jean had been invited by Henri de Réveillon to dine at the Réveillon’s place. He initially refuses because he had planned to spend the night away on an evening of debauchery with a couple of his schoolmates and three girls. However, he repents, decides not to meet his friends, and accepts the invitation for a quiet dinner, so that he could finally start being a good son. While this is going on, Jean’s mother gets a visit from Jean’s professor, who wrongly imagined Réveillon to be leading her son to this bohemian lifestyle instead of

being the one trying to persuade him not to go. The professor claims that Réveillon was the stronger of the two and found amusement in preventing Jean from focusing on his studies. Thus, when Jean happily tells his mother he will have dinner alone with Henri at the Réveillon's, already warned by her house staff he was planning not to spend the night in, she "takes the word *alone* to mean *without his parents, in the company of loose women, preparatory to a night of orgy*", instead of meaning just a night enjoying "the innocent pleasure, the virtuous delight, of serious conversation with a dear friend" (*Santeuil*, 414), and demands that Jean ceases meeting his friend at once.

Unlike what would happen in *À La Recherche*, in *Jean Santeuil* the main character is very often stopped from becoming the person he intends to be, not due to the famous Proustian lack of will but to misunderstandings like the one described above, which transfer the responsibility of the way his life was led away from him, pointing it in the direction of a cruel demiurge who appears to obtain pleasure in frustrating Jean's pure intentions.

Proust also seems to be trying to re-describe a crucial moment of his early years. When he was seventeen, Proust's mother forbade him to see Jacques Bizet. Proust had been for quite some time, rather explicitly, trying to convince Jacques Bizet to have sexual intercourse with him and so Mme. Proust, probably aware of the fact, asked Proust to break off the relationship with his classmate. In the episode of Jean's quarrel, Proust is therefore rearranging his whole childhood episode, making it a mere misunderstanding and defining his friendship with Bizet as an innocent pleasure, not leading him into but away from a bohemian (yet, of course, heterosexual) life. Furthermore, in this anecdote, Proust once again refuses to allow his alter ego to be perceived as occupying a subalternate position in relation to his friend. When his professor suggests Réveillon, being from a higher social class, "can always dominate him"¹⁹⁶ (*Santeuil*, 413), he is immediately refuted by the facts, since this idea is based purely on a wrong interpretation of the available information.

In *The Fictions of Life and of Art*, Bersani presents an argument worth analyzing closely in order to shed some light on our claims, which will nonetheless be the exact opposite of Bersani's. Bersani argues that

a gap or discrepancy in a novel between the narrator's analysis or description of a character and the language and behavior of that character may undermine the reader's illusion of

¹⁹⁶ In the original text, we actually read something slightly different from the English version, as Jean's teacher says "*c'est un jeu pour lui, et il a facilement raison de votre fils qui est faible*".

reading about a real human being (...) since the characters of a novel exist for the reader only as verbal description, certain tensions in these verbal portraits can easily 'kill' the characters. The omniscient author, for example, who claims to analyze his characters accurately, but whose characters speak and act in ways that contradict the narrative analyses, can destroy our belief in his characters' reality (Bersani (2013), 124-5)

It is not easy to follow Bersani's reasoning here. The discrepancy between the way a character acts and talks and the narrator's description of it should give life to the character instead of 'killing' it. By escaping the narrator's jurisdiction, the characters are, as Jesus did with Thomas, showing us their nail marks so we can run our fingers through them in order to believe they actually existed and are not something born from the narrator's imagination. And it is crucial for Proust that it is so. Through these discrepancies, Proust is not killing the characters but the people who served to model them. He is killing the outer world and resurrecting it in his novel, just like he did with Mme. Van Blarenberghe, creating thus the illusion that characters roam free inside the narrative he built for them. He is persuading the reader that these characters are, as a matter of fact, real people and he is unable to tame them, while still remaining in control of everything. Proust claims, in "La Mort des Cathédrales", that the power of a great artist, such as Ruskin, is the ability to destroy something like St. Mark's Cathedral and rebuild it so that when we look at the Cathedral, we see only Ruskin himself. Proust's power, being one of those great artists he talks about, is to do precisely that with his world, which he destroys and resurrects in *À La Recherche*, so we can look at it only through Proust's eyes. Thus, Proust is now capable of refashioning it to decide the way people behave, giving them an illusory freedom while holding on tight to the bridles he uses to guide them exactly where he wants them to go¹⁹⁷.

This method of transferring violence into a safe and controlled environment, where it is redirected to proper channels without overflowing, according to Girard's suggestion, was already noticed, even if not sufficiently developed, first by J. E. Rivers, in *Proust and the Art of Love*, and then by Julia Kristeva, in *Le Temps Sensible*.

Regarding the sadomasochistic scene of *Le Temps Retrouvé*, Kristeva considered, somehow simplistically, that Proust was "exorcising Proust's own sadomasochism" (Kristeva, 126) and Vermeer's scene with the little patch of yellow wall remits to the

¹⁹⁷ Bersani himself wrote something that helps this argument, in *A New History of French Literature*, when, after quoting a crucial passage of *À La Recherche* regarding this idea ("all those men and women who had revealed some truth to me and who were now no more, appeared again before me, and it seemed as though they had lived a life which had profited only myself, as though they had died for me"), he adds: "the putting to death permits the resurrection of others as redemptive truths" (Bersani (1994), 862).

luminous patch in the madeleine episode, which might have been a way for Proust to show he was able to do something Bergotte could not¹⁹⁸.

Rivers maintains that “when in *À La Recherche* Proust endows the dashing and debonair Saint-Loup with homosexual tastes, he is on one level perhaps compensating, in the conscious fantasies and waking dreams of art, for the erotic male devotion he sought, but never found, among his own aristocratic friends” (Rivers (1983), 73). Rivers goes even further when discussing an episode described in Marcel Plantevignes’ memoirs of Proust. If we take this testimony as true, Proust claimed he had the intention of fighting a duel against Plantevignes’ father in Cabourg, because Marcel Plantevignes had admitted to a girl he knew that Proust was a homosexual¹⁹⁹. Plantevignes correctly argues that this scene was very similar to the letter Charlus wrote to Aimé (III, 380-382) and J.E. Rivers sustains that the episode would be reproduced in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, when Charlus swears he will duel with two imaginary regiment officers who allegedly whispered that the Baron and Morel had a relationship (III, 451-460). Furthermore, the story is also analogous to numerous conversations Charlus had with Marcel, and which always leave Marcel rather confused regarding what he is being told by the Baron (I, 581-592). Proust, just like Charlus and Marcel, never explicitly states what happened but suggests it is a very serious matter, one he will take to the last consequences. Thus, Rivers rightly claims that “through characters such as Charlus, [Proust] analyzes his own aspirations and thereby shows that he has little need of an armchair or professional psychoanalysis” (Rivers (1983), 43).

Yet, it is often hard to take some of Proust’s contemporaries seriously (particularly Marcel Plantevignes) when they share souvenirs of Proust, like the one above, due to the strength of Proust’s creation, which in many ways has shaped the way his acquaintances recalled and described the stories they shared with Proust. While reading the reminiscences of episodes and conversations his acquaintances had with him, we immediately sense that the tone conferred to the memories is owed not to those Parisians but to Proust himself. The stories are not narrated as we are used to having stories of the past being told to us, but as just another episode of *À La Recherche*. We are not hearing the Comtesse de Noailles, Marcel Plantevignes, or Céleste Albaret talking about Proust

¹⁹⁸ “The notion of death (...) was already evoked, and associates the disappearance of that anti-Proust, represented by the writer Bergotte, to the impossibility of bringing back to life a childhood memory” (Kristeva, 5).

¹⁹⁹ Cf. Plantevignes, pp. 98-114.

but a second-rate Proust talking about Marcel. While trying to find a way to carve *À La Recherche* out of his own world, Proust was simultaneously making of the world he inhabited something carved out of *À La Recherche*, something which could only be described through the vocabulary of his own novel. He was expanding his fiction out into Paris, out into France, out into anywhere he went, thus escalating his range of influence and control to such an extent that he himself came to be defined in the terms he chose, controlling up to an extraordinary extent the way his life was discussed and permitting him to live the perfect ironist's life, according to Rorty, one which guaranteed that the "last of his final vocabularies, at least, was wholly *his*" (Rorty, 97).

Chapter 12

A Novel of Revenges

During a conversation with Swann, we find Mme. Cottard praising Machard, who she considers a better painter than Biche, also known as Elstir. The argument Mme. Cottard uses in Machard's favor is that "the most important thing about a portrait, especially when it's going to cost ten thousand francs, is that it should be like, and an agreeable likeness" (I, 369). This idea of a flattering similarity with life and with Proust himself is, as this chapter will suggest, omnipresent in *Jean Santeuil*. It is precisely Proust's constant attempt to enhance his position in the world through fiction that led *Jean Santeuil*, as René Girard convincingly argues, to be neglected by both Proust himself and by posterity in general, since it became a failed exercise of self-delusion more than a novel, properly speaking.

In "La Conversion Proustienne", Girard claims that Jean Santeuil is the perfect personification of Freud's notion of narcissism. Everything in the novel revolves around him and around his remarkable rise within the Parisian aristocracy. He is the center of a world in which he unfailingly triumphs. As Girard puts it,

Jean Santeuil is very interested in himself, in the effect he has over others; and that is always the best effect in the world... apart from some snobbish and sorrowful souls who become green with envy of his success. Jean Santeuil made the experience of desire (...) but his desire never goes beyond the enchanted circle of which he is the center. The young girl with whom he falls in love belongs to the same circle as him; she has the same refined tastes, the same idealist aspirations (Girard (1978), 415-6)

Jean's narcissism seems to be, from our perspective, just an argumentative strategy and a way for both Jean and Proust to regain some control over their lives. By transforming himself into someone self-sufficient and absolutely triumphant, Proust is merely persuading others to desire him, to see him under this flattering light. He is trying to conform reality to his own terms, almost as if, by creating this pleasant resemblance with life, he could force life to behave as he intended it to²⁰⁰.

For Girard, the main difference between *Jean Santeuil* and *À La Recherche* is that in the latter the focus is no longer on Proust's alter ego²⁰¹. Jean (now Marcel) is not the

²⁰⁰ This argumentative strategy, which consists in telling a story so that Proust could persuade his readers to perceive him in a certain way, is central for the comparison between Rousseau and Proust that will be established in the next chapter.

²⁰¹ For the purpose of this chapter, we will unproblematically assume Jean and Marcel (and Honoré) to be alter egos of Proust. This is, obviously, a very simple solution for a rather complex problem. But

source of truth. This allows the novel to explore the possibility of that source being elsewhere outside this ‘enchanted circle of which he is the center’. Marcel’s search will lead him to conclude that there is no place where truth and beauty hide, that they were concealed inside himself all along but are not absolute, since they depend on a perspective which is revealed through a confluence of paths. The apothecic tone of *Jean Santeuil* is replaced by a more cautious and restrained one, since, at the end of the novel, as we will claim in the last chapter, Marcel doesn’t find the glorious and celestial path to Truth and Beauty, but simply a life-jacket which allows him to better endure the storm. Girard argues that, when he wrote *Jean Santeuil*, Proust had not yet obtained any success in the Parisian high society and was, therefore, projecting (and thus, he hoped, anticipating) how it would feel to attain what he most desired, transferring it from reality into fiction. Proust’s reasoning here is, hence, very close to Marcel’s when he intended to seduce Mme. de Stermaria, so that he could somehow deceive himself into believing he had visited Brittany just by having had sex with a native:

We begin to isolate, to identify what we love, we try to procure it for ourselves, if only by a stratagem. Then, in the absence of our vanished faith, costume fills the gap, by means of a deliberate illusion. I knew quite well that within half an hour of home I should not find myself in Brittany. But in walking arm in arm with Mme. de Stermaria in the dusk of the island, by the water’s edge, I should be acting like other men who, unable to penetrate the walls of a convent, do at least, before enjoying a woman, clothe her in the habit of a nun (II, 681)

In 1909, however, when he finally started writing *À La Recherche*, he had already been “near enough to the things and people that have appeared to us from a distance to be beautiful and mysterious, to be able to satisfy ourselves that they have neither mystery nor beauty” (II, 300). Girard perfectly summarizes this idea about *Jean Santeuil* when he concludes “La Conversion Proustienne” by writing that “desire sells the sacrificial bear’s skin before killing it” (Girard (1978), 420).

Although we will have some reservations regarding Girard’s description of *À La Recherche*, he certainly seems very accurate in what *Jean Santeuil* is concerned. To distinguish both *À La Recherche* from *Jean Santeuil* and Girard’s opinion of the novels from the one we will present herein, it is useful to take a closer look at Girard’s analysis of the scenes in both novels where Proust’s alter ego goes to the theater, as they can be

it is a solution that, due to the scope of this particular argument, we find satisfying and that doesn’t raise, we believe, significant problems to the scenes analyzed. It should be stressed, however, that we should not generalize and reduce both these characters merely to portraits of Proust.

seen as the perfect introduction to our own argument and the differences between our suggestions and the ones made by Girard, even if our argument has been in many ways influenced by Girard's.

In both cases, there is a theatrical performance that is completely ignored by an audience more focused on the boxes and the aristocratic people sitting in them. In *Jean Santeuil*, Jean is amongst those aristocrats and sees his glory recognized by a former king of Portugal, who fixes the knot of his tie as a token of friendship. Furthermore, "to complete the scene, the enemies of the protagonist (...) witness his success from afar" (Girard (1978), 419). Girard certainly has a point when he argues that "nowhere [in *À La Recherche*] do we find that perfectly circular economy of a desire which, self-nourishing itself and regurgitating so to speak, will never suffer, thence, any 'loss', perfectly corresponding to the Freudian notion of intact narcissism" (Girard (1978), 419). He adds that this 'intact narcissism' only appears to be found, briefly, in the novel, in characters and communities to whom Marcel has no access to. Yet, it is rather reductive to see Marcel as a scientist of human desire, drastically differing from Jean Santeuil, as someone who only describes the structure of desire, without any personal investment. The theater scene in *À La Recherche* shows us precisely that Girard's idea that Marcel has seen and acknowledged the vanity of human desire is not completely accurate, that it is not an absolute truth that "as soon as the narrator manages to get himself invited to the Guermantes', as soon as that obstacle is no longer there for him, desire vanishes" (Girard (1978), 420).

Unlike Jean, Marcel is sitting amongst the common people, in the stalls, looking up to the gods and demi-gods sitting above him. Yet, just like Jean, he will have his victory; right at the end of the episode he will be identified by the major goddess as belonging to Olympus, as being the victim of an avoidable and embarrassing mistake regarding his identity, a mistake that had him confused with a mortal. While looking at the Duchesse of Guermantes, who had been described as the most sublimely beautiful person attending Berma's performance, his eyes meet hers; this leads to an anagnorisis which couldn't be described in more enthusiastic terms:

The Duchess, goddess turned woman, and appearing in that moment a thousand times more lovely, raised towards me the white-gloved hand which had been resting on the balustrade of the box and waved it in token of friendship; my gaze was caught in the spontaneous incandescence of the flashing eyes of the Princess, who had unwittingly set them ablaze merely by turning her head to see who it might be that her cousin was thus greeting; and

the latter, who had recognized me, poured upon me the sparkling and celestial shower of her smile. (II, 358)

One of the major differences between the two scenes is that Proust seems to have understood that the way he initially portrayed his success was hard to believe. He had to accept some concessions so that he could still obtain a final victory. In between the two novels, Proust realized he would never be able to make a character as triumphant as Jean Santeuil credible to his readers and, so, he realized he would have to accept some losses. Instead of winning all the time, he would win only those battles he couldn't afford to lose (and the death of his mother comes immediately to mind)²⁰².

It is true that Marcel is consistently more aware of the vanity and changeability of desire than Jean, as well as of how the objects he projected his desires upon unvaryingly fail to hold on to their mystery and beauty:

The evening on which I rose from my bed of sickness and set out to see a picture by Elstir or a mediaeval tapestry in some country house or other was so like the day on which I ought to have set out for Venice, or that on which I had gone to see Berma or left for Balbec, that I felt in advance that the immediate object of my sacrifice would leave me cold after a very short while (...) I discerned in the instability of its object the vanity of my effort, and at the same time its immensity (II, 345)

Still, he cannot abandon the enchantment those objects had once made him feel. He will never stop admiring Elstir and Berma, he will never stop recalling with tenderness and longing the time he had spent in Balbec and Venice (even if that time was mostly spent in despair), and he will never stop seeing the Duchesse as a goddess, despite acknowledging her vanity. So, the triumph he obtains that evening in the theater won't ever completely lose its enchantment, which is perhaps why the episode ends brusquely after the Duchesse hails Marcel.

Knowing Proust, we would expect that after having met this success (which would some time later be confirmed by an invitation for him to attend the Guermantes' *soirées*), Marcel would call the importance of what had just happened into question. The usual Marcel would ask himself if that greeting was, in fact, directed at him, wondering if it was not aimed at someone right behind him; he would speculate if this was not the acknowledgment of his true hidden value but simply a concession to the plebs. The Marcel we will become accustomed to during the novel wouldn't miss the opportunity of

²⁰² This idea will be further explored in the next chapter.

relating this salutation to the description made a few pages prior, of the way the Prince of Saxe talked with a servant. Marcel explains that

the nobleman, affable and mild, gave the impression of considering, of practicing an affectation of humility and patience, a pretense of being just an ordinary member of the audience, as a prerogative of his good breeding (...) thus [dissembling] behind a smile overflowing with good nature the inaccessible threshold of the little world apart which he carried in his person (II, 337)

but he will refuse to raise the possibility of the Duchesse's greeting being just a variation of the way the Prince talked with this servant, thus in no way abridging the gap between their different worlds. He will hold on firmly to it and immediately change the subject, ending the narrative of the evening he went to see Berma for the first time.

Girard is right when he claims that most of Jean Santeuil's characteristics were transferred to Legrandin. We could also add that the strategy of turning his life into a 'circle of which he is the center' is very similar, as we will come to see, to the strategy used by aunt Léonie²⁰³. But what cannot be neglected is that Legrandin, like aunt Léonie, and like many of the characters in the novel, is in several aspects an exorcizing portrait of Proust, and just another way for Marcel to describe himself²⁰⁴.

Having acknowledged the umbilical relation between *Jean Santeuil* and *À La Recherche*, it would now be important to take a closer look at the former, since according to our argument, *À La Recherche* can in a number of respects be read as a subtler *Jean Santeuil*, with considerably more *sprezzatura*. Hence, *Jean Santeuil* will hopefully show us, in a more blatant fashion, patterns we would otherwise struggle to discern in *À La Recherche*.

George Painter points out what we claim to be the most significant difference between the two novels, explaining that the failure of Proust's first attempt was due to a lack of sense of humor and an ironic attitude towards himself:

The Comic Spirit, which is almost entirely absent from *Les Plaisirs et les Jours* and *Jean Santeuil*, arrives in full force in the parodies, and is ever-present in *À La Recherche*, not only in the Narrator's view of the characters and the laws of human frailty which they reveal, but in his ironic attitude to himself, by which Proust redeemed the self-complacency and self-pity which had ruined *Jean Santeuil* (Painter, 421)

²⁰³ Cf. Chapter 14.

²⁰⁴ In *Philosophy of the Novel*, Descombes describes the relation between Legrandin and Marcel, stating that "in *Remembrance* Legrandin (among others) is Marcel seen from the outside at a certain period of his life, whereas Marcel at the same period is Legrandin seen from the inside" (Descombes, 203).

Thus, he would have understood the importance of recognizing his failures and shortcomings to build a believable portrait of himself that could allow him to exorcize his own demons. Painter himself, who went so far as to describe *Jean Santeuil* as a ‘novel of revenges’ (Painter, 59), refers to the two novels as a part of Proust’s attempt to exorcize his own life, pointing out that he was unsuccessful in *Jean Santeuil* due to how improbable his self-descriptions were at that time²⁰⁵.

In *Jean Santeuil*, Proust never fails to humiliate any character that slightly disturbs Jean’s triumphal march. Perhaps the best and funniest example is found in the episode with the Vicomte de Lomperolles. The Vicomte despises youth, particularly the young boys of Jean’s generation, and has no intention of hiding his scorn. Regarding Jean, the Vicomte tells the Duchesse de Réveillon that “he may be a little less stupid than the rest of ‘em, but what’s one to think of a young fellow like that who suffers from insomnia and cries at the least thing? He’s not a man at all, he’s no better than a little girl [*une vraie femme*]” (*Santeuil*, 677). As we would expect in *Jean Santeuil*, the description of the Vicomte which follows is absolutely exaggerated and humiliating, thus allowing Jean to obtain his revenge simply through the coldness of the facts:

Jean was struck by the fact that Monsieur de Lomperolles’ wig looked shorter than when he had last seen him. Monsieur de Lomperolles guessed what was in his mind. ‘You think I’m not in looks this evening, eh?’ half smirking, half grumbling, ‘that’s because I had my hair cut yesterday.’ Jean learned later that he possessed forty wigs each slightly longer than the others. As soon as he had worn the longest, he replaced it without even the briefest of intervals, by the shortest in order to give the impression that his hair had been cut. From that moment, to make believe that his hair was growing again, he appeared each day, for forty days, with a different and slightly longer wig (*Santeuil*, 498)

It is true that Proust is not particularly generous with the characters Marcel dislikes in *À La Recherche* either. Yet, there is one particular episode which allows us to understand the change occurred between *Jean Santeuil* and *À La Recherche*, when we are told the Verdurins, in many aspects even more ridiculous than the Vicomte de Lomperolles, secretly helped Saniette monetarily. In moments like this, we understand that *À La Recherche*’s characters are composed of many diverse aspects, not being merely punching bags from which Proust obtains his revenges, but people capable of some kind of redemption. In *À La Recherche*, we never find the simple Manichean divisions which

²⁰⁵ “The origins of this central event in *À La Recherche* must be sought deeper, in the otherwise unknown humiliation which Proust endeavored unsuccessfully to exorcize in the most deplorable chapters of *Jean Santeuil*” (Painter, 568). Painter here assumes, abstrusely, that any episode of Proust’s fiction must necessarily have a correspondence in his biography, even if we fail to figure out that connection. On this subject, cf. Chapter 15.

are omnipresent in *Jean Santeuil*. It is often clear there are characters Proust and Marcel openly dislike (to be fair, almost every character in the novel) and characters towards whom they are sympathetic. Nonetheless, when we are told of the Verdurins' philanthropy, we become aware that there is no clear demarcation establishing that people who are nice to Marcel are genuinely good, honorable and smart, while those who bring him some harm are evil, ridiculous characters. In *À La Recherche*, people Marcel sympathizes with do unspeakable things (Oriane's refusal to allow her employee to leave after work so he could go meet his fiancée, with no apparent reason besides opposing his intentions, provides us a good example) and people he despises, like the Verdurins, have moments of absolute virtue like the one mentioned above.

Girard's idea of Marcel as someone who had become immune to desire, like some kind of ethereal god, can be compared to Jean's initial reasoning on the visit he makes to Mme. Lawrence along with his friend Henri. Before entering Mme. Lawrence's house, he was informed this lady was a snob and kept M. de Ribeumont as a lover. Tactfully, Jean "had been careful to empty his mind of three phrases in particular - *snob, loose conduct, Monsieur de Ribeumont*" (*Santeuil*, 735). Yet, as soon as they arrive to her house, Mme. Lawrence starts to, completely off-topic, praise the virtues of her lover, M. de Ribeumont, while criticizing Mme. Marmet for being a snob and for her unacceptably loose conduct. Having heard all this, Jean, acting like Girard, was prepared to conclude that Mme. Lawrence was the victim of malicious rumors, since "one has only to hear her castigating those failings in others to realize how far she is from being guilty of them herself" (*Santeuil*, 736). However, at the end of the episode Jean reaches a more reasonable conclusion than Girard's. He understands that "once started on the slippery slope, Madame Lawrence must have known she was lying when she spoke as she did about the Duchesse de Réveillon and Monsieur de Ribeumont. But that kind of lying had become sweet to her, for those who love, love to talk of what they love" (*Santeuil*, 737).

Marcel is, thus, so obsessive (and so obsessively cold) when analyzing snobbery that we cannot help but feel he is, in this particular aspect, very similar to Mme. Lawrence herself, talking about something very dear to his heart, loving to talk of what he loves.

Regarding this similarity we find between Proust's two novels, there is one final commentary to be made. In *Jean Santeuil*, the character who, so to speak, occupies the space of Albertine (even if being considerably less important in the novel than Albertine) is called Françoise. This name will reappear often in Proust's *oeuvre* prior to *À La Recherche*. Honoré, Proust's alter ego in *Les Plaisirs et Les Jours*, is, in "La Fin de la

Jalousie”, in love with a character named Françoise. The name of the girl confessing her sins in ‘Avant La Nuit’, for whom the narrator of the story has an at least platonic love²⁰⁶, is also called Françoise. In 1900, Proust wrote a dialogue dedicated to Robert de Flers, where we find a young man talking with a girl at night. The scene is very similar to episodes in *À La Recherche* in which Marcel tries to persuade Albertine to love him by hinting he is in love with somebody else (very similar to the scene in which Marcel convinces Albertine to come and live with him in Paris, after she informed Marcel of her former intimacy with Mlle. Vinteuil). The characters of this dialogue are called Henri and, unsurprisingly, Françoise. Françoise is also the name of Proust’s character in the epistolary novel he started writing with Robert de Flers²⁰⁷.

It is therefore revealing that Proust transferred to the kitchen of *À La Recherche* the name he used far more often for the lovers of his main characters. He seems to be thus obtaining a revenge over his past, showing us that what used to be the center of his work, the best part of it, is now a small ingredient of his much more relevant novel, and proving to us that he had, in fact, evolved. Pointing out the difference between what he has done so far and what he is now prepared to do, he also takes the opportunity to ridicule his own past self by personifying it in the petty, narrow-minded housemaid of aunt Léonie. Also letting us know that he finally found the right place for his Françoise, and that the passions he was so obsessively describing in his early writings could be found in the struggles of romantic love but also in the kitchens of Combray.

This frequent attitude towards what was once important to him is already present in *Jean Santeuil*. The girl Jean Santeuil first falls in love with, Marie Kossichef, is later on presented in the novel in a new and humiliating perspective. She is now no longer the “little Russian girl, with a mass of black hair, bright mocking eyes and rosy cheeks, who possessed all the glowing vitality and joy of living, which were so sadly lacking in Jean” (*Santeuil*, 216), but an irrelevant snob, willing to do anything to climb up the social ladder,

²⁰⁶ “I loved you with an affection in which no hope of carnal pleasure unsettled the sensitive sagacity” (*P&J*, 249).

²⁰⁷ In the recently published anthology of Proust’s unpublished short stories, *Le Mystérieux Correspondant et Autres Nouvelles Inédites*, we also find a Françoise, precisely in “Le Mystérieux Correspondant”. There, Proust tells the story of a lesbian woman dying of a nervous disease caused by a star-crossed love for her best-friend, a married woman. Curiously, according to the manuscripts, Proust was never able to decide which of the characters was called Françoise and which was called Christiane, even if Luc Fraisse decided, reasonably, that Françoise was the married woman who, for moral reasons, rejects the sick Christiane. Yet, Proust would also add to this short story an unfinished variant in which Françoise becomes a widow and falls in love with a handsome captain called Honoré, even before having first met him.

someone who had nothing to offer Jean that he might be 'so sadly lacking'. Jean finds her, years later, in Mme. Marmet's reception. Mme. Marmet is someone Jean unwillingly visits, since she is below his standards. Marie approaches Jean, who pretends to remember her only vaguely. She, on the other hand, like her own mother, looks at Jean as someone above her, someone she would be lucky to have on her side: "'(...) I do hope you'll come to see us. We are always at home on Sundays', said Madame Kossichief, for whom Jean's presence at an evening party in Madame Marmet's house was a sufficient passport, and a recommendation of the highest value. Jean thanked her and left" (*Santeuil*, 674).

Jean's attitude is, hence, Marcel's and Proust's. He looks at his past and recognizes himself in it, and precisely because he recognizes it, he rejects it, acting as if he was leaving it behind. Nonetheless, the movement is not as linear as one could imagine it to be, since, as Proust learned with Mme. Lawrence, the violent rejection of one's past is a way to keep it close, because 'those who love, love to talk of what they love'. Proust, therefore, sees himself in his past and deals with it the way Marcel deals with Albertine: he shoves it away so that he can keep it close to himself, and pretends to run from it so that it goes nowhere and he may act as someone freed from its influence while actually tightening up the ropes.

Thence, as this chapter tries to argue, the main difference between both novels is not an alleged immunity to desire, which Marcel had and Jean had not, nor a substantially different attitude towards life between the two of them, but, as we will go on to argue later, the verisimilitude Proust intended to confer upon his protagonists. In *Jean Santeuil*, it is crucial we take Jean's word as fact and realize there is no bridge intended between Jean's perception of the world and the world itself. This continuity, which simplifies the world by making it one with Jean's vision, is totally erased in *À La Recherche*. In the latter, we are always very aware that the person telling us the story is unreliable, both because of his various blind spots, of which he is (while Proust is not) unaware, and because of Marcel's constant recognition that he is unable to understand what was going on during the great majority of the events in his life, particularly the ones he was most interested in. Thus, in *Jean Santeuil*, due to the erasure of the difference between perception and fact (which is partially due to the novel having an external narrator), the focus is on the events narrated, our concern directed exclusively to the story being told. On the other hand, in *À La Recherche*, our attention is not focused on the episodes themselves but on the relation established between those episodes and the person who is living them and is incapable of understanding their importance. *À La Recherche* is,

therefore, not about snobbery, Paris or Albertine, but about how little Marcel, like any of us, understands his own life.

Chapter 13

The Ridiculous Thing: Rousseau and Proust

Another aspect which, from our perspective, has also not been sufficiently explored by Proustian criticism, and which allows us a better grasp of Proust's vision of literature, is the connection between *À La Recherche* and Rousseau's *Confessions*. Proust himself contributed a great deal to this neglect as in a work where he never curbs from invoking many a second-rate French writer, he refers to Rousseau only once right at the beginning, merely to mention that Marcel's grandmother first intended to offer him "Musset's poems, a volume of Rousseau, and *Indiana*" (I, 39) as a birthday present, before opting for four of George Sand's novels. Never again would Rousseau or his work be directly alluded to in the novel, which could perhaps suggest Proust was not a heavy reader of Rousseau or, at least, that he never found the French philosopher particularly relevant to his idea of literature. Even if in his correspondence Rousseau appears a little more often, he is still never more than a mere extra, being almost always named in the middle of an enumeration of French writers.

Yet, there are many moments that remind us of Rousseau's *Confessions* during the reading of *À La Recherche*.

One of the major similarities between the two was already noticed by Vincent Descombes. As stated in *The Philosophy of the Novel*, Rousseau and Proust's works are quite similar in the sense that there:

biography (...) is divided into two parts, one being the life of someone (the person) told as a series of facts, and the other the life of someone (the subject of the experience) told as a series of moments lived through or impressions. There results from this distinction a stylistic revolution of which Rousseau is fully aware. The account of the facts will have to include trivial incidents, of no worldly importance, because they are linked to decisive impressions in the series of moments lived through. What would have been considered laughable in the story of a life can acquire new gravity in the story of a soul (Descombes, 203)

What Descombes seems to be suggesting here is that, by transferring a point of view into someone's subjectivity (Jean-Jacques²⁰⁸ and Marcel's), into their own impressions, then both Rousseau and Proust are operating a stylistic revolution which

²⁰⁸ As we have done with Proust and Marcel, we will be referring in this chapter to Jean-Jacques Rousseau as Rousseau when we are dealing with the author of *Confessions* and to Jean-Jacques when dealing with his alter ego, the protagonist of *Confessions*. Yet, Rousseau's demarcation from Jean-Jacques is even more complex and harder to trace than the one that separates Marcel from Proust. We will have more to say on this subject later in the chapter.

makes the decisive moments of a narrative not the objectively relevant moments of one's life (the first kiss, the first trip abroad, the birth of one's first child, etc.), but the trivial incidents that somehow shaped the very core of who one is (the refusal of a goodnight kiss, a ticket stolen, a view of some town's steeples, etc.), the impressions which shaped the story of one's soul.

There is also an obvious similarity between the two oeuvres in the way that the protagonists recall their past. In the beginning of his *Confessions*, Jean-Jacques recalls his childhood days using a reasoning very similar to the one used by Marcel in *Le Temps Retrouvé*, as we will claim in our last chapter. When describing the time he left Bossey, Jean-Jacques states that:

More than thirty years have passed since I left Bossey without recollecting the somewhat disconnected memories of my stay there in any very agreeable way; but now that I have passed the age of maturity and am descending towards old age, I sense that it is these memories which, while others fade, grow brighter, and are imprinted on my memory with a clarity of detail that grows every day more charming and more potent. It is as though, already sensing life slipping away, I were trying to catch hold of it again at its beginnings. The least recollection of that time pleases me for the very reason it belongs to that time (Rousseau, 20)

The past is, therefore, remembered as a charming period of his life not because it in fact was, but because Jean-Jacques was now 'descending towards old age' and was feeling life irretrievably slipping away from him. This reveals a movement of looking to the past to find shelter from death, which we would also later find in the last two hundred pages of *À La Recherche*. Jean-Jacques, like Marcel, repeatedly portrays himself as someone who has lost his Eden, but what is peculiar is that, while Marcel is in fact in his Eden, he is constantly looking for ways to leave it, making us wonder if that Eden was so paradisiacal to him after all²⁰⁹.

Also, in a proto-Proustian tone, Jean-Jacques confesses his loves are always variations of an initial love: "I devoured with ardent gaze all the beautiful women I encountered. My imagination returned to them again and again, but only to deploy them in its own way, and to make of each of them another Mlle. de Lambercier" (Rousseau, 15).

²⁰⁹ Starobinski pointed in this direction when he suggested that "the *Confessions* simultaneously express nostalgia for lost unity and anxious anticipation of ultimate reconciliation" (Starobinski, 192). The charm of the past is, thus, the interest in closing a circle and finding in it a unity that doesn't allow time to penetrate it, just as happens in *À La Recherche*.

Conventional descriptions of filial love are similarly eroded in both Rousseau and Proust's work. In *À La Recherche*, as many Proustian critics have claimed and as we will also later claim in another chapter, Marcel's loves seem to derive from the initial love he had for his mother and from the moment when she refused to give him a goodnight kiss. Since Jean-Jacques' birth led to his mother's death, Jean-Jacques' relationship with his father also had some undertones of conjugal, much more than filial, love. Rousseau never refrains from showing how the typical vocabulary we use to describe a father and son relationship was inadequate to grasp their proximity. According to Jean-Jacques, his father "thought he could see my mother in me, without being able to forget that I had deprived him of her; he never caressed me without my sensing, from his sighs, from his urgent embraces, that a bitter regret was mingled with them, for which, however, they were the more tender". If the spousal side of this affection was not sufficiently explicit, Rousseau would add, a couple of lines later, that Jean-Jacques' father, in those moments of affection, seemed to be begging his son to "bring her back to me, comfort me for losing her; fill the emptiness she has left in my soul. Would I love you as much if you were only my son?" (Rousseau, 7). The confusion Jean-Jacques lived between filial and erotic love would famously reach stratospheric levels in his relationship with Mme. de Warrens, who would first adopt him, and whom Jean-Jacques would refer to as 'maman', and who would later become his lover²¹⁰.

Before describing the similarity between Rousseau and Proust that will concern us the most, it is perhaps important to stress one last point of contact uniting both works. It has to do with a claim made by Jean-Jacques in Book Four of *Confessions*, in which he

²¹⁰ On this subject, it is interesting to read the passage in which Jean-Jacques describes the moments when he was distant from Mme. de Warrens, as they immediately remind us of a typical Proustian epiphany (cf. Rousseau, 105). It is also worthy to compare the moment when Jean-Jacques explains that he avoided saying Mme. de Warrens name, since "it was as though, in speaking her name, I was revealing everything she meant to me, that my lips were betraying the secret of my heart, that I was compromising her in some way" (Rousseau, 147), with the moment when Marcel explains that, when he was in love with Gilberte, he would go to considerable lengths to make his parents pronounce Gilberte and Swann's name. Swann's name "was for ever present in my mind, which could not, however, grow accustomed to it. I analyzed it, I spelt it; its orthography came to me as a surprise. (...) The pleasure that I derived from the sound of it I felt to be so sinful, that it seemed to me as though the others read my thoughts, and changed the conversation if I tried to guide it in that direction (...) I knew that they were only words - words uttered in her absence, which she could not hear, words without virtue in themselves, repeating what were facts but powerless to modify them - it seemed to me none the less that by dint of thus manipulating, stirring up everything that had reference to Gilberte, I might perhaps elicit from it something that would bring me happiness" (I, 413). Even if the outcome is radically different (in one case, absolute silence, in the other, repetition *ad infinitum* of the loved one's name), both Jean-Jacques and Marcel confer a magical power to the name of the person they loved.

seems to be describing Proust's artistic life and, once more, his relationship with the past. Jean-Jacques explains that "if I am to portray spring, it must be winter; if I am to describe a fine landscape, I must be shut up indoors; and, as I have remarked a hundred times, I would paint liberty to the life if I were sent to the Bastille" (Rousseau, 166). As many critics have already stated, Proust's illness was instrumental for him to be able to write his novel. The passages where he writes at length about hawthorns were perhaps only made possible by his asthma, which precluded him from getting close to them; the passages where he dissertates over the salons were written when he was secluded in his own room, attended almost exclusively by Céleste Albaret; and the passages where he refers to his allegedly idyllic past were, as it was already repeatedly stated, written when he was getting closer and closer to his death. The idea of creation through distance is thus nuclear for both writers, as for both we can only articulate speech regarding the things we love when they are detached from us and seen from afar, already lost, thus allowing us to love them.

Possibly in part due to the similarity between their literary and political projects, Rousseau never refrains from attacking Montaigne in *Confessions*²¹¹. In the beginning of the book, Rousseau alludes somehow subtly to Montaigne when he explains that "it is not what is criminal that it is the hardest to reveal, but what is laughable or shameful" (Rousseau, 17). If, in this passage, the target might not be entirely perceptible, Rousseau would, on two separate occasions, allude directly to Montaigne on this exact topic. Firstly, Jean-Jacques claims that "I had always laughed at the false naivety of Montaigne, who, while pretending to confess his faults, is very careful to give himself only lovable ones" (Rousseau, 505) and, on the preface of the Neuchâtel edition of *Confessions*, later excluded from the final version of the book, Rousseau insisted that "I place Montaigne foremost among those dissemblers who mean to deceive by telling the truth. He portrays himself with defects, but he gives himself only lovable ones; there is no man that does not have odious ones. Montaigne offers us a likeness, but in profile" (Rousseau, 644). Montaigne himself seems to validate this idea when he claimed that "there is no description as difficult nor, certainly, as useful, as the description of ourselves. One has

²¹¹ Again, we find in this repudiation of writers and persons that heavily influenced Rousseau a point of connection between him and Proust, as we have already argued in the tenth chapter. It is also perhaps due to this tendency to detach himself from the things that were closest to his heart that Proust so rarely mentioned Rousseau in his work.

to comb one's hair, prepare and tidy oneself to appear in public. Now, I adorn myself ceaselessly because I describe myself ceaselessly" (Montaigne, II, 76)²¹².

Jean-Jacques, on the other hand, never shows any hesitation in confessing startling, laughable, and shameful vices. He steals, he lies, he gives out all his children to adoption but, more importantly, he masturbates ("I had learned to use that dangerous substitution which defrauds nature" (Rousseau, 106)), he shows his behind in dark alleys (we will go back to this later in this episode) and he eats food that had been in Mme. de Warrens' mouth ("one day at table, when she had just put a forkful of food into her mouth, I cried out that I had seen a hair on it; she rejected the mouthful and put it on the side of her plate, whereupon I seized it avidly and swallowed it" (Rousseau, 106)).

It is rather obvious that *Confessions* has the structure of a legal defense. Jean Starobinski, for instance, recurs often to judicial vocabulary when talking about *Confessions* ("[Rousseau] submits this evidence to his judges in the hope of winning a reversal of their verdict. Their previous judgement, he claims, was wrong" (Starobinski, 183)). In order to obtain a not guilty verdict, Rousseau often recurs to the same strategy. As Starobinski suggests, the confession of rather shocking and shameful vices is a way of becoming credible when he really wants to be persuasive: "This is of course a way of pleading not guilty: a man so confident, so unwilling to hide anything, and so ready to let his readers judge him can hardly be guilty of anything, can he?" (Starobinski, 189). Aware that he could not possibly make of his *Confessions* a credible hagiography, Rousseau decides to offer us a clear view of some of Jean-Jacques' faults so that he could be persuasive when it came to what interested him the most. In the preface of the Neuchâtel edition, Rousseau argues precisely in favor of such readings, suggesting we shouldn't doubt what he says in the end of the book due to what he wasn't afraid to confess in its beginning: "there is no vice of character whose disclosure it is not easier to make than that of a black or base action, and one may be certain that anyone who dares to admit to such an action will admit everything. Here is the harsh but sure proof of my sincerity" (Rousseau, 647)²¹³.

²¹² When quoting Montaigne, we will firstly parenthetically indicate the *essais*' volume, followed by the page number.

²¹³ In *Allegories of Reading*, Paul de Man has also denounced Rousseau's argumentative strategy: "even within the first narrative, in Book II of the *Confessions*, Rousseau cannot limit himself to the mere statement of what 'really' happened, although he is proud to draw attention to the fullness of a self-accusation whose candor we are never supposed to suspect: 'I have been very thorough in the confession I have made, and it could certainly never be said that I tried to conceal the blackness of my crime'" (de Man, 280).

The confession of a vice such as masturbation is crucial for Rousseau's (and Proust's) strategy due to its intimate and private nature. Every other vice of character Jean-Jacques confesses in *Confessions* had at least one witness or, when not, a somehow real impact on the world, and could, through a careful though unlikely investigation, be traced back to him. It is not so with masturbation. As it is usually done behind closed doors, with no one in attendance, and leaving no incriminatory evidences behind, Rousseau could be sure that no one would be able to denounce Jean-Jacques' masturbatory habits. Thus, by coming out and confessing those habits, Jean-Jacques is showing us that he would not hide all his shameful behaviors from his readers, even those he was certain of being able to conceal forever.

Marcel confesses his laughable and shameful vices as well. He never avoids picturing himself as a calculating, manipulative, selfish, spoiled young brat. From the start, the image we have of Marcel is of a ridiculous child unable to go to sleep without upsetting his entire household. As Jean-Jacques, he also masturbates in the privacy of his family house in Combray. By doing so, however, Proust is not, like Rousseau, trying to persuade us into believing in a rather complex and sadistic conspiracy theory of which he is the innocent victim²¹⁴. Proust confesses all his alter ego's shortcomings in part to confer to *À La Recherche*'s narrative a verisimilitude which, for example, *Jean Santeuil* lacked. He would thus be able to convert his world into the world of his novel, becoming capable of forcing the world to conform to the terms of the narrative he created. Marcel willingly confesses his youth's sins so that we believe in the description he will make of the years that followed²¹⁵.

In the beginning of *Confessions*, Jean-Jacques, while full of remorse, admits to have one day obtained a refund for a theater ticket that M. de Francueil had bought him and spent the money somewhere else, while M. de Francueil had to attend the show all by himself, unaware of what happened to his friend. While confessing this youthful mistake, Jean-Jacques adds that "I record it in order to demonstrate that there are moments when a man is seized by a sort of madness and should not be judged by his actions. I was not stealing this money so much as the use to which it was put; but the less it was a theft, the more it was an abomination" (Rousseau, 38).

²¹⁴ The plausibility of Rousseau's theory presented in the last sections of *Confessions* will not be discussed here.

²¹⁵ On this subject, cf. Chapter 12.

M. de Francueil's episode in *Confessions* has several aspects which are worth considering, as they shed some light over a crucial aspect of both *Confessions* and *À La Recherche*. Something that has to do with the nature of the narrative and with what exactly 'a black or base action' is within the context of a confessional narrative. By writing a book like *Confessions*, Rousseau is transferring the moral question from the acts he is confessing to the confession itself. In this kind of autobiography, the judgment being made does not so much concern the actions narrated but the fullness of its account and of the moral position Rousseau takes regarding those prior attitudes. In narratives of this sort, in a sense, the Rousseau we call into question is the narrator much more than the one whose life we are being told about and is being observed at a distance. Therefore, the alleged abomination of actions as such becomes irrelevant, since doing the right thing is telling the whole story, without finding excuses (yet regretting what is regrettable), much more than sitting in the theater balcony next to M. de Francueil²¹⁶.

Here Rousseau is also setting a demarcation between what he once was and what he is now. As in St. Augustine's *Confessions*, we are always being persuaded that the young protagonist's actions are and simultaneously are not actions of the person narrating them, that there is a young Jean-Jacques and then an old, more mature, Rousseau. Through the inclusion of a cathartic moment (more explicit, of course, in Augustine), in which the narrator finally becomes himself, we have the sense of somehow reading the story of two different people. The crudeness and detachment with which Rousseau narrates stories such as this, suggests the person who has committed those offenses no longer exists. It was someone who disappeared to make way for Rousseau. But this crudeness can also have another reading. Patrick Coleman, in the introduction he wrote to *Confessions*, claims that, if we are to understand the tone of his confession, there is a masochistic side in Rousseau that we cannot neglect. Coleman states that:

One wonders whether his motives are really as selfless as he says. In fact, some of the experiences Rousseau relates, such as the pleasure he took in being spanked, indicate that the revelation of shameful desires is for him a source of masochistic pleasure. But if this is so, then the resolution to tell everything flows not only from a determination to acknowledge his faults, not only from a sense of deeper innocence, but from another shameful desire: the desire to feel shame itself. Instead of moving from complexity to

²¹⁶ "To confess is to overcome guilt and shame in the name of truth: it is an epistemological use of language in which ethical values of good and evil are superseded by values of truth and falsehood, one of the implications being that vices such as concupiscence, envy, greed, and the like are vices primarily because they compel one to lie. By stating things as they are, the economy of ethical balance is restored and redemption can start in the clarified atmosphere of a truth that does not hesitate to reveal the crime in all its horror" (de Man, 279).

simplicity, or from confusion to clarity, the act of confession returns Rousseau, and the reader with him, to the problematic mixture of motives the *Confessions* are supposed to untangle (Rousseau, xxvi)

Believing, as there are good reasons to believe, that there is a masochistic undertone in Rousseau, the bridge separating young Jean-Jacques from Rousseau becomes a way of enhancing the suffering. The unapologetic description of episodes such as this, episodes which are inflated by Rousseau to become more abominable than they seem to have been, seems simply a way for Rousseau to make his actions unredeemable and hence obtain the pleasure he felt at being punished, in this particular case, the pleasure Rousseau felt from punishing Jean-Jacques.

Still on this subject, it would be useful to take a closer look at Rousseau's description of Jean-Jacques' exhibitionism. When confessing to have sometimes exposed himself to women in dark alleys, Jean-Jacques says that he showed himself "in the state I should like to have been in while in their company" (Rousseau, 86). Yet, immediately afterwards, he gives us more details regarding that state, saying that what he showed was not 'the obscene' ('I never even thought of that', he assures us), but the 'ridiculous thing'. Therefore, the state in which Jean-Jacques would have liked to be in was not necessarily naked, but with his behind facing those women, waiting for them to punish him the way Mlle. Lambercier used to do. This is, in a sense, his confessional position. He depicts his previous behavior exaggerating his guilt and offering no excuses for it, so that the confession of those misdemeanors could become 'a source of masochistic pleasure'. This masochistic pleasure is also enhanced by enlarging the gap separating Jean-Jacques from Rousseau. If, as stated before, while Rousseau grew old, the image he had of his past became 'more charming and more potent', by talking about what he used to be with crudeness and distance, as if that past were irretrievably lost, he would be increasing the sorrow and, therefore, increasing the pleasure he felt. But this would also mean something else. If Rousseau's confessions are his way of obtaining some masochistic pleasure while trying to condition the image his audience had of himself, then they are not confessions in any ordinary meaning of the word. Here Rousseau is not performing the act of admitting he has done something he should be ashamed or embarrassed about, but merely persuading people and trying to obtain some pleasure. This would, of course, make of the admittance of his failures and shortcomings a mere consequence of those main actions and not the action itself, the same way that when a burglar pretends to be cleaning windows in order to steal a house he is not actually cleaning those windows even if the

windows end up being cleaned in the process²¹⁷. Thus, if Rousseau's *Confessions* are no confessions at all, the narrator of the book is unreliable, since what happens throughout the narrative is not what he tried to persuade us that was going on but something else entirely.

At this point, this chapter articulates with the arguments in the previous one, where Marcel was described as an unreliable narrator, making of *À La Recherche* a novel where the reader is constantly eluded about the core of the book. Proust's novel is, therefore, not about the stories being told but about the relation those stories have with Marcel, and about how little Marcel knows of what he intended to describe.

The link uniting Rousseau and Proust on this topic is, by now, becoming rather evident. Like Rousseau, Proust would transfer his life into his fiction so that the discussion regarding his behavior would become not a moral discussion but a narrative one. And, as we have been arguing, Proust always went to great lengths to make sure he was the one setting the tone of this particular discussion. It also seems that, like Rousseau, Proust was aware of the advantages of detaching himself from his former selves, even if, in Proust's case, the sorrow that this detachment brought was not an end in itself but a path to artistic creation²¹⁸.

Finally, in order to better grasp this resemblance between both writers, it would be useful to pay attention to one of the most famous episodes of *Confessions*, calling into discussion Paul de Man's description of it. In the end of Book Two, Jean-Jacques confesses not only to have stolen a blue ribbon from a house where he was serving at the time but, more importantly, to have accused Marion, an innocent young girl, of doing it when he was caught, which led to her dismissal.

Paul de Man suggests that in Rousseau's description we find a manifestation of his masochistic desires, since, even though his actions were uncontroversially serious and wrong, we cannot help but feel there is some exaggeration in Rousseau's tone when he claims that, thanks to this episode, the poor young girl was probably condemned to a

²¹⁷ On this subject, cf. J.L. Austin's *How to do Things With Words*.

²¹⁸ Although this particular form of sorrow is, in Proust, necessary to become a writer, there is always the suggestion that, like Rousseau, Proust's alter egos obtain some pleasure through other manifestations of sorrow. Cf., for example: "And [Jean] set himself deliberately to sharpen his feeling of disappointment by letting his mind dwell upon it, to enjoy the bitterness of knowing that he had been deposited here alone without her, four hundred miles away, when all the time she might have been here with him" (*Santeuil*, 359). Cf. Chapter 15.

miserable life, even subtly suggesting the possibility of his reckless behavior having led her into prostitution and/or suicide²¹⁹. According to de Man,

What Rousseau really wanted is neither the ribbon nor Marion, but the public scene of exposure which he actually gets. The fact that he made no attempt to conceal the evidence confirms this. The more crime there is, the more theft, lie, slander, and stubborn persistence in each of them, the better. The more there is to expose, the more there is to be ashamed of; the more resistance to exposure, the more satisfying the scene, and, especially, the more satisfying and eloquent the belated revelation, in the later narrative, of the inability to reveal (de Man, 285)

However, this episode is more than a manifestation of Rousseau's masochistic impulses. Rousseau will start the narration of Marion's story by enhancing the monstrosity of his deed and its probable consequences. Nevertheless, after having told the whole story, Rousseau will offer some justifications for it and will explain to the reader how his remorse tormented him throughout all his life, so much so that "at times I am so troubled by this cruel memory, and so distressed, that I lie sleepless in my bed, imagining the poor girl advancing towards me to reproach me for my crime as though I had committed it only yesterday" (Rousseau, 84). Therefore, Rousseau is following a pattern here which is very close to Proust's heart. Rousseau is trying to inflate the wickedness of his behavior as much as he can. By doing so, he hopes this exaggeration to be felt inadequate to the deed he had done and, with the relief felt by the masochistic pleasure afforded by his sorrow, to unburden his conscience. Of course, the exorcism Rousseau is aiming at also depends on the transference of his action from the real to the literary world where, as it was argued earlier, the rules are different, and 'values of good and evil are superseded by values of truth and falsehood'. By adding this story he saw as repulsive to his *Confessions*, Rousseau seems to be trying to figure out how well this mechanism of conversion of good and evil into truth and falsehood actually works. This suggestion that, by writing his *Confessions*, Rousseau was looking for the relief brought by transferring his life from a world ruled by moral laws to a world ruled by verisimilitude, a world in which one is not judged by what one did but by what one said about what he did, is validated by Rousseau's claim that the decision to write *Confessions* was partially owed to this episode²²⁰.

²¹⁹ "I fear, too, that wretchedness and destitution were not the worst of the dangers I exposed her too. Who knows to what extremes despair and injured innocence might not, at her age, have driven her?" (Rousseau, 83).

²²⁰ "This burden, then, has lain unalleviated on my conscience until this very day; and I can safely say that the desire to be in some measure relieved of it has greatly contributed to the decision I have taken to write my confessions" (Rousseau, 84).

Still, what is particularly striking and illuminating is not that he resorts to this mechanism but its own failure. In Marion's episode, Rousseau is unable to exorcize the guilt he felt. De Man describes the failure as follows:

Some ten years later, in the Fourth Reverie, he tells the entire story all over again, in the context of a meditation that has to do with the possible 'excusability' of lies. Clearly, the apology has not succeeded in becalming his own guilt to the point where he would be allowed to forget it. It doesn't matter much, for our purpose, whether the guilt truly relates to this particular act or if the act is merely made to substitute for another, worse crime or humiliation. It may stand for a whole series of crimes, a general mood of guilt, yet the repetition is significant by itself: whatever the content of the criminal act may have been, the excuse presented in the *Confessions* was unable to satisfy Rousseau as a judge of Jean-Jacques. This failure was already partly inscribed within the excuse itself and it governs its further expansion and repetition (de Man, 283)

De Man makes two suggestions in this quote which are particularly enlightening, not only in relation to this episode, but mainly to the parallel we are trying to establish with Proust. Paul de Man raises the possibility of this episode not being important in itself but merely as a token for something else. Thus, what Rousseau is aiming at is not to necessarily exorcize the guilt he felt in this particular episode, but a more general guilt which he believes to be reducible to the Marion episode, thence allowing him to deal with his sense of guilt and shame to a more manageable extent. Rousseau believed that handling this episode properly would allow him to solve a much more general sense of guilt. Accepting de Man's suggestion would reinforce our suggestion that the importance of what is being told in *Confessions* is not so much related to the veracity of the stories but rather with Rousseau's attitude towards them. Rousseau isn't concerned with Marion but with a narrative built to make episodes like this form a representation of his life. This is precisely what Proust seems to be doing with *À La Recherche*. Taking this similarity as creditable would further prove the irrelevance of biographical readings of the novel, since the episodes shown in *À La Recherche* would be, as Marion's blue ribbon, irrelevant in themselves, being just a stepping stone for Proust to convert his life into Marcel's, into fiction, even if they actually had happened.

Finally, the idea that a failed attempt to get rid of guilt leads to repetition and expansion is nuclear in *À La Recherche*. During the novel Proust is constantly repeating and expanding patterns of behavior. Swann, Charlus and Marcel have very similar attitudes towards the people they love. Marcel behaves in the exact same way towards his mother, Gilberte, the Duchesse of Guermantes, and Albertine. As it will soon be

suggested, many characters act towards aunt Léonie in similar ways,²²¹ and the narrative even follows a predictable path from illusion to disappointment, which keeps repeating itself right to the end. Repetition in Proust seems to play a similar role to the one de Man attributes to it in Rousseau. Proust tries to compel the world to fall down into some kind of order so that it can be manageable, an effort he knows to be condemned to failure, since he knows it will perpetually be on the run, just like Albertine, Odette and Morel, escaping from his hands every time he tries to hold it close to him.

²²¹ Cf. Chapter 14.

Chapter 14

Mme. Imbert's Asparagus

In *À La Recherche*, we find many occasions in which Marcel realizes that one's behavior can only be sufficiently described by presenting a considerable number of alternatives to justify it, either because he feels unsure regarding the actual reason for his behavior, or because that behavior occurred due to several different factors, the relative weight of which is often impossible to tell²²².

The fact that it is so frequently impossible to detect the reason behind our or other people's conduct is a significant source of anxiety for both Marcel and some of the other characters in the novel, particularly when this unaccountability directly impacts the character's wellbeing, as for instance, in Marcel's case, Albertine's life without him. The world seen as this abundant confluence of different and barely traceable motivations makes it a sort of untamable animal, which the characters try their best to subjugate, although unsuccessfully, so they can convince themselves they control what is in fact leading them on. In a sense, the world of *À La Recherche* behaves like Ishmael says Moby Dick did. It allows the characters to believe they are trapping it, while it is only leading them to a place where it can more easily eat them up.

One of the most effective ways of dealing with this anxiety is the strategy used by aunt Léonie in Combray. Marcel's aunt decided never to leave "first Combray, then her house in Combray, then her bedroom, and finally her bed" (I, 48) and to live the rest of her days drinking Vichy water, taking her medicine, reading her prayer book and watching the inhabitants of Combray passing by her window. The reader, just like Marcel, is always left wondering why she enclosed herself in her room, the hypothesis of a serious illness not being definitely excluded. Yet, the first time Marcel refers to her reclusion, it is mentioned it dated since "her husband's (...) death" (I, 48). Therefore, it seems at least plausible that she chose to refrain from setting foot outside her own house in order to

²²² Among numerous possible examples, cf. "[my grandmother] would say, 'At last one can breathe!' and would trot up and down the sodden paths (...) her keen, jerky little step regulated by the various effects wrought upon her soul by the intoxication of the storm, the power of hygiene, the stupidity of my upbringing and of symmetry in gardens" (I, 11); "(...) whether because the young altar-boy did not think it necessary to display the same civility to a person by whom he supposed himself to be sufficiently well loved, or because that love annoyed him or he feared lest, if discovered, it might make him lose other opportunities. But this very coldness pleased M. Nissim Bernard, because of all that it concealed; whether from Hebraic atavism or in profanation of its Christian feeling" (III, 238).

protect herself from the world, to make sure she is never again hurt by something as unpredictable and uncontrollable as the death of a loved one²²³.

Consequently, Aunt Léonie tries to convince herself of her self-sufficiency, to persuade herself that she has within her and her immediate surroundings everything she needs to get by. Of course, by reducing her world to the bare minimum, every little thing that belongs to her life acquires extraordinary importance, as she now occupies, for herself, the place which used to be occupied by the outer world, by other people and places. This is why

in the life of complete inertia which she led, she attached to the least of her sensations an extraordinary importance, endowed them with a Protean ubiquity which made it difficult for her to keep them to herself, and, failing a confidant to whom she might communicate them, she used to promulgate them to herself in an unceasing monologue which was her sole form of activity (I, 50)

Finally, she is only able to preclude this illusion from fading away if the world outside her window reserves absolutely no surprises, if she can believe that by shutting herself in her small bedroom she is not losing or missing out on anything. As such, she will attentively supervise her window to make sure everything that happens down there is predictable and, due to that predictability, boring. Therefore, for aunt Léonie, people watching is not merely a hobby, but something she does in order to survive²²⁴. She needs to know where Mme. Imbert gets her asparagus, to whom any given dog belongs and the reason for the visit of strangers who turn out to be, thank God, only Mme. Sauton's son. When a focus of tension appears, it has to be immediately taken care of by Françoise, but when she diligently does so, Aunt Léonie takes a deep breath and admits she was worried for nothing, while knowing perfectly well the threat she had just avoided:

‘No, no; it's not worth while now; it's certainly the Pupin girl. My poor Françoise, I'm sorry to have brought you upstairs for nothing.’

But it was not for nothing, as my aunt well knew, that she had rung for Françoise, since at Combray a person whom one ‘didn't know from Adam’ was as incredible a being as any

²²³ Taking this hypothesis seriously would explain why aunt Léonie never allows her family to stay very long with her, not permitting Marcel to remain in her room for more than the time it takes him to tell her about his day and giving her a kiss (“Scarcely had I been five minutes with my aunt before she would send me away for fear that I might tire her” (I, 51)). Françoise is unproblematically allowed to stay because, despite being very competent and friendly, she is not someone that would be tremendously missed were she to die.

²²⁴ We are prevented from seeing this activity as just a way for aunt Léonie to peacefully spend her days when we are informed that when Marcel innocently told her he saw, in Combray, someone his grandfather did not know, she became ‘a little disturbed’. The misunderstanding is immediately clarified and the aunt becomes ‘calm again but slightly flushed still’. Marcel is then “warned to be more circumspect in future, and not to upset my aunt so by thoughtless remarks” (I, 57).

mythological deity, and indeed no one could remember, on the various occasions when one of these startling apparitions had occurred in the Rue du Saint-Esprit or in the Square, exhaustive inquiries ever having failed to reduce the fabulous monster to the proportions of a person whom one 'did know', either personally or in the abstract, (I, 56)²²⁵

Aunt Léonie is, evidently, a comical character. Nonetheless, she plays a central role in Proust's cosmos, as she is blatantly showing us a pattern which will be repeated throughout the novel, a pattern that is, for this reason, important to take here into consideration.

At the end of *À l'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs*, while describing the period when Marcel began his friendship with Albertine and the *jeunes filles en fleurs*, Proust describes something remarkably similar to the clever strategy used by aunt Léonie after the death of uncle Octave:

And it is, after all, as good a way as any of solving the problem of existence to get near enough to the things and people that have appeared to us beautiful and mysterious from a distance to be able to satisfy ourselves that they have neither mystery nor beauty. It is one of the systems of mental hygiene among which we are at liberty to choose our own, a system which is perhaps not to be recommended too strongly, but gives us a certain tranquility with which to spend what remains of life, and also—since it enables us to regret nothing, by assuring us that we have attained to the best, and that the best was nothing out of the ordinary—with which to *resign ourselves to death* (II, 300, my emphasis)

Contrarily to Marcel, Aunt Léonie didn't get close to things and people who appeared beautiful and mysterious. Yet, she reduced the possibilities of mystery and beauty in the world to the view she had from her window, and then spent her days persuading herself that the narrow view held no mystery or beauty at all, as she could perfectly understand and predict what she saw. Thus, she was then able to resign herself to her imminent death, which would come shortly afterwards.

The sudden appearance of someone perceived as a stranger to Combray compromises this diminishment of the world's mystery and beauty, and thus, always comes as a shock to aunt Léonie. This mechanism is explained to us again later in the novel, when Proust is referring not to aunt Léonie but to the moment when Marcel's image of his grandmother is reshaped by his arrival at a time she was not expecting him. Proust writes that:

(...) So it is when some cruel trick of chance prevents our intelligent and pious tenderness from coming forward in time to hide from our eyes what they ought never to behold, when

²²⁵ The religious undertone of this passage suggests how, for aunt Léonie, this exercise had something to do with her obsessive recitation of her prayer book. It is related with her own mortality. The next quotation in this chapter will reinforce this argument.

it is forestalled by our eyes, and they, arriving first in the field and having it to themselves, set to work mechanically, like films (II, 439)

The world of *À La Recherche* is perceived as a world of castes²²⁶. The characters belong to small, closed communities, from which it is very hard to escape (even though, in the end, like in a kaleidoscope, they turn up to get magically reorganized, in a shape no one could have predicted some years before). The establishment of these castes is enforced by the power of habit, since, despite all characters silently desiring to ascend to a superior caste, they are considerably more worried with the permeability of their own sect to external members, who could erode their routine and bring chaos to a world they have struggled so hard to tame.

Considering the dangers of facing the world's wildness unarmed, the characters understand that their best alternative is to keep this system of castes intact, trying to establish borders to separate their small communities from others at every opportunity they get. Just like Léonie, they will restrict their world to a domestic size, so that there is no chance of it getting out of hand. This idea is perfectly illustrated with the famous notion of the two *côtés*. Marcel initially thought that, from his family house in Combray, there were two separate paths which were entirely distinct, one leading to Méséglise and another to Guermantes. This separation is so insurmountable that, in Marcel's head, "to 'take the Guermantes way' in order to get to Méséglise, or vice versa, would have seemed to me as nonsensical a proceeding as to turn to the east in order to reach the west" (I, 133). Yet, Marcel will come to learn that the frontiers he had raised in his mind existed nowhere else and that Méséglise and Guermantes communicated after all, which makes him anxious, as it shows he couldn't map out his own surroundings, being therefore unable to restrict his world to a portable and comfortable size.

The episode of Dr. Percepied's daughter's wedding, in which Marcel becomes disappointed when he finally gets the chance to see the Duchesse de Guermantes for the first time, reflects the same abovementioned anxieties. Here we find the same willingness to raise borders, separating different worlds in order to decrease this fear of communicability between different castes, since that communicability ultimately expands the world ad infinitum:

²²⁶"(...) middle-class people in those days took what was almost a Hindu view of society, which they held to consist of sharply defined castes, so that everyone at his birth found himself called to that station in life which his parents already occupied, and from which nothing, save the accident of an exceptional career or of a 'good' marriage, could extract you and translate you to a superior caste" (I, 16).

My disappointment was immense. It arose from my not having borne in mind, when I thought of Mme. de Guermantes, that I was picturing her to myself in the colors of a tapestry or a stained-glass window, as living in another century, as being of another substance than the rest of the human race. Never had it occurred to me that she might have a red face, a mauve scarf like Mme. Sazerat; and the oval curve of her cheeks reminded me so strongly of people whom I had seen at home that the suspicion crossed my mind (though it was immediately banished) that in her causal principle, in the molecules of her physical composition, this lady was perhaps not substantially the Duchesse de Guermantes, but that her body, in ignorance of the name that people had given it, belonged to a certain female type which included also the wives of doctors and tradesmen (I, 172-3)

Marcel, like most of *À La Recherche's* characters, still believed that he was living surrounded by monsters and gods²²⁷, that there was something substantially different between the people from the different communities around him. He could still believe that there was nothing in common between the noblest of aristocrats in the *faubourg Saint-Germain* and the tailor working next door to him, a creed that would famously fall to pieces in the first pages of *Sodome et Gomorrhe*. Before that episode, any time a suspicion regarding this subject arises, it is 'immediately banished'. By believing that people from other communities are molecularly different from the ones which inhabit his own, Marcel is simplifying the world, reducing its complexity by segmenting it instead of facing it as an enormous continuum where there is virtually no place he can draw a circle to close it, like aunt Léonie did in Combray.

Even if the vast majority of *À La Recherche's* characters at some point recur to aunt Léonie's strategy, there is no one following it more blindly than Mme. Verdurin. From the first time we are introduced to the Verdurins' *petit clan*, we are told that one could only be a member if one shared their creed, which established Cottard as the best doctor in Paris and guaranteed that both Planté and Rubinstein were supplanted by the young pianist Mme. Verdurin chose to sponsor that particular year²²⁸. By proclaiming this creed, Mme. Verdurin was, like aunt Léonie, reducing the possibility of world's mystery and beauty to her own vicinities. Once again following aunt Léonie's example, Mme. Verdurin will also create random borders between her clan and the other communities which threaten its stability, by for instance prohibiting the usage of evening clothes: "Evening dress was barred, because you were all 'good pals,' and didn't want to look like the 'boring people' who were to be avoided like the plague" (I, 186). The threat posed by 'bores' is exactly the same as the one posed by occasions that would force

²²⁷ "thronged with monsters and with gods, we know little peace of mind" (II, 90).

²²⁸ Cf. I, 188.

members of the clan to miss a gathering, as both these situations would endanger the community. Any new member, just like anyone not belonging to the tribe full time, may compromise the fragile equilibrium which allows the clan to survive. Aware of this fact, Mme. Verdurin refuses to trust someone who moved so freely between castes as Swann, denying him full access to the clan²²⁹.

It would be relevant to take a look at Proust's description of the first conversation Marcel had with Charlus, since it reflects not only Charlus' attempt to cast a flattering description upon himself, but also how life ends up frustrating those attempts. The uncle of Marcel's new friend is thus described:

the sobriety which [his garments] displayed seemed to be of the kind that comes from obedience to a rule of diet rather than from lack of appetite. A dark green thread harmonized, in the stuff of his trousers, with the stripe on his socks, with a refinement which betrayed the vivacity of a taste that was everywhere else subdued, to which this single concession had been made out of tolerance, while a spot of red on his necktie was imperceptible, like a liberty which one dares not take (II, 112)

Charlus' sobriety is, hence, something born out of his fear of being caught rather than from a natural predisposition. In different passages of the novel, Proust presents him as someone desperately trying to act in a virile fashion, so that he could hide his homosexuality. Yet, every time he does so, every time he attempts to restrain life, there is always *a thread or a stripe* screaming out the tension piling up inside him, which at the end of the novel explodes, revealing his identity for everyone to see²³⁰.

Swann himself, perceived by Mme. Verdurin as the antidote against aunt Léonie's strategy, can be seen in several occasions as another variation of Marcel's aunt. In *Du Côté de Chez Swann*, while describing the second time Swann visited Odette, Proust explains that

On his way to the house, as always when he knew that they were to meet, he formed a picture of her in his mind; and the necessity, if he was to find any beauty in her face, of

²²⁹ "If Dr Cottard felt bound to leave as soon as they rose from table, so as to go back to some patient who was seriously ill, 'Who knows', Mme. Verdurin would say, 'it might do him far more good if you didn't go disturbing him again this evening; he'll have a good night without you; tomorrow morning you can go round early and you'll find him cured'. From the beginning of December she was sick with anxiety at the thought that the 'faithful' might 'defect' on Christmas and New Year's Days" (I, 187); "Mme. Verdurin, realizing that this one infidel would prevent her 'little nucleus' from achieving complete unanimity, was unable to restrain herself" (I, 256).

²³⁰ Cf., for instance, "I gathered that the particular fault which he found in the young men of the day was their effeminacy (...) But what life would not have appeared effeminate beside that which he expected a man to lead, and never found energetic or virile enough? (He himself, when he walked across country, after long hours on the road would plunge his heated body into frozen streams.) He would not even concede that a man should wear a single ring" (II, 121).

concentrating on the fresh and rosy cheekbones to the exclusion of the rest of her cheeks which were so often drawn and sallow, and sometimes mottled with little red spots, distressed him as proving that the ideal is unattainable and happiness mediocre (I, 219)

Swann is here trying (although failing) to force Odette's face to be beautiful in order not only to believe in the self-sufficiency of his surroundings, but more importantly, to make some sense of his love. Swann's life is haunted by the reflection present in the last lines of "Un Amour de Swann". Swann could never, during his lifetime, understand what exactly attracted him in Odette and, in moments like this, he is searching for a perspective which makes his love somehow graspable. He is trying to make of Odette, seeing her from a specific truncated point of view, someone who was his type. If Swann, rather strangely, can never get rid of the suspicion that the woman to whom he devoted his entire life is someone that is not his type, then he will make every effort to shape what he imagined to be his type to conform to her. Swann will also do the same with the community he ends up living in after his marriage. Like aunt Léonie, if Swann got stuck in a room for the rest of his days, he will persuade himself that this room is not a prison but a palace containing everything he may possibly need²³¹.

Even Swann's approach to his life as a whole can be seen as somehow Léoniesque. To understand the argument we are trying to put forward in this chapter, it is worthy to quote at some length one of the best descriptions of Swann in "Un Amour de Swann":

he had grown into the habit of taking refuge in trivial considerations, which enabled him to disregard matters of fundamental importance. Just as he never stopped to ask himself whether he would not have done better by not going into society, but on the other hand knew for certain that if he had accepted an invitation he must put in an appearance, and that afterwards, if he did not actually call, he must at least leave cards upon his hostess, so in his conversation he took care never to express with any warmth a personal opinion about anything, but instead would supply facts and details which were valid enough in themselves and excused him from showing his real capacities. He would be extremely precise about the recipe for a dish, the dates of a painter's birth and death, and the titles of his works. Sometimes, in spite of himself, he would let himself go so far as to express an opinion on a work of art, or on someone's interpretation of life, but then he would cloak his words in a tone of irony, as though he did not altogether associate himself with what he was saying (I, 207)²³²

Swann, by behaving this way, seems to be convincing himself that life is merely surface, and there is nothing beyond what he sees and touches, because he vaguely knows that, if

²³¹ "since (...) it was a new life that he had begun to lead, in common with his wife, among a new set of people, it would have been understandable if, in order to gauge the social importance of these new acquaintances and thereby the degree of self-esteem that might be derived from entertaining them, he had used, as a standard of comparison, not the brilliant society in which he himself had moved before his marriage, but former connections of Odette's" (I, 424).

²³² For more on this 'ironical tone', cf. Chapter 6.

he were to look deeply into the world, he could get drawn into a swamp he might not be able to exit. The world seems to scare him so much he only allows himself to touch it with the tips of his toes, never expressing any opinion which might compromise and immerse him in a reality that would erase any illusion of control he still might have over his own life. This conduct is not very different from encapsulating himself in a room while repeating that the outer world holds no mystery and the people walking by are just the daughters of Mr. Pupin.

Nonetheless, in order for the pattern exposed above to be relevant for the understanding of *À La Recherche*, we would also have to find it present in the character around whom the entire novel is built. Before the end of this chapter, it is therefore important to further develop an idea that Marcel states in *La Prisonnière*. Marcel claims that “little by little, I was beginning to resemble all my relations: my father who (...) took so keen an interest in the weather; and not my father only, I was becoming more and more like my aunt Léonie” (III, 586). This resemblance (a resemblance that Proust himself shared²³³) with his aunt could be trivially reduced to the reclusion Marcel lived in over the last three volumes or to their fragile health; we could recall the affinity the old lady had with her nephew, which led her to make Marcel her inheritor, or the fact that most of Marcel’s revelations are obtained precisely when he is looking through a window or through peepholes, just like his aunt did, but it seems to go deeper than that.

Marcel makes every effort to keep things domestic. He is systematically scared of moments when life can get out of hand and when things may become hard to restrain, leaving him in a state of anxiety. He seems to want to keep his world as under control as aunt Léonie did in her little room. This is the reason that leads Marcel to confess, several times during the novel, having avoided looking deeply into things (particularly things that were related with the women he loved) so that their wildness wouldn’t paralyze him²³⁴. We find a perfect example of this pattern of behavior in the kimono episode²³⁵, in which

²³³ In Céleste Albaret’s biography of Proust, the image we are offered of Proust is very often similar to Proust’s description of Marcel’s secluded, sick aunt. Just to provide an example among many others possible, we are told that Proust, exactly like aunt Léonie, demanded a bottle of Vichy water to be placed at his bedside table, even though he never drank it (Albaret, 165). In her compilation of Proust’s correspondence, Françoise Leriche acutely notes a curious similarity between a comment Proust made regarding himself in a letter to Mme. Luys and something that aunt Léonie used to say (cf. *Lettres*, 410).

²³⁴ Cf., for instance, the moment when Marcel is thinking, after Albertine’s departure, about the look she sometimes had and confesses: “no doubt I had not ventured to interpret them in their full significance or to form a definite idea of her immediate departure” (IV, 7-8).

²³⁵ Cf. III, 581-3.

Marcel explains that Albertine would often fall asleep near him, providing him with the chance to steal the letters she had in her kimono's pocket, thus getting to know what she did away from him a little better. Facing the perfect opportunity to gain access to Albertine's hidden life, Marcel cannot persuade himself to take that step. To imagine he restrained himself for some moral reason would be absurd, since Proust seems to recognize absolutely no jurisdiction of morality over the actions of someone in love, and particularly over Marcel's. He refrained because if he happened to read the letters, Albertine would acquire a new layer and become even more incomprehensible than she already was, leaving Marcel in a state of absolute despair. As such, he prefers to believe that her world is as simple as the little square and the Rue du Saint-Esprit that aunt Léonie contemplated for hours.

Even if aunt Léonie's spirit, as this chapter intended to establish, is very persistent in *À La Recherche*, it is not however omnipresent, since for Proust an artist's attitude is precisely the opposite of aunt Léonie's²³⁶ and there are rarely moments (like the episode in which Marcel is driven through the countryside in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*) in which the characters realize that their entrenched way of perceiving the world is wrong. The Duchesse de Guermantes, for example, is one of the few people in *À La Recherche* who sometimes tries to look at the world from different points of views, eroding simplified versions of it, even if Marcel adds that her life was absolutely sterile:

... the Duchess, living this worldly life the idleness and sterility of which are to a true social activity what, in art, criticism is to creation, extended to the persons who surrounded her the instability of viewpoint, the unhealthy thirst, of the caviller who, to slake a mind that has grown too dry, goes in search of no matter what paradox that is still fairly fresh, and will not hesitate to uphold the thirst-quenching opinion that the really great *Iphigenia* is Piccinni's and not Gluck's, and at a pinch that the true *Phèdre* is that of Pradon (II, 761)

For Proust, art has everything to do with this idea of multiplying perspectives and destroying borders. Perceiving the world as an artist is to realize that "this imbecile was a great physician" (I, 490); that, like Cottard, every person is composed of several different, incongruent ingredients and no one fits a single brief description. The personification of the artistic, anti-léoniesque attitude is found, of course, in Elstir. Elstir's work, according to Marcel, was composed of "the rare moments in which we see nature as she is" (II, 192). The following paragraph, in which Marcel describes Elstir's painting of Carquethuit's port, explains what it means to see nature exactly as it is. Elstir "prepared

²³⁶ It is significant, therefore, that Marcel informs us that aunt Léonie never understood what literature meant (cf. III, 586).

the mind of the spectator by employing, for the little town, only marine terms, and urban terms for the sea” (II, 192). To create is, therefore, to abolish the demarcations our thought imposes upon things, it is to make it so “that the eye should discover no fixed boundary, no absolute line of demarcation between land and sea” (II, 192-3). Thus, the artistic process is for Marcel the attempt to expand the world infinitely, abolishing the demarcations we create to get some comfort while trying to swallow up that world way beyond our reach. This makes art a task evidently condemned to failure, therefore proving Léonie’s way of life to be a somehow healthier, domestic alternative to face the incomprehensible monster that is life.

Chapter 15

Proust and Posterity I: The Unauthorized, Posthumous Autobiography

While telling the story of the relationship Proust had with his secretary, Edmund White makes a Wildean comment which perfectly illustrates one of the most important problems in Proustian criticism. White states that “Proust was becoming so immersed in his writing that soon his life was imitating his work. When Albert Nahmias stood Proust up one evening in 1912 at Cabourg (...), Proust wrote him a letter that directly echoed Swann’s declarations to Odette” (White, 102). Accepting White’s argument, we would have to concede that the autobiographical readings of *À La Recherche* are missing the point by a rather long shot. Looking into Proust’s life for the origin of the novel’s episodes is certainly uninteresting but, more than that, wrong. Even if it is true that some episodes in *À La Recherche* also took place previously in Proust’s life, others didn’t and, as White here so clearly shows, there are several others which occurred in Proust’s life after and because they occurred in his work.

There is another significant problem with the belief that one can understand why an episode appears in *À La Recherche* by simply pointing out to its factual existence in the author’s life: we should always bear in mind that the mere fact of something having de facto occurred in Proust’s life does not, as it should be obvious, allow us to understand why it was chosen to integrate Marcel’s narrative, leaving many others, perhaps objectively more relevant (like, for instances, the death of his parents), untold. If we unproblematically believe that, in order to explain a scene in the novel, it is enough to indicate its biographical counterpoint, we would at least need a theory to justify why everything else we know to have occurred in Proust’s life was left out of *À La Recherche*. Besides, there is probably not a single episode in Proust’s life which happened exactly the same way in Marcel’s. Arguing that they were only slightly adulterated to establish some sort of metaphorical point or to allow Proust to conform them to his narrative is to surrender unconditionally, as that reasoning recognizes their actual existence is in fact irrelevant, being subjugated in the novel to serve some greater interest. Proust himself took great trouble, mainly in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, to prevent *À La Recherche* from being read as an exercise of connecting the dots.

The first two paragraphs of this chapter are just stating the obvious and would be unnecessary were it not for the considerable number of respected critics who, in one way or another, dedicated their efforts to such readings. Taking Painter’s biography of Proust

as the ultimate example amongst the many readings of this kind, we find numerous occurrences of deductions regarding Proust's life based on episodes of *À La Recherche*, rejecting thus any role for imagination or creative freedom in Proust's fiction.

Therefore, in this chapter, which should be read as a stepping stone to the one that follows, we will firstly try to illustrate the problems with readings such as Painter's. After establishing the limitation of Painter's suggestion, we will then focus our attention on Céleste Albaret's narrative during the years she took care of Proust towards the end of his life. Focusing on Albaret's book, whose ghost writer, Georges Belmont, seems to be in several ways Proust himself, will allow us to illustrate the unavoidable confusion between life and fiction, biography and exegesis, when we are dealing with Proust. A confusion which makes the frontier we tend to create between Marcel and Proust somehow arbitrary. Finally, we will enter a comparison between Céleste's morally charged perspective and Proust's unapologetic tone, as this difference will allow us to grasp something very pressing that runs through Proust's work, a mechanism for dealing with guilt, pleasure and the taming of suffering which is instrumental in understanding several of our chapters.

Let us then go back to Painter's method. Painter infers that if something happens in *À La Recherche*, one needs only to find a circumstance in Proust's biography which, from some perspective, could be seen as carrying some similarity with the episode in question, being then possible to describe that particular circumstance in the terms of its fictionalized version. Following that inverted path, one would eventually be able to reach the truth lying behind the shadows of *À La Recherche*. Painter's creed is further strengthened if the same episode occurs both in *À La Recherche* and in *Jean Santeuil*, which according to Painter somehow reinforces its veracity. It would be exhausting to offer every single instance of this method, but it is worth looking at just a couple of them.

Painter justifiably deduces that Proust was inspired by his aunt Élisabeth to come up with his aunt Léonie. Yet, he will later assume, apparently based on no other sources, that aunt Élisabeth should be described in the exact terms Proust used to describe the character she inspired²³⁷.

However, the best example of Painter's method (in which Painter himself seems to become vaguely aware of its absurdity) appears when the biographer decides to trace

²³⁷ "She refused, step by step, to leave Illiers, her house, her room, and finally her bed" (Painter, 15); "that aunt Léonie who, since her husband's (...) death, had gradually declined to leave, first Combray, then her house in Combray, then her bedroom, and finally her bed" (I, 48).

back to its original source the cross examination made by both Swann and Marcel to Odette and Albertine, respectively. Through his method, without presenting any other evidence besides Painter's reiterated belief that *Jean Santeuil* is even less fictionalized than *À La Recherche*²³⁸, and the fact that Reynaldo Hahn plays the piano, he ends up concluding that Proust was jealous of Hahn's proximity with Saint-Saëns:

In Jean Santeuil the hero's mistress, Françoise S., plays the Saint-Saëns sonata under its own name²³⁹, during an episode of jealous cross-examination about her Lesbian loves which is retold in *À La Recherche* both of Swann and Odette, and of the Narrator and Albertine. So it may be conjectured that there is something of Proust's friendship for Reynaldo in both Françoise and Albertine. Perhaps, too (though here the transposition would be particularly devious and dubious), since Albertine and the Sonata are associated through Mlle. Vinteuil and her friend with homosexual jealousy, it may be guessed that Proust quarreled with Reynaldo over his loyal attachment to his master Saint-Saëns, who, as was notorious, was himself an invert (White, 164)

Despite Proust's reluctance to being read in the simplistic manner mentioned above, there is one consequence of this approach which would have particularly pleased him. This confusion between the author's life and his work often leads to the impression that Proust described the world as it is and it can only be read according to the terms of *À La Recherche*. The terms used by Proust are so imposing they are seen as objectively true, offering Proust absolute control not only over his narrative but also over his own life and, surprisingly, over everything else, giving its fictional creations a very palpable cohesion. Again, it is Painter who more perfectly illustrates this outcome of biographical interpretations, when he is expatiating on Proust's childhood in Illiers and goes as far as to suggest (even if he appears, once more, vaguely aware of the ludicrousness of his argument) that Illiers had already in itself the necessary conditions for the genesis of *À La Recherche*. Painter seems to believe it was Proust's childhood town which imposed the structure of the novel upon him. A structure he merely had to accept, instead of having to impose his own vision over Illiers, forever defining the way we perceive it²⁴⁰. Painter seems to take the hypothesis of the novel having been born from one of Illiers' ribs very

²³⁸ Cf. also Painter, 10.

²³⁹ Painter assumes here that, in *Jean Santeuil*, the sonata played appears under its own name, therefore suggesting that, in *À La Recherche*, the same sonata appears under a fake name, which would, of course, mean that Proust, for some bizarre idiosyncrasy, decided to change the sonata's name, but that we could unproblematically read 'Saint-Saëns sonata' instead of 'Vinteuil sonata' since that is the sonata Proust is cryptically alluding to. From our perspective, this is not at all the case. The actual name of Vinteuil's sonata, according to our argument, should always be 'Vinteuil's sonata', just like, for example, the actual name of Charlus can never be Montesquiou but is necessarily Charlus.

²⁴⁰ French toponymy seems to disagree with Painter on this point, since, in recognition of the way that Proust shaped our perspective of Illiers, the town has by now changed its official name to Illiers-Combray, and will probably one day become known only by its Proustian name.

seriously, instead of the novel shaping the way we look at Illiers, as if Proust's art was discovered (and therefore objectively true to the facts) instead of crafted. It is worth quoting Painter at some length over this subject:

Certainly in no other section of *À La Recherche du Temps Perdu* did the literal truth need so little alteration in order to make it coincide with the ideal truth. Partly this is because Proust saw Illiers in childhood, when the visual object, which later serves only to mask immaterial truth, is still able to reveal it (...) Perhaps there is even some danger of exaggerating the objectivity of the symbols Proust saw there: they are undoubtedly real outside this world, but in this world may they not be illusions? Perhaps, as the Baron de Charlus said of Combray, Illiers is only 'a little town like so many others', and if Proust had spent his childhood holidays in one of those many other little towns, he would have extracted the same truths from different symbols. And yet, at Illiers, the church and grey streets and gardens of Combray are there for all to see; the village spires perform their strange movement, the two ways of rolling plain and narrow river lead for ever in opposite directions, and nevertheless meet. In the real topography of Illiers, the mysterious significance of the symbolical landscape of Combray was already latent (Painter, 32)

Always aware of any possible outcome of his work, Proust seems to have made every effort to shape how critics would later perceive him, investing significantly towards this goal in the relationship he established with Céleste Albaret, the housekeeper who spent the last nine years of his life with him. Céleste described, on Proust's own terms (fifty years after his death), the time she spent at his service. In the foreword of Céleste's *Monsieur Proust*, André Aciman precisely describes the mechanism of the book: "in the end, she gave to his readers a Proust whom Proust had labored a lifetime to create, to perfect, to invent. Which is another way of saying that she not only echoes his vision but fails to see through so many of his disguises" (Albaret, xii).

Céleste started doing some chores for Proust after marrying Odilon Albaret, Proust's chauffeur, in 1913. Yet, she would spend a few weeks distributing copies of *Du Côté de Chez Swann* to Proust's friends before being admitted to his house. When she was eventually granted that access, she had still to wait several days, receiving very precise instructions in the meantime, before being allowed to enter the writer's bedroom, and only to perform such a simple task as to give him his morning coffee. The paragraph describing the first time Céleste entered Proust's chamber is perhaps the best moment of the entire book. Céleste explains that

The smoke was so thick you could have cut it with a knife. Incredible. Nicolas [Cottin, Proust's valet] had warned me that sometimes, when he woke up, M. Proust, who suffered terribly from asthma, burned fumigation powder – but I wasn't prepared for this dense cloud. It was a very big room, but the smoke absolutely filled it. The only light was from a bedside lamp, and that gave just a little glow, through a green shade. I saw a brass bedstead

and a bit of white sheet with the green light falling on it. All I could see of M. Proust was a white shirt under a thick sweater, and the upper part of his body propped against two pillows. His face was hidden in the shadows and the smoke from the fumigation, completely invisible except for the eyes looking at me- and I felt rather than saw them (...) When I left the room, I would have been incapable of describing any of the furniture that became so familiar to me afterward – everything was so confused in the half-light, and I was too intimidated by those eyes I couldn't see. I bowed toward the invisible face (...) He gave a wave of the hand, presumably to thank me, but didn't say a word. Then I left. (Albaret, 16)

Despite this being a very literal description of the meeting, or at least as Céleste remembered it, it contains every single element Proust used to condition the way he is read. The author appears to have created a cloud of smoke around his life and his work, an aura of unapproachable mystery (in which his illness plays a significant role), which we, like Painter, can only pierce exactly the way he intended us to. However, he remains capable of seeing everything. Proust conditioned the image we have of him to such an extent that his face is kept hidden in the shadows. It is always Proust who remains in control. Proust is constantly, and very effectively, trying to condition how we see him and what is revealed to us. As Céleste puts it, “from his bed, he manipulated (...) like an admiral controlling his fleet” (Albaret, 281). Like Céleste, we are initially blinded by Proust, we cannot see a thing, and when we get our vision back, it is no longer ours but Proust's.

Céleste Albaret repeats several times in *Monsieur Proust* how much Proust appreciated her services and liked her, often recurring to other of Proust's friends' testimonies to prove it. However, with Proust, we should remain skeptical. Frequently, those declarations of dependence serve other purposes. To observe this, we need to look no further than the references to Céleste we find in Proust's correspondence during the month of October, in 1917, when she had already been at his service for four years. In a letter to André Gide (the person Céleste most vehemently attacks in *Monsieur Proust*, alongside Albert Le Cuziat), Proust writes that, despite having extraordinary gifts, Céleste was impaired with “an inconceivable ignorance” (*Correspondance*, XVI, 239), providing as an example of that ignorance her belief that Napoleon and Bonaparte were two different people. However, at the end of that same month, Proust would write to René Boylesve assuring him that he had read Boylesve's new book to “a very intelligent and very beautiful housekeeper” (*Correspondance*, XVI, 266), who was undoubtedly Céleste herself. Facing these inconsistencies, when it comes to Proust, the answer should not be to try and accommodate them in one more complex description (for instance, separating book smartness from intelligence), nor trying to understand if Céleste was in fact ignorant,

nor to figure out to whom Proust was lying to, Gide or Boylesve. With Proust, we should accept that the veracity of the considerations he made regarding the people who surrounded him is irrelevant, as those considerations are always serving some other purpose. It is that purpose we will try to track down in this chapter.

Although both Céleste Albaret and Georges Belmont repeatedly assure us that *Monsieur Proust* did not present an idealized version of Proust²⁴¹, the tone of the narrative is constantly apologetic and apothetic, offering us a depiction of Proust as a demigod with extraordinary powers and whose faults are overlooked. Proust does not eat, does not sleep, and can predict every little thing, from the timing of his and other people's death to the lack of whitebait at the fishmongers²⁴². Despite saying she would be horrified with the idea of presenting Proust as a 'plaster saint' and that she never "intended to paint an idealized portrait of M. Proust" (Albaret, 186), *Monsieur Proust* possesses a hagiographic tone from the start. Right in the first paragraph, Céleste quotes something Proust used to tell her and adds that

now I see he was right – as he always was. I've never been separated from him; I've never stopped thinking of him or taking him as a model. When I can't sleep at night, he seems to be talking to me. If I have a problem, I ask myself, 'What would he tell me to do if he were here?' And I can hear his voice: 'My dear Céleste, ...' and I know what he'd say. All the happy things that come my way, I think it is he who sends them, because he wished only for my good (Albaret, 1)

Even the reasons Céleste presents for breaking over fifty years of silence to write this book are attempts to protect saint Proust from slander and falsity²⁴³.

However, what is particularly revealing in *Monsieur Proust* are not Céleste's arguments but how the entire book is in a way puppeteered beyond the grave by Proust since, as Céleste admitted, "he set the tone of the song" (Albaret, 2). The last time Proust

²⁴¹ It is extremely difficult to understand exactly to what degree Georges Belmont believed the story Céleste told him. Yet, in his introduction, Belmont guarantees (without saying a word regarding Céleste's obvious blind spots, namely her denial of Proust's homosexuality) that "not once did I doubt that this was the real Proust" (Albaret, xvi), while claiming that he would have refused to write the book had he thought to be contributing "to another kind of betrayal: to make of Proust an idol" (Albaret, xv).

²⁴² It is hard not to be amused by Céleste's claim that she never intended to idolize Proust or present him in a very flattering light when, a couple of pages later, we read in regards to Agostinelli's death, that "I wouldn't be surprised if he actually foresaw the tragedy" (Albaret, 192). Or when, telling the story of how Proust once asked her if she could buy and cook him some whitebait, adding that if there were none she could bring some gudgeon instead, Céleste believes it to undoubtedly prove Proust's magical divinatory powers: "with that sort of magical power he had, it was as if he'd guessed that there wouldn't be any whitebait" (Albaret, 75).

²⁴³ "The reason I finally changed my mind is that so many inaccurate and even completely false things have been written about him (...) All I want to do, before it is my turn to go, is to correct the picture people have of him" (Albaret, 11).

went to Cabourg, he took Céleste by the hand “as if I were a little girl” (Albaret, 34) and led her to a window for her to look at the sunset over the sea. More than a bonding moment between employer and employee, Proust is here trying to force Céleste to look at things through his perspective, setting the tone of the song and making sure that it will go on after he is no longer here. Throughout Céleste’s narrative, we sense that Proust is constantly taking her by the hand, as if she were a little girl, and making her look not at the sea but at himself, seeing exactly what he is interested in showing her, the way he intended her to see it, and nothing else. It is, therefore, unsurprising that at some point Proust asks Céleste what she is waiting for to start to keeping a diary. She doesn’t understand what Proust’s intention was after all, so he explains that ““no one really knows me but you. No one knows all I do as well as you do, or can know all I say to you. When I am dead your diary would sell more copies than my books (...) Better still, Céleste: You write it and I shall make comments on it as you go along”” (Albaret, 128).

As Proust probably predicted, Céleste never quite understood Proust’s intentions. It is not so much that Proust saw Céleste as ignorant or intelligent. He saw in her simply someone he could shape so that she would write his biography and, more importantly, help him define the way critics like Painter would come to read *À La Recherche*. She was the only person who could allow Proust to write an autobiography on his own terms, after his death, and signed by someone else. Proust had already written a fictionalized version of his own life. Now he aimed at having someone else write a non-fictional biography of him while looking at his life from the perspective which most flattered his interests, at the same time shaping our reading of his own work. It is, therefore, unsurprising that, in many moments, Céleste seems to be writing a pastiche of Proust²⁴⁴, as it was Proust, more than Céleste or Georges Belmont who wrote *Monsieur Proust*, probably the only unauthorized autobiography in the history of literature to have been written posthumously.

Monsieur Proust depicts many moments in which Proust would have shocked us with his egocentrism, were it not for the excuses Céleste immediately offers for each one of them. If Proust woke an exhausted Céleste in the middle of the night for no particular reason, he did so very politely²⁴⁵; if Proust threw away food he could have easily offered

²⁴⁴ Cf., the undeniable Proustian tone of, for instance, the passage where Céleste is describing Proust’s pain while talking with her of his grandmother’s death, where Céleste says that “he smiled so sadly I realized his tears were chiefly because, even if one doesn’t get over one’s greatest sorrows, one always survives them” (Albaret, 136).

²⁴⁵ Cf. Albaret, 48.

to Céleste and Odilon, he did so due to his sickness and absent-mindedness²⁴⁶; if Proust left Céleste standing for hours and hours while talking with her, he did so because he was too absorbed in conversation to notice such trivialities²⁴⁷. During the war, while Paris was being bombed, Proust sometimes made Céleste leave the house in the dead of night to run some errands. Reading *Monsieur Proust*, we get the idea that this carelessness has nothing to do with selfishness or lack of appreciation, but simply due to Proust's bravery and, in a sense, to an extraordinarily progressive idea of feminism²⁴⁸.

Céleste's blindness regarding Proust's faults has of course much to do with her devotion to her former employer, as well as her willingness to present Proust in a favorable light, but also with the enchantment Proust casted over her. Céleste recognizes, in passing, that "we created our own sort of intimacy, though for him it was chiefly an atmosphere within which to work, while I forgot about my own tasks and could see nothing but that magic circle" (Albaret, 117). The main fault of Céleste Albaret's book is her refusal to accept what is implicit here. Proust's interest in Céleste Albaret was mainly a consequence of his need to create an atmosphere he could work with (and, later, an atmosphere within which people would describe his work), and not so much due to a sincere friendship. Proust's behavior towards Céleste is, to a certain extent, similar to Marcel's towards Françoise in *À La Recherche*. Marcel is never at all concerned with Françoise's feelings, merely looking at her as a way to study himself, to get to know himself²⁴⁹. Like Proust did with Céleste, Marcel sees in Françoise someone he may shape to better suit his needs.

²⁴⁶ Cf. Albaret, 73.

²⁴⁷ Cf. Albaret, 120.

²⁴⁸ "he was so oblivious of danger he saw nothing amiss in sending me out into the dark streets at night when he had to have something done, and it never seemed to occur to him that my being a woman made any difference" (Albaret, 95); "the only time I ever remember being frightened was once after I'd gone past the Terminus Hôtel at Saint-Lazare and a man followed me all the way along rue Pépinière. There wasn't another soul about, and I ran up rue d'Anjou like a hare. When I told M. Proust about it afterward, my heart still pounding, he said: 'Oh, you're quite strong enough to defend yourself'" (Albaret, 96).

²⁴⁹ "Besides, I did not care much with [Françoise's] feelings" (III, 133); "I should have been obliged, even if I had dismissed Françoise, to keep the same servant. For various others were to enter my service in the years to come; already endowed with the defects common to all servants, they underwent nevertheless a rapid transformation with me. As the laws of attack govern those of riposte, in order not to be worsted by the asperities of my character, all of them effected in their own an identical withdrawal, always at the same point, and to make up for this took advantage of the gaps in my line to thrust out advanced posts. Of these gaps I knew nothing, any more than of the salients to which they gave rise, precisely because they were gaps. But my servants, by gradually becoming spoiled, taught me of their existence. It was from the defects which they invariably acquired that I learned what were my own natural and invariable shortcomings; their character offered me a sort of negative of my own. We had always laughed, my mother and I, at Mme. Sazerat, who used, in speaking of servants, to say 'that race', 'that species'. But I am bound to admit that what made it useless to think

In *Jean Santeuil's* introduction, we are told the story of how during summer, in a small town in northwest France, the unnamed writer of that introduction, along with a friend, met C., a writer they both admired a great deal and would come to write *Jean Santeuil*. As usual, Proust spread himself through his characters, in this particular case through Jean Santeuil, through C., and through the introduction's narrator. Near the end of the introduction, Proust returns to the problem posed by the strange relation between appearance and reality in a writer (such as C., but also as Proust himself) who, according to his own opinions, "lacked the gift of invention and could write only of what he had himself experienced" (*Santeuil*, 190). Wiser than most Proustian critics, the narrator realizes this raises the question of what it means for a writer to lack the gift of invention when Jean, C.'s fictional alter ego, "has many of C.'s faults, but even more of his good qualities (...) though unlike C. he is cursed with delicate health, has known much unhappiness, and is without talent for any of the arts" (*Santeuil*, 190). The narrator cannot understand how someone might simultaneously be able to only write about his own experience and from that experience create an alter ego which is different from himself, and has lived things the writer never did, or at least not in that particular way. Proust would answer this problem the same way his character did. The narrator once tried to question C. about this, but in return obtained only a very brief comment. He then understood that the problem could not be solved with a simple and straightforward answer, as "a lifetime devoted to solving [the problem] would be well employed" (*Santeuil*, 190).

Here Proust would once more follow a pattern already described in a previous chapter²⁵⁰. C., the character Proust used to become detached from Jean Santeuil as well as portray himself as a writer, recurring to someone who is simultaneously himself and someone else, disappeared as soon as his task was fulfilled. When Proust was done with C., who started by being described as an extraordinary writer, and became no longer useful to him, Proust violently attacks him, transforming him into someone rather irrelevant, and afterwards kills him. This way Proust is able to pretend not to attribute great importance to his own creation²⁵¹.

of replacing Françoise by anyone else was that her successor would inevitably have belonged just as much to the race of servants in general and to the class of my servants in particular" (II, 364-5).

²⁵⁰ Cf. Chapter 10.

²⁵¹ The narrator, who spent the first fifteen pages praising the virtues of C., ends his text by claiming that, after leaving him on that summer, never followed through with the plan of keeping in touch with C. and that he only decided to publish *Jean Santeuil* because nothing was said in the press regarding the novel at the time of C.'s death, and because the friend who had accompanied him that summer

Throughout *Jean Santeuil's* introduction, the narrator describes several of C.'s selfish attitudes. Contrarily to Céleste, he never tries to find excuses for this behavior. The narrator catches C. amusing himself by chasing away the geese of his hosts to the sea, which would lead to the death of three of them. When he intended to go fishing in the evening with the aid of a young local boy, C. would also "send the servant-girl to wake the lad – who was already asleep in bed – with orders to get up at once and make the boat ready", acting very similarly to Proust according to Céleste's own testimony. Instead of trying to excuse him by making this scene a case of the absent-mindedness we tend to associate to gifted writers, the narrator only adds that "some thought [this attitude] very inconsiderate of him" (*Santeuil*, 188). The narrator knows that C. would only be able to become a writer if he got rid of the castrating worries he had regarding the wellbeing of others, or the politeness owed to strangers, and forgot any concerns of civility he imposed upon himself²⁵². This is the reason why C. doesn't answer the letters of invitation sent to him in Paris and also why he resists the temptation of telling the people he met that they were made characters in his book. Because if anything or anyone around him entered his novels, they did so only after being entirely absorbed and spat out by C., no longer being themselves but just another version of C. As the narrator explains: "Not once did I hear him say to the landlord, pointing to the scribbled pages, 'You're there' (...) For he knew well enough that they, as persons or as objects, counted for nothing in those moments of vision which had so often come to him in their presence" (*Santeuil*, 193).

The difference between Céleste's morally charged vision and Proust's tone can be seen if we compare the descriptions of the donations to brothels we find both in *Monsieur Proust* and in *À La Recherche*. Céleste dedicates an entire chapter to denying that Proust might have been homosexual or might have had homosexual relationships, at least during the years she worked for him. In that chapter, Céleste also defends Proust from the rumor of having helped Albert Le Cuziat open a brothel.

Céleste resumes the rumors regarding Proust helping Le Cuziat's business by stating: "M. Proust is supposed firstly to have helped him set himself up there, with furniture and money, and secondly to have visited the place (...) it's all malicious gossip" (Albaret, 193). Yet, a few lines below, Céleste admits that "as to money, yes, M. Proust did give him some, under definite conditions". The money Proust gave Le Cuziat was,

was busy about other matters. Proust is, thus, through this metanarrative, trying to suggest he gave no importance to the novel he had just finished.

²⁵² Cf. Chapter 9.

according to Céleste, given not to help Le Cuziat but as a generous tip “for the information Albert brought him, or which sometimes M. Proust went to get himself” (Albaret, 193). Finally, Céleste explains that Le Cuziat asked him for furniture for his private room and Proust generously gave it to him, but was shocked and angered to find out it was being used in a brothel. Nonetheless, Proust neither stopped visiting Albert Le Cuziat after finding out, nor did he ask him to return the desecrated furniture. So, according to Céleste, despite Le Cuziat having received Proust’s money, furniture and visits, the rumors claiming Proust would have given him precisely that are malicious gossip.

On the other hand, the lack of a moral point of view over his attitudes, which Marcel repeatedly shows in similar scenes, seems to hide something more, a profound sorrow this indifference might lead us to disregard. The idea that feeling no pain is more painful than pain itself is a very well-known *leitmotif* of *À La Recherche*. Marcel brings that up while describing his reaction to Albertine’s death, but mainly while talking about the grief he felt after his grandmother’s death. In *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, Marcel tells us that “my fear lest the pleasure I found in this solitary excursion might weaken my memory of my grandmother, I sought to revive it by thinking of some great sorrow that she had experienced; in response to my appeal that sorrow tried to reconstruct itself in my heart, threw up vast pillars there” (III, 178). Thus, sorrow is a way to get in touch with who one once was, with what one once had, and for that reason preferable to the apathy of forgetfulness. By portraying himself as someone immune to sorrow, Marcel is completely detaching himself from his surroundings and from what used to constitute him. Hence, he is tracing a line that separates the young Marcel from the person he had become. Isolating himself from his past self would hopefully allow him to create, but also, as should be clear by now, increase his sufferings.

Marcel recognizes, in *À L’Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs*, that he had frequented several brothels during his lifetime, that they have given him ‘samples of happiness’ (I, 566) and that those houses deserved to be ranked alongside other of his benefactors, such as the illustrated editions of the Old Masters, symphony concerts, and guidebooks to historic towns. Marcel also admits he offered his recently deceased aunt Léonie’s furniture to the mistress of the house he frequented with Bloch. However, he did so not because she lied regarding the use she would give the furniture, but because Marcel intended to offer it as a “token of my good-will” (I,567) towards the procuress²⁵³.

²⁵³ It is worth pointing out that *À L’Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs* was published in 1919, while Céleste claims that Le Cuziat opened his brothel around 1915. However, we should not, to avoid

If Marcel stopped visiting the brothel after seeing the furniture there, the pain he felt seems to be owed not so much to moral concerns but rather to the episode's resemblances with the epiphanies experienced at the *Bal des Têtes*, in the last volume. Contrarily to what we find at the end of the novel, Proust feels pain instead of joy in a moment where past and present amalgamate, because the environment is one of life and not death. If in *Le Temps Retrouvé* everything around Marcel is dying and, therefore, his past may resuscitate as an escapeway from death, in the brothel everything is very much alive and, therefore, the past crowded up around old aunt Léonie's furniture is being assassinated, as those memories can no longer survive the juxtaposition with others more imposing. Therefore, it is not the past which is superimposing the present at the brothel, but the present which is upstaging the past, causing Proust to feel pain as his memories of the past are violently changed and put to death, just like his old self²⁵⁴.

By creating this distance between his old and his new self, Proust is also trying to further detach himself from Marcel, which would hopefully allow the narrative to stand on its own grounds, inhabiting a world whose existence he intended by now to be, in a way, independent from Proust's own. Yet, while doing so, Proust would, as the next chapter will try to argue, only reinforce the hybridity of his main character, someone who simultaneously threaded the pavements of Paris and the pages of *À La Recherche*.

Painter's mistake, assume that this similarity necessarily proves that Proust's offer to Le Cuziat was made in the same terms as the one made by Marcel to the house's mistress.

²⁵⁴ "as soon as I saw them again in the house where these women were putting them to their own uses, all the virtues that pervaded my aunt's room at Combray at once appeared to me, tortured by the cruel contact to which I had abandoned them in their defenselessness! Had I outraged the dead, I would not have suffered such remorse. I returned no more to visit their new mistress, for they seemed to me to be alive and to be appealing to me, like those apparently inanimate objects in a Persian fairy-tale, in which imprisoned human souls are undergoing martyrdom and pleading for deliverance" (I, 568). Gradually, after this episode, the furniture will no longer bring Marcel memories of her old aunt, but of the moment when he lost his virginity with one of his cousins.

Chapter 16

Proust and Posterity II: Proust's Echo

As we started to argue in the previous chapter, during his lifetime Proust aimed at controlling the way his contemporaries and the generations to come would perceive and interpret both his life and his work.

This concern, which will be the center of this chapter, is detectable in Proust from an early age. In one of the famous questionnaires he answered in his childhood, the young writer is asked by Antoinette Faure, one of the daughters of the future President of the Republic of France, Félix Faure, what fault he was most tolerant of. Proust, only thirteen or fourteen years of age at the time, doesn't hesitate: "The private life of geniuses" (*E&A*, 32). More than anticipating what would become a major theme in *À La Recherche* and what would underlie *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, Proust was claiming that his life should not be judged as other people's, since, well-aware of his talents, he maintained that being concerned with moral restraints would hold back his art. Hence, according to Proust, readers should not dig deep in his biography and, if they happened to do so, should never look at it from a judgmental perspective, but rather see it simply as the path he had to tread, in spite of himself, in order to come up with something like *À La Recherche*. Proust is claiming that everything he did in his private life was somehow done in subordination to his art. He is also suggesting that he only behaved the way he did so that his life could one day become Marcel's.

Two years later, in 1888, Proust would once more offer definitive evidence of his concerns regarding the image of himself to be left to posterity. Proust was by then the secretary of *Revue Verte*, a magazine ran by Daniel Halévy, seconded by Halévy's cousin, Jacques Bizet. Revealingly, the only thing from that magazine to survive is a protest written by Proust against the cousins' intention of copying some of its articles for posterity's sake. Proust would argue that so far the magazine only had one copy, to circulate amongst Lycée Condorcet's students, for good reasons. There was no excuse to try to obtain financial profits from it as it was done simply for fun. In his biography of the writer, Painter quotes Proust's vehement complaint. According to young Proust, "these 'fleeting reflections of the mobility of imaginations at play' must be 'protected against the criticism of readers for whom they were never scribbled'; otherwise '[Proust] will be under the regretful necessity of refusing his participation in a review so widely different from that in which he hitherto thought of collaborating'" (Painter, 57). Proust

was, therefore, asking Halévy, Bizet and, in a sense, us readers, to not take those scribbled pages seriously, as he felt them not to be yet worthy of his signature. They were a simple musing of a young student still looking for the right tone. Again, in *Revue Lilas*, the magazine which would replace *Revue Verte* in Lycée Condorcet, Proust would submit a contribution but would head it with a rather vivid recommendation for the board of the magazine to destroy his article after publication (Painter, 58).

In *Proust and the Art of Love*, J.E. Rivers narrates an episode of Proust's life which is rather illuminating on this topic. According to Rivers, Halévy once took Proust to see a girl Halévy considered to be extraordinarily beautiful and worked behind the counter of a dairy shop. Showing himself impressed, Proust whispered in his friend's ear: 'how beautiful is she?' and asked him if he thought they could have sex with her. A few days later, Proust came back to the shop with Halévy, bringing some flowers with him, and went directly towards the girl. Halévy remained outside seeing an extremely confident Proust ask something to the girl, who smiled and rejected whatever Proust was proposing. Proust allegedly insisted and was kicked out of the store, leaving Halévy amazed. Rivers' conclusions regarding this episode are relevant, since he suggests that Proust could be putting up all this show, not because he found the girl particularly appealing, but to prove his heterosexuality beyond doubt²⁵⁵. Thus, Proust would be reproducing the pattern this chapter will attempt to describe, as the most direct goal of his actions was not their immediate outcome (in this case, the girl's acceptance, which he seems not to be interested in at all), but the conditioning of his innocent audience, persuading it to accept a more flattering image of himself²⁵⁶.

A few years afterwards, Proust would have a society column in *Le Figaro*, describing the most exclusive Parisian parties of his time. Aware of the bad image those articles would give him as a writer, Proust decided to sign them with a few different pennames: Horatio, Dominique, and Écho²⁵⁷. Although it was not unusual for writers of society columns to remain anonymous, Proust goes to great lengths in order to protect his identity. He would change his pseudonym several times and, in 1903, would go as far as

²⁵⁵ "We might speculate that Halévy was the pawn in an elaborate ruse by Proust, who had marched into the shop certain of two things: that the lady would certainly refuse and that Halévy would testify to all their friends that Proust was not only sexually attracted to women but also audacious beyond belief in his attempts to seduce them" (Rivers (1983), 13).

²⁵⁶ On this topic, cf. Anscombe's description of the notion of 'double-effect' in "Action, Intention and Double-Effect".

²⁵⁷ André Gide would prove Proust's concerns to be right, as he would admit that one of the biggest regrets of his life was to have rejected the manuscript of *Du Côté de Chez Swann* without giving it close attention, as he believed Proust to be a snob and an amateur.

to write an irritated yet polite letter to Gaston Calmette, *Le Figaro*'s editor, reasserting the need to keep his identity a secret: "my Dominique's incognito is much more serious than you believe it to be. I was rather gravely displeased that you have unmasked me in the eyes of Madame Lemaire, and I beseech you not to do it again" (*Correspondance*, III, 367).

The names Proust uses to sign his articles do not seem random, which is not surprising, since it is Proust we're dealing with here. The choice of *Écho* as an alias seems rather explicit. Proust is simply stating the emptiness of the world in which he lived in. A world that, in spite of his efforts to deny it, he couldn't help but love. We could only speculate that *Écho* is also a reference to the notion, which Proust would later explore in *À La Recherche*, that communication in the *faubourg* Saint-Germain (and of course in similar circles, such as the Verdurin clan) was communication in a void, where words have no meaning and are just an exchange of signs²⁵⁸. The words uttered in those aristocratic circles are in a sense spoken by no one. They are just the repetition of formulas with the intention of watching time idly pass by without any inquietude. It is not communication but simply something that, like an echo, fills the silence. And Proust, in his society columns, was just, or so he claims, reporting that same echo.

As to 'Horatio' we can only present tentative justifications. Proust wrote three articles for *Le Figaro* under the name Horatio. In the first of these, about the salon of Princesse Edmond de Polignac, Proust makes two explicit references to another Horatio, Hamlet's best friend. The article ends precisely with one of these references, in the context of a eulogy to Prince Edmond de Polignac, who had died two years before. Proust declares that

we will never again see the figure of the thinker, the figure of the artist, the figure of the man so exquisitely spiritual, loving and good that was Prince Edmond de Polignac. Ah! For sure, a 'sweet prince', as Horatio said. And, again like him, we will say to the deceased prince, who so loved the angelic chants and is listening to them, undoubtedly, in his eternal sleep: 'Good night, sweet prince; And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest' (*E&A*, 165)

Perhaps Proust is, thus, quite accurately projecting himself in the role of Horatio, the friend of the aristocracy who will survive it all and, in the end, become the one to tell the story on his own terms.

In what concerns 'Dominique', the justification seems to be smoother, since the name could easily be seen as an allusion to "L'Étranger", a section of "Rêveries Couleur

²⁵⁸ On this subject, cf. Deleuze's "Proust and Signs".

du Temps” in *Les Plaisirs et les Jours*. There, Proust tells the story of a man called Dominique who had a different aristocrat over for dinner every evening. One night, while waiting for his company, Dominique is visited by a specter of someone he cannot recall but seems rather familiar. The specter asks him to get rid of all the other guests so that he could have him over. Dominique refuses because he feels he couldn’t let himself alone, yet he “felt he had just sacrificed noble bliss to an imperious and vulgar habit, that didn’t even have pleasures to give away as a price for his obedience anymore” (*P&J*, 189). Before disappearing, the specter explains who he, in fact, was:

The habit you sacrifice me to this evening will become stronger tomorrow with the blood of the wound you are causing me to feed. More imperious for having been obeyed once more, each day it will turn you away from me, forcing you to make me suffer more still. Soon, you will end up killing me. You won’t see me anymore. And yet you owe me more than you owe these other people who will abandon you soon. I am within you and, yet, I am forever distant from you, I almost do not exist anymore. I am your soul, I am yourself (*E&A*, 191)

By signing his society columns as Dominique, Proust might therefore be alluding to this text, which he had included seven years earlier in his first book²⁵⁹. He was perhaps, as usual, exaggerating his guilt and persuading us that those articles were something he knew to be separating him from himself. He might be, after all, suggesting that he was becoming someone who preferred noise and movement over silence, thus allowing his artistic life to perish and die, and reinforcing the pleasure he felt at recognizing and punishing his shortcomings.

Later, in *Jean Santeuil*, we would also find this Proustian attempt to control how he would be perceived by posterity. We have already provided and discussed an example of this behavior in the tenth chapter, but we find instances of this attempt to fashion himself to his wishes throughout the novel.

One of the most striking examples of this appears in the pages devoted to colonel Picquart, where the eponymous colonel is constantly presented not as a soldier but as a philosopher and an artist very much resembling the image Proust had of himself. Proust first compares the colonel to a patient, someone who like Proust had a fragile health. Proust will then argue that, although the colonel may often appear in very selective social

²⁵⁹ We could also speculate that this was a subtle allusion (but not so subtle to escape Proust’s contemporary readers) to Eugène Fromentin’s autobiographical novel, “Dominique”. It could also be the case that Proust was alluding to Fromentin in “L’Étranger”, whereas in his society columns he was simply alluding to “L’Étranger”. On this topic, cf. Jacques Monge’s “Un Précurseur De Proust: Fromentin Et La Mémoire Affective”. It is unsurprising that, once again, Proust attacked Fromentin elsewhere, thus trying to exorcize his influence (*E&A*, 335).

circles, exclaiming things like “how delightful all this is: I could gladly spend my life here” (*Santeuil*, 637), he says that without meaning it. Picquart, Proust argues, would rather be alone, in deep silence, in an atmosphere adequate not so much for a colonel but for a true poet, than to watch his days idly pass by in the social gatherings he so often frequented.

Proust will make the parallel with his own life rather explicit soon afterwards, when we find colonel Picquart amidst a discussion very familiar to the readers of *À La Recherche*:

In just such a way will the father of a son with a great talent for poetry exhibit no particular annoyance, so long as all he hears are compliments about the young man’s gifts. But should a day ever come when those gifts and his son’s temperament combine to prevent the boy from carrying out work he has been given, to lead him into doing nothing at all, or make him refuse an offer of employment, then the father will get angry, and show by the way in which he fires up that in his heart of hearts he has been aware of his son oddities of character, and has taken pleasure in them without for that reason ceasing to judge him just as he would any “man in the street” (*Santeuil*, 639)

Soon afterwards, Proust will describe a judgment that reminds us not so much of the Dreyfus trial, in which Picquart was then involved and was being narrated in those pages, but the poetic trial Proust would face by posterity²⁶⁰. Finally, before concluding the chapter on the colonel, Proust will make Jean recognize himself in Picquart, since “we detect in those who possess grandeur something of our own spiritual essence” (*Santeuil*, 643). By underlining this similarity with someone he considered to be the epitome of rectitude, honesty and bravery, Proust was trying to force us to see him not as a spoiled, snobbish youngster but as an artist in his own right.

Yet, perhaps the most revealing of these moments occurs later in the novel, when Proust is defending himself from accusations he felt would be raised against him sooner or later. He counterintuitively begins to present the act of a writer being polite to his friends as a moral failure. A writer may feel compelled by his conscience to write a nice letter to an acquaintance, present himself at social gatherings, or visit a widow, but “he knows in his heart of hearts that he ought not to be doing those things (...). Whence too comes the seeming egotism of the literary man, his indifference to the work of others. The truth of the matter is that it is only in our own work that we can have any influence. It is a matter of *moral* concern that we should be occupied with our own work and not

²⁶⁰ “I can’t see what there is particularly attractive about a barracks at sunset,’ says the Judge ‘if it had been a cathedral now, that would have been quite a different matter” (*Santeuil*, 641).

with the work of others” (*Santeuil*, 487). Proust is thus showing that when he visited the duchesses and princes he was acquainted with, he was doing so not as a quest for pleasure but as something his moral conscience had imposed upon him. Those visits were a moment of morally wrong altruism which, nonetheless, he couldn’t avoid out of love for others. Proust is also defending that his duty was to devote his entire life to his work, which would of course mean that the only moral restrictions Proust should feel, should not come out of the ethical values we use to judge any ordinary person. For people like him, he argues, being moral is being egotistic, it is doing whatever one feels one should be doing to improve one’s work and not being charitable, sympathetic towards others or chaste. Proust is here merely rephrasing his answer to Mlle. Faure’s questionnaire²⁶¹.

A few lines below, Proust will once more defend himself against future critics. Proust knew perfectly well that, out of interest, he had praised (and would keep on praising) authors who were at best second-rate²⁶². Instead of trying to find reasons to congratulate those authors, Proust will use his novel to show that extremely gifted writers sometimes need to praise minor authors, since they have the moral obligation to give some pleasure to people around them, when that pleasure costs them nearly nothing. We should not, therefore, take those compliments at face-value²⁶³.

²⁶¹ Proust would return to this topic on *À La Recherche*. While talking about Bergotte’s oeuvre, he always emphasizes that, when dealing with an artist, we should suspend our moral judgments and transform them into artistic ones: “As for those other vices to which M. de Norpois had alluded, that almost incestuous love affair, which was made still worse, people said, by a want of delicacy in the matter of money, if they contradicted in a shocking manner the trend of his latest novels, filled with such a painfully scrupulous concern for what was right and good that the most innocent pleasures of their heroes were poisoned by it (...) those vices did not at all prove, supposing that they were fairly imputed to Bergotte, that his literature was a lie and all his sensitiveness mere play-acting (...) Perhaps it is only in really vicious lives that the problem of morality can arise in all its disquieting strength. And to this problem the artist offers a solution in the terms not of his own personal life but of what is for him his true life, a general, a literary solution. As the great Doctors of the Church began often, while remaining good, by experiencing the sins of all mankind, out of which they drew their own personal sanctity, so great artists often, while being wicked, make use of their vices in order to arrive at a conception of the moral law that is binding upon us all” (I, 548). Cf. Chapter 17.

²⁶² Just to give two of many possible examples of Proust’s exaggerated praises, cf. the letter to the Princesse Hélène de Caraman-Chimay, in which an article she wrote to *La Renaissance Latine* regarding Fra Angelico and Benozzo Gozzoli is predicted to outlast the works of those authors, or the one to Anna de Noailles where her virtue is ranked above the Virgin Mary’s (*Correspondance*, III, 446-8; III, 261). Cf. Chapter 10.

²⁶³ “Nevertheless, there are moments of falsity even in the most sincere of lives. It may be that we have to deal with somebody whom we ought to make a pretense of admiring, in whom a little intellectual jugglery will easily make it possible for us to discover excellencies which we do not honestly feel but which we extol in convincing terms, because we know that even if we have never read his books it will give him infinite pleasure. A letter of this kind, a mere line of compliment from a France or a Daudet, provided the compliment bears the mark of the writer’s high intelligence, serves the purpose of the signed and emblazoned photograph of a Crowned Head on a Banker’s desk. We can find some excuse for such small dishonesties in reading the letters - even of a man like Flaubert (...) which are no whit more sincere, and this makes us tremble to think what opinion may be formed

À *La Recherche*'s publication process is also an obvious example of how Proust was considerably more worried with finding the right place in posterity than with any other concern. After being rejected by the *NRF*, Proust negotiated with Bernard Grasset. The negotiation was extremely bizarre, since Proust constantly demanded less than Grasset had to offer him. Grasset offered half of the published price, Proust accepted only three-sevenths. Proust also rejected any royalties over special-edition copies and agreed upon two hundred and fifty francs for translation rights when Grasset wanted to give him five hundred. Yet, he demanded that there be a large first edition and that it should be sold for only three and a half francs²⁶⁴. This bizarre negotiation shouldn't be seen as yet another example of Proust's prodigality. Proust didn't offer these conditions out of generosity but because he astutely perceived that offering a larger stake to someone as ambitious as Grasset would make him work harder to increase sales and find publishers interested in buying the translation rights of *À La Recherche*. Furthermore, it would give him some margin to persuade Grasset to sell the novel at a lower price and would also, as Painter suggested, allow Proust to later negotiate with *NRF* a move out of *Éditions Grasset* without too heavy a conscience²⁶⁵.

At the time of his departure for *NRF*, Proust made it very clear to Gaston Gallimard that he wouldn't raise any issue with the money *NRF* had to offer him but would, however, demand Gallimard (preparing the way for what would come in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*) to promise him they would never make any objections regarding the content of his books. He would also often point out that he was willing to pay for the edition of his books provided they should be accessible to any ordinary reader and not merely to wealthy people or bibliophiles²⁶⁶.

If Proust, as we have been so far arguing, had a tendency to very successfully attempt to condition his image both in the eyes of his contemporaries and posterity, this tendency was exacerbated when he started the process of writing *À La Recherche*. Céleste Albaret, in *Monsieur Proust*, pointed out that in the years she worked for Proust (the last nine years of Proust's life), he was always very careful on this subject. Near the end of

of our literary judgments by those who may discover certain articles of ours after we are dead, or should our correspondence ever be published, read certain letters" (*Santeuil*, 488).

²⁶⁴ Cf. Painter, 510.

²⁶⁵ "Proust's fancied concessions in the matter of royalties had left him, as was no doubt his unconscious intention, with the impression that he owed nothing to Grasset" (Painter, 524).

²⁶⁶ In a 1912 letter to Gallimard, Proust remarks: "I want to be read, and not exclusively by rich people or bibliophiles" (*Correspondance*, XI, 280). In another letter, written five days later to Mme. Straus, he states: "I would be pleased to address a vaster audience, the people that take trains and buy before stepping in the wagon a badly printed volume" (*Correspondance*, XI, 292).

his life, Céleste explains, Proust was obsessed with the destiny of his correspondence, fearing it might be used to pass an image of himself that, not being chosen and shaped by him, wouldn't make him comfortable. According to Céleste, Proust once told her: ““You will see, Celeste, I shall hardly be cold and everyone will start publishing my letters. I did wrong; I wrote too many, far too many. Because I was ill, my only contact with people was through writing. But I should never have done it. Still, I shall take what precautions I can. I shall see to it that no one has the right to publish my letters”” (Albaret, 201). Céleste then says that Proust subsequently tried to prevent the publication of those letters, but soon understood that the law was not on his side, and that he had given to his correspondents ““arrows that will be turned against me”” (Albaret, 201)²⁶⁷.

During the composition of *À La Recherche*, Proust became particularly focused on this idea of conditioning posterity and, therefore, tried to safeguard himself from any reading of his work and his life that he saw as harmful or unflattering. We find a perfect example of this in Proust's attitude when, in 1917, he heard that Robert de Montesquiou was starting to write his autobiography. It was predictable that the announcement of a book of *memoires* from someone so prone to spreading gossips as Count Robert de Montesquiou-Fézensac would leave Proust worried. So, instead of trying to prevent its publication (which he probably knew would be counterproductive), Proust ““providently offered ‘my own humble contribution of observed absurdities’, together with a list of people to whom he had recently spoken highly of Count Robert, and an invitation to dinner with Princesse Soutzo”” (Painter, 578). Proust tried, therefore, to fall under Montesquiou's good graces, so that he could avoid becoming the center of the autobiography's gossip, a scenario that would be rather tempting for Montesquiou, since Proust was by then starting to be acknowledged, was preparing the controversial move to *NRF*, and was less than two years away from receiving the Goncourt Prix.

Yet, Proust's efforts weren't restricted to the Parisian circles in which he moved. When he decided to publish *Pastiches et Mélanges*, he was making every effort to internationalize his *oeuvre*. Therefore, he thought it natural to dedicate his new book to a friend who could more easily help the globalization of *À La Recherche* by introducing it to the American market: Walter Berry, an American who at the time chaired the American

²⁶⁷ Before this episode took place, Proust was already vaguely aware of the dangers posed by his correspondence, as he refrained from using his real name in the letters he sent to Nahmias when he was trying to persuade Agostinelli to come back to Paris, shortly prior to the tragic death of Proust's former driver.

Chamber of Commerce in Paris. When asked by Bibesco why he opted to dedicate the book to Berry, Proust simply answered “Because he won the war!” (Painter, 605). What Proust was trying to explain Bibesco with that crude answer was that if Berry was influential enough (as Proust believed him to be) to lead the United States into the war, he would surely be influential enough to make *À La Recherche* a success in his home country. Yet, he was also pointing out that the United States, and not France, had won the war, and for that reason they would become the center of the new world, as they undoubtedly did; Proust could not afford to neglect them any longer.

The perfect metaphor for Proust’s attempts to condition posterity is revealed to us in André Gide’s journals. Gide writes, in an entry of May, 1921, that he suspected Proust of forcing the Albarets to memorize his exact words so that, being unable, due to his always fragile health, to carry his messages himself, he could be sure that they would not be adulterated on the way there, thus offering Proust as much control as possible over how he would be perceived by his interlocutors. The Albarets felt this obsession to be so pressing that Odilon, certainly warned by Proust about the importance of delivering the messages in the exact words in which he himself had phrased them, would start to proclaim everything all over again if he happened to be interrupted during his communication. Odilon clearly believed that this was the only way for him to be sure nothing was lost in the way²⁶⁸.

Near the end of the novel, in *Le Temps Retrouvé*, Proust reinforces his often-stated argument that *À La Recherche* is an entirely fictional novel, with no correspondence whatsoever to what we usually call ‘real life’. According to the author, it is a “book in which there is not a single incident which is not fictitious, not a single character who is a real person in disguise [*il n’y a pas un seul personnage ‘à clefs’*], in which everything has been invented by me in accordance with the requirements of my

²⁶⁸ “Last night I was about to go up to bed when the bell rang. It was Proust's chauffeur, Celeste's husband, bringing back the copy of *Corydon* that I had lent to Proust on the 13th of May, and offering to take me back with him, for Proust is somewhat better and sends a message that he can receive me if it is not inconvenient for me to come. His sentence is much longer and more complicated than I am quoting it; I imagine he learned it on the way, for when I interrupted him at first, he began it all over again and recited it in one breath. Celeste, likewise, when she opened the door to me the other evening, after having expressed Proust's regret at not being able to receive me, added: ‘Monsieur begs Monsieur Gide to have no doubt that he is thinking constantly of him.’ (I noted the sentence right away)” (Gide, 266). It is easy, at this point, to trace a parallel with our argument regarding Céleste Albaret’s *Monsieur Proust*, as that biography is nothing more than Céleste trying to pass us a message, word for word, exactly the way Proust told her to (Cf. “Proust and Posterity: The Unauthorized, Posthumous Autobiography”). In fact, Proust did the same with the reviews of his novel as he did with these messages. Thierry Laget claims that “as he was impeded of signing the critiques of his own books in the press, he dictated them to his journalist friends” (*E&A*, XV).

theme...” (IV, 424). Proust claims this for at least four different reasons. Firstly, because at this point of the story he stated he would make an exception to this rule for Françoise’s cousins, thus overstating the difference between people who were not fictional characters at all (which is a bizarre notion, since they are cousins to a fictional character), and the remaining characters of the novel; he also did this because he did not want his acquaintances to be offended by the portraits he made of them in *À La Recherche*, and did not want the focus of his critics to be on the discovery of hidden correspondences, but rather on the analysis of the characters’ roles within his fiction; and, finally, because the argument is, in a sense, true. If Proust was using the people he knew not to depict them but to build a story where truth and falsity are intertwined to the point of irrelevance, then it is hard to claim that anything could be read as ‘fact’, just as it is equally hard to say that characters like the Baron de Charlus have any *clefs* when they are built, from start to finish, to present Proust’s own vision of himself and the world, and not to depict Paris at the turn of the 20th century.

Nonetheless, this idea is more interestingly presented in *La Prisonnière* when Marcel praises Swann. There, Proust writes: “And yet, my dear Charles, whom I used to know when I was still so young and you were nearing your grave, it is because he whom you must have regarded as a young idiot has made you the hero of one of his volumes that people are beginning to speak of you again and that your name will perhaps live.” (III, 705). At this point, we could easily believe that it was Marcel and not Proust talking here, that the novel referred to is the book Marcel would finally write at the end of *Le Temps Retrouvé*, and that Charles Swann is merely the character inside Proust’s fiction. However, Proust adds immediately afterwards that “If, in Tissot’s picture representing the balcony of the Rue Royale club, where you figure with Galliffet, Edmond de Polignac and Saint-Maurice, people are always drawing attention to you, it is because they see that there are some traces of you in the character of Swann.” (III, 705). So, the person who is talking here is simultaneously Marcel and Proust, as the narrator is simultaneously talking inside and outside the world of *À La Recherche*. Proust deliberately added as many elements from real life as he possibly could in just one sentence so that he could be both within and removed from his fictional world, since the person he is addressing is, concurrently, Charles Swann and Charles Haas.

This is the most exact description of how *À La Recherche* works. Characters are at one and the same time themselves and also people who lived and breathed in what we could call the ‘real’ Paris. People like the Baron share some traits with others like Robert

de Montesquiou; as they are, in a sense, Robert de Montesquiou, but a Robert de Montesquiou who has suffered a fundamental twist, walking, talking and acting only to suit Marcel's best interests. Even further simplifying a rather complex problem, they are variations of the story of the young girl at the dairy shop. The characters give the reader the impression of looking like, for example, Robert de Montesquiou, exactly the way Proust gave Halévy the impression of trying to seduce the young girl at the dairy shop. Nevertheless, they do not act as they do because Robert de Montesquiou would act the same way. They act the way they do because it better fits with the narrative Proust had prepared, making these characters hybrid creatures who are and are not the person which they were based on. Because, just like Halévy, these characters are molded by Proust to persuade others (in Halévy's case, the other students, in the characters' case, the readers) to believe in the narrative Proust created, in Proust's description of the world and of himself.

By making his characters so alike the people they were based on, Proust, perhaps unwillingly, produced a rather bizarre effect. As Proust himself stated in the passage regarding Swann and Charles Haas, after *À La Recherche* we become interested in the people Proust knew, not because of how interesting they were (and Montesquiou, for example, was remarkably interesting) but because we look at them as Proustian characters; and such a perspective retroactively transforms them. Proust intertwined his creations with the people who surrounded him to a point that we can no longer trace if he is referring to a model or a character. What is remarkable is that, instead of causing us to replace the names of the characters for the names of the people Proust knew, this movement requires we substitute the names of the people Proust knew for the names of the characters. In *Plon's* anthology of Proust's correspondence, Virginie Greene points out this transformative power Proust had over his own world when she explains her option of never equating Proust's correspondents to the characters they generated:

I have systematically avoided any approximation between the people in Proust's life and the characters of his novel, except when that approximation was indicated by Proust or by the person in question. All the women who had a *salon* at the time of Proust's youth have retrospectively suffered of the Verdurin effect. People very often attribute to them the flaws and ridicules of that character: the ambition, authoritarianism, snobbism, and narrowness of taste and spirit. But what do we know in first-hand of Mme. Lemaire? Almost nothing (*Lettres*, 1170)

Virginie Green is, thus, underscoring posterity's tendency to see the people who surrounded Proust in the light of *À La Recherche*, to the point where the absence of

information regarding these people is replaced by the excess of information we have regarding those characters in the novel, which happen to share some traits with them²⁶⁹.

In the alleged conversation Proust had with Gide, and which Gide reported in his journals, many critics found reasons to argue in favor of this notorious theory of transposition. According to those critics, the right way to read many characters in *À La Recherche*, namely Albertine, would be to assume they were not women at all, but men hidden under a feminine name. Transposing them back into men would, thus, solve many incongruences we find in those characters. Yet, what Gide reports Proust to have said is not that he had transposed men into women but that he transposed “all the attractive, affectionate, and charming elements contained in his homosexual recollections” (Gide, 267). He was simply transferring memories he had with men into scenes with female characters, like he had transposed moments Proust had with real people into scenes Marcel lived with fictional characters. Just as it would be a mistake to believe that Baron de Charlus was, after all, Oscar Wilde, as in a certain passage of the novel something that happened between him and Proust happens between Charlus and Marcel, we should avoid seeing Albertine as a man just because Proust used moments of his life he spent with men to create Marcel’s lover²⁷⁰.

Still, what Proust told Gide should be approached with caution²⁷¹. As we have been arguing, Proust always had an eye on posterity and, therefore, even if we believe Gide is correctly reporting his conversations with Proust (which we should never take for granted), we have to remind ourselves that Proust might have said these things only to fall into Gide’s good graces, as he had previously done with Montesquiou. Gide was certainly influential and it is not hard to believe that Proust would tell him anything he imagined Gide wanted to hear, so that he would afterwards promote and include Proust amongst those who were, in Gide’s opinion, fighting the good fight. This is why Proust vehemently protests when Gide accuses him of having stigmatized homosexuality in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, which is of course why Proust, in his conversations with Gide, and according to the latter, “scarcely talked (...) of anything but homosexuality” (Gide, 267). Proust not only openly confesses his homosexuality²⁷² but, being more Gidean than Gide

²⁶⁹ Cf. Chapter 15.

²⁷⁰ It would be, of course, a similar mistake to believe Marcel to be, in fact, Proust. But that mistake will not concern us at this point. On this subject, cf. Chapter 21.

²⁷¹ On this topic, cf. Landy, 18.

²⁷² “Far from denying or hiding his homosexuality, he exhibits it, and I could almost say boasts of it. He claims never to have loved women save spiritually and never to have known love except with men” (Gide, 265).

himself, goes as far as to claim that he is persuaded of an author's homosexuality as soon as he starts talking about the subject. This meant, of course, that *Sodome et Gomorrhe* should be seen as definite and undeniable proof of Proust's sexual inclinations²⁷³.

There is a revealing passage in *Monsieur Proust* where Céleste openly calls Gide a liar and violently attacks him, saying that Proust disliked Gide. Céleste starts by saying she doubts Gide ever visited Proust as he claims he did and that he offers some details which, according to her, are objectively false. Then, she says she doesn't give any credit to what Gide reports regarding Proust's homosexuality, ending up with something she believes would be enough to persuade all skeptics and sectarians:

Late one afternoon M. Proust was opening his letters as usual after his coffee. There was a letter from Gide introducing a young man and asking M. Proust to help him. M. Proust read it and told me the drift. Then he put it aside and said:
'I'll have nothing to do with that'
There was a long silence, as when he traveled faraway into his thoughts. When he came back, he said with a grave look, stressing his words:
'One day, Celeste, they will see no one has done more serious moral harm than Gide to the younger generation' (Albaret, 300)

More than a political clash between a conservative old lady and an activist of homosexual rights, here we find the opposition between two sides of Proust he seems to have struggled with all through his life. Two facets that kept him undecided as to which was better able to suit his interests. Proust seems reluctant to be remembered as Céleste's plaster saint or as a Gide-like homosexual activist and, at times, we get the impression that he might have wanted to have the cake and eat it too²⁷⁴. A proof of Proust's hesitation is suggested in *Proust's Lesbianism*, where Elisabeth Ladenson convincingly shows how "À Propos de Baudelaire" was Proust's attempt to condition the reading of *Sodome et Gomorrhe* as the story of a heterosexual with no access to a world he would like to be acquainted with: the world of lesbianism²⁷⁵. Proust never refrains from trying to persuade the readers of *À La Recherche* that we should not believe in the author's homosexuality simply because it is a major theme of the story, and that what attracted him in

²⁷³ "He tells me his conviction that Baudelaire was homosexual: "The way he speaks of Lesbos, and the mere need of speaking of it, would be enough to convince me" (Gide, 265).

²⁷⁴ It could be argued that, as Gide's *Journals* were only published after Proust's death, he wasn't aware that this conversation would become public. Yet, knowing Gide and the interest he devoted to *À La Recherche*, Proust had to be incredibly naïve to believe that what he told Gide would not become somehow public.

²⁷⁵ Cf. "Sexual/ Textual Inversion" in *Proust's Lesbianism*.

homosexuality was the fact that it was so strange and foreign to Marcel and, we might infer, to Proust himself²⁷⁶.

Therefore, what we find here is not a political hesitation or the understandable moral struggle of a closeted homosexual living in a society which punished and persecuted people like Proust. What we find in moments like these is the dilemma of a man who wasn't capable of deciding how he wanted to be preserved for posterity, someone who couldn't figure out exactly in which direction he wanted his critics to look. And what is even more remarkable is that, instead of remaining in silence, he actively tried to be both. Proving beyond doubt that even when he did not know exactly what he was aiming at, he couldn't simply leave posterity's perception of him to chance.

²⁷⁶ Cf. "Art extracted from the most familiar reality does indeed exist and its domain is perhaps the largest of any. But it is none the less true that considerable interest, not to say beauty, may be found in actions inspired by a cast of mind so remote from anything we feel, from anything we believe, that they remain incomprehensible to us, displaying themselves before our eyes like a spectacle without rhyme or reason" (III, 556).

Chapter 17

The Lonesome Center of the World

In “Discours du Récit”, while trying to describe the temporal duplicity we find in even the simplest narratives, Genette suggests that *À La Recherche* starts *in media res*, as the *Iliad* does for instance. Genette then makes a distinction between objective retrospectives (when the narrative jumps back in time) and subjective retrospectives (what we could define as reminiscences). Afterwards, Genette comes up with this rather complex summary of the novel, in which letters follow the linear order of the pages and numbers define the chronology those pages present to us, with an apostrophe distinguishing objective from subjective retrospectives:

A5[B2]C5[D5'(E2')] F5[G1]H5[I4] [J3...]

Thus, the essay’s main goal is to demonstrate that the most basic forms of narrative do not conform to a linear structure, as there are often temporal distortions caused, for example, by analepses and prolepses, or simply by the different durations of events (e.g. spending twenty pages narrating a minute of a character’s day and only a couple of words covering years or decades of the same character’s life).

Before contesting Genette’s argument, it would be only fair to keep in mind that there is a plausible excuse for what we will now argue to be Genette’s misreading of Proust. Genette was obviously concerned with the theorization of a formal problem he identifies as cutting across all forms of literature and not the analysis of what is merely the example chosen to illustrate his ideas, so much so that there is no reference to Proust or his novel in the title of the book (*Figures III*) or the title of the essay we are dealing with here. Yet, if “Discours du Récit” provided an undeniable contribution to literary studies, the truth is the attempt to mold *À La Recherche* to Genette’s theories ends up considerably deforming the novel, since it would be hard to imagine a book more troublesome for Genette’s argument than the one the critic ended up choosing.

The above quoted schematic description of the novel makes what seems to be Genette’s misreading in “Discours du Récit” explicit. In the light of this thesis, a description which distinguishes subjective from objective retrospectives, and suggests the novel begins *in media res*, entirely misses Proust’s point. *À La Recherche* does not start, as Genette suggested, with Marcel lying awake in a sanatorium on the outskirts of Paris, but rather with Marcel remembering his sleepless nights in that same sanatorium. Thus, taking Genette’s scheme as accurate would mean failing to understand that having the

narrator describe his memories to the reader is not an artful narrative tool but the core of the novel. *À La Recherche* is not, in any relevant way, a novel about aristocratic salons or bizarre epiphanies involving French patisserie, but a work exploring how our perception of events changes subtly but definitively as time goes by. Accepting this would equate to seeing distinctions between form and content become obsolete when it comes to *À La Recherche*, as the form of the novel is, in many ways, its content. The *oeuvre* is, among many different things, also about how one recalls one's past life.

Genette's mistake lies in not having understood that the difference between events such as Marcel's epiphanies and the discovery he made regarding Charlus in the beginning of *Sodome et Gomorrhe* for instance, is a difference in degree and not in kind. A mistake of failing to see that there are no objective retrospectives in *À La Recherche*. Taking our argument as valid would mean that Genette would need a much more complex or a much simpler scheme. We would either have to take the initial moment as the final chronological moment (let's call it, for the sake of the argument, A50) and make all the other moments that follow subjective retrospectives directly correlated with that initial moment (a scheme that would look something like: A50[(B5')(C2'[D5'(E5')F5'[G1']H5'[I4']J3'...)]), or we would need an infinitely simpler scheme which could be reduced to something like A1, since all the moments that follow the initial scene necessarily occur in the order they are presented in, as their chronology is not the chronology in which they took place but the disposition in which they are told and remembered by Marcel.

In the first section of the essay, Genette makes a suggestion we couldn't agree more with. He states that the most persistent use of recollections in the novel aims "to modify the meaning of past occurrences after the event, either by making significant what was not so originally or by refuting a first interpretation and replacing it with a new one" (Genette, 96). Yet, Genette seems to deflate this idea immediately afterwards by reducing its scope and classifying it as a mere narrative technique. If Genette is one of the few Proustian critics to have noticed that many of the novel's moments of remembrance are euphoric even though a painful moment is being recalled, he always seems to describe this strangeness as the way Proust found to tell his story more effectively.

The main problem with Genette's description of Proust's writing is that it transforms Proust into someone resembling a circus artist focused on showing off his abilities, and not so much a writer. This description brings to memory Norpois' depiction of Bergotte, which we cannot help but feel that both Marcel and Proust deeply antipathize

with. Norpois claims Bergotte is a 'flute-player' and that in Bergotte's books, "all those Chinese puzzles of form, all those deliquescent mandarin subtleties seem to me to be quite futile" (I, 465). In a letter to Lionel Hauser, Proust seems to be answering arguments of the sort Genette would develop several decades later when he reprehends Hauser for believing style to be something that has only to do with an aesthetic choice: "You wrongly believe style to be an embellishment that we add, something resembling Sunday clothes. It is not distinguishable from thought or from impression" (*Correspondance*, XVII, 212).

Proust seems to have wanted his novel to be a sort of mapping of the world, as if he intended the world to be filtered and acquire a rather uniform tone. Proust wanted to engulf everything that touched him, to convert everything according to his perception, so in a way everything would simply become yet another portrait of himself. Genette identifies this tendency in Proust when he points out that only Marcel is allowed to tell the tale. Even in the case of "Un Amour de Swann", Marcel must be the one telling a story which happened before he was born, but that someone allegedly told him. Once more, this is not an aesthetic choice but what the novel in fact is. If Marcel were not the one showing us all this and filtering it with his own vision, the novel would be utterly destroyed, since Marcel's telling of the story is not a perspective over the story but the story itself²⁷⁷.

Proust's idea of the novel as a mapping of the world is relatively easy to demonstrate. In a polite letter to Grasset, referring to the first edition of *Du Côté de Chez Swann*, Proust corrects Grasset's printer: "I forgot to tell you that your printer, probably quite rightly, started another line for each reply wherever there was a dialogue. I wouldn't even talk of my preference to see those dialogues, unimportant in themselves, be absorbed by the continuity of the text (...)" (*Correspondance*, XII, 185). Proust is here pointing out to the fact that anything other characters might say in the novel should not live independently but in close connection with Marcel's vision, being therefore 'unimportant in themselves'. Mme. Verdurin, Charlus, aunt Léonie, and all the others are important only to the extent that they can be incorporated in Marcel's vision, if it were not the case they wouldn't matter.

²⁷⁷ Tadié, in *Proust et le Roman*, points in the same direction when he claims that Marcel's voice becomes the "form and matter of the *oeuvre*", and "in that elusive and omnipresent, modest and tyrannical character, in that form full of shadows where all other forms, scattered without it and before it, find their true birthplace, it is not a life being constructed, it is a vision" (Tadié (1986), 33).

In “À Propos du ‘Style’ de Flaubert”, while taking the opportunity to criticize one of the writers whose shadow he felt hanging over him, Proust presents two ideas similar to the one he introduced in the above-quoted letter to Grasset. Proust begins by stating: “for reasons that would take too long to develop here, I believe that only metaphors can offer a sort of eternity to style, and there is perhaps not even one beautiful metaphor in all of Flaubert” (E&A, 282). Proust doesn’t develop the idea any further, but one gets a sense of what he is aiming at. Only metaphors (and metonymies, i.e. metaphors in space) offer ‘a sort of eternity to style’ because only metaphors allow the writer to map out the world, to see some form of continuity in the elements composing it, to grasp an invisible line tying everything up around a single vision²⁷⁸.

In the same essay, a couple of pages later, we find a rather similar idea regarding the usage of the *imparfait* in Flaubert (which Proust also privileged in *À La Recherche*). Proust claims that “the *imparfait* indicates a state which prolongs itself” (E&A, 285) and praises “that eternal *imparfait*, composed in part by the characters’ words which Flaubert usually reports in indirect style so they can become indistinguishable from the rest” (E&A, 286). Proust suggests there is something eternal about the *imparfait* (as there already was with metaphors), in the sense that it points to a state which prolongs itself, as though the usage of the *imparfait* allowed one to talk about things as if seeing them on the same plane, as somehow homogenized. The same occurs with the indirect style, as if what makes something eternal in literature, for Proust, is precisely the ability to see things levelled out, so everything can be ‘absorbed in the continuity of the text’²⁷⁹.

Metaphors, *imparfait* and indirect speech: they all allow things to become somehow indistinguishable, sharing a similar perspective which forces things to become not themselves but the tone Proust’s vision imposed upon them, as if their individuality

²⁷⁸ Cf. Chapter 14. Proust further develops this idea in *Le Temps Retrouvé* when he states that “the truth will only begin to emerge from the moment that the writer takes two different objects, posits their relationship, the analogue in the world of art to the only relationship of causal law in the world of science, and encloses it within the circle of fine style. In this, as in life, he fuses a quality common to two sensations, extracts their essence and in order to withdraw them from the contingencies of time, unites them in a metaphor, thus chaining them together with the indefinable bond of a verbal alliance” (IV, 468).

²⁷⁹ Love, for Proust, produces a similar effect to metaphors and the usage of the *imparfait* and indirect speech, which is one of the reasons it is so important to him. In *À L’Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs*, Proust describes this effect love has over us when he writes that “when, even without knowing it, I thought of them, they, more unconsciously still, were for me the mountainous blue undulations of the sea, the outline of a procession against the sea. It was the sea that I hoped to find, if I went to some town where they had gone. The most exclusive love for a person is always a love for something else” (II, 189). We find a similar description of this phenomenon in the last paragraph of “Présence Réelle”, a section of “Les Regrets, Rêveries Couleur du Temps”, which will be discussed further ahead.

dwelled no longer in themselves but in the beholder's eyes. Proust believed these three stylistic resources would enable him to construct an indefinitely stretchable world, where he could construct the narrative of his life on his own terms, getting rid of what he felt to be wild or untamable, and forcing these rebellions to conform. This obviously explains why moments such as the first time young Marcel witnesses Berma perform come as a shock to him, because by expanding Marcel's concept of art, her performance blatantly shows him that his definitions and concepts are not yet (and perhaps, he understands, never will be) enough to circumscribe the world according to his own terms²⁸⁰.

Descombes seems to be saying something about this particular problem when, in *Philosophy of the Novel*, he tries to define *À La Recherche* as a never-ending repetition of patterns, in which all characters behave so they reproduce Marcel's behavior, showing that his construction offers Proust a vision of himself but also of everyone else:

The architectural complexity of *Remembrance* begins to appear when we ask in what way Marcel, Legrandin, and Swann are in the end the same character. Not, of course, the same character in the narrative, but the same character in the scheme or argument of the realistic novel that serves as the foundation of the whole construction. This initial scenario would be something like: *A man is in danger of finding himself excluded from a party; he will do anything to be invited*. Instead of using this scenario in order to tell a single story (which would not have gone beyond the dimensions of a novella), Proust uses it in order to multiply all sorts of episodes that repeat it in different styles. If the party is for grown-ups, we have the initial scene of the maternal kiss first refused and then extorted. If the party is set in fashionable society, we have the scenes of invitation, as well as the scenes of expulsion from the Verdurin salon (Swann, Charlus). If the party is erotic, we have the scenes of jealousy (Swann-Odette, Marcel-Gilberte, Robert-Rachel, Marcel-Albertine, Charlus-Morel, et al.) (Descombes, 210)

The argument we have so far been exploring in this chapter, as it has already probably become quite manifest, is very close to the notions of egoism and egotism that are so nuclear in Proust, since Genette fails to see the importance of everything in the novel being centered around Marcel's life and vision. According to our argument, the novel would fall apart if Marcel were anywhere else except at the center of the narrative, if anything in the novel pointed in any direction besides the protagonist's. In the fifteenth chapter, we provided enough examples of Proust's unapologetic egoism when dealing

²⁸⁰ When describing what he considered to be the pathetic fallacy, Ruskin, who Proust so attentively and exhaustively read, seems to be referring to this tension that we have been here trying to describe. Ruskin states that "the greatness of a poet depends upon the two feelings, acuteness of feeling, and command of it. A poet is great, first, in proportion to the strength of his passion, and then, that strength being granted, in proportion to his government of it" (Ruskin, III, 215). When quoting Ruskin, we will parenthetically indicate the volume of his complete works we are referring to, followed by the page number.

with his housekeeper and we can safely say that this characteristic was somehow ubiquitous in the author's life.

Just to quote another brief instance of Proust's egotism, we could take a look at the second of the famous Proust questionnaires, which Proust answered when he was around twenty years old. When asked what he hated most, Proust wrote: "what is wrong in me". Soon afterwards, questioned about the military accomplishment he most admired, Proust replied: "my volunteering!" (*E&A*, 33). At an early age, Proust already seems to have understood that the importance of things has nothing to do with the objective impact they have on the world, but has everything to do with the impact they cause on his own life, as it will be from his own life that he will feed his work²⁸¹.

This incipient idea would bloom in *À La Recherche*, where Proust expatiates on the subject. In *La Fugitive*, Proust presents perhaps the best image of this problem when, considering the relatively small importance Marcel attributed to Elstir in the days of Balbec in comparison to the attention he then offered to Albertine, Proust writes: "A simple slice of bread, but one that we eat, gives us more pleasure than all the ortolans, leverets and rock-partridges that were set before Louis XV, and the blade of grass quivering a few inches in front of our eyes as we lie on the hillside may conceal from us the vertiginous summit of a mountain if the latter is several miles away" (IV, 79).

The importance Proust attributes to egotism is obviously related to its perceived prevalence in the world, since Proust sees it as one of the main characteristics of humanity or, at least, of everyone around Marcel. Proust identifies this general characteristic of mankind (in this particular case, of womankind) when, in *Le Côté de Guermantes*, he claims that "in the lives of most women, everything, even the greatest sorrow, resolves itself into a question of 'trying-on' [*une question d'essayage*]" (II, 631), or when the Duc and Duchesse of Guermantes prioritize a masquerade ball over a dying cousin and then over Swann's imminent death²⁸². But he is considerably shrewder in *Du Côté de Chez Swann*, when suggesting that the admiration Swann had for Mme. Verdurin is not so much related with her intellectual virtues (something that isn't hard to believe) but more with the help she provided him in seducing Odette (Swann claims without any doubt that Mme. Verdurin "has a profound understanding of art. But it is not, perhaps, in that that she is

²⁸¹ We find a variation of this idea, for example, when, in *Le Temps Retrouvé*, Marcel claims that The first edition of a work would have been more precious in my eyes than any other, but by this term I should have understood the edition in which I read it for the first time. I should seek out original editions, those, that is to say, in which I once received an original impression of a book" (IV, 465).

²⁸² Cf. Chapter 7.

most admirable; every little action, ingeniously, exquisitely kind, which she has *performed for my sake*, every thoughtful attention, every little gesture, quite domestic and yet quite sublime, reveals a more profound comprehension of existence than all your textbooks of philosophy” (I, 245, my emphasis)).

Marcel himself, as it should be expected by now, is never exempted from this constitutive egotism. This is so prevalent, surreptitious and strong that it often makes it impossible to separate intellectual considerations from egotistic interests, for example. To present one of many possible situations in which this confusion takes place, we should look at Marcel’s conversation with Norpois regarding Elstir, during which Marcel praises one of the painter’s pieces simply because he knew it to be at house of the Duchesse de Guermantes, and intended Norpois to invite him there so that he could finally meet the Duchesse. Although Marcel seems to be perfectly aware of why he admired the painting in question so much, he nevertheless cannot avoid a metonymic contamination, as he confesses that the reasons which led him to appreciate the painting in question had little to do with its aesthetic value, “if I had been a prominent person and had been asked to state what picture I liked best, I should have named this *Bunch of Radishes*” (II, 520).

We might expect that the awareness of this constitutive egotism somehow came as a burden for Marcel, as an evil he couldn’t perhaps beat but hoped to attenuate. Nonetheless, he is always unrepentant when it comes to this (and, as a matter of fact, about virtually everything else). He never shows remorse for his behavior towards Albertine, who he goes as far as almost incarcerating in his house in order to find some relieve for his jealousy. Marcel forces Albertine through emotional blackmail to stay inside, giving her permission to leave only in very well-defined terms and conditions and with him knowing exactly where she would be at any given second. Not only does he not apologize for these attitudes, but he erases from the novel any episode which might present him in a better light. In the three thousand and five hundred pages of *À La Recherche*, very rarely do we witness an altruistic attitude on Marcel’s behalf, as if those moments somehow constituted a moral failure²⁸³.

In the novel, we always have the impression that both Proust and Marcel are deprived of any sense of moral duty, at least in the terms we are accustomed to conceiving

²⁸³ Following an argument that we have previously developed, we could see the absence of altruism as well as another way for Proust to sadistically punish himself through Marcel. Cf. Chapter 13.

it²⁸⁴. In fact, Marcel confesses this when in *La Prisonnière* he explains that “the notion of justice, to the extent of a complete absence of moral sense, was unknown to me” (III, 795). The importance Proust attributes to egotism is perhaps better understood if we take into consideration his position towards friendship, which Beckett, in the book he devoted to Proust, described as “the attempt to communicate where no communication is possible (...) like the madness that holds a conversation with the furniture” (Beckett, 46). According to Proust, the main difference between friendship and egotism resides in the idea of appropriation. In the preface he wrote for his translation of Ruskin’s *Sesame and Lilies*, Proust attacks the English critic by saying that, contrarily to what Ruskin suggests, reading is not exactly a form of friendship between the reader and the writer. For Proust, reading can only be seen as a friendship between these entities if it is a form of friendship with the dead²⁸⁵, “unencumbered with everything that makes other friendships ugly”: “respect, gratitude and devotion” (*On Reading*, 33). By classifying respect, gratitude and devotion as ‘ugly’, Proust is stating that the problem with friendship is that it detaches us from the center of our own life, making us prioritize others. What is more, friendship separates us from silence and introspection, which Proust sees as fundamental for artistic creation, making us become barrenly altruistic creatures²⁸⁶.

On the other hand, by forcing us to appropriate those who surround us (having artistic creation in mind), egotism not only keeps us at the center of ourselves but, by assimilating everything that touches us, makes us sufficiently robust to be able to come up with a literary work. Based on the lessons he learned from his relationship with Albertine in *La Fugitive*, it is precisely this that makes Marcel describe man as “the creature that cannot emerge from himself, that knows his fellows only in himself; when he asserts the contrary, he is lying” (IV,34). More than showing how intrinsic to human nature egotism is, Proust is here arguing that friendship does not make people become saints but rather sub-humans.

²⁸⁴ “Proust is completely detached from any moral considerations. There is no right and wrong in Proust nor in his world” (Beckett, 49).

²⁸⁵ For Proust, the fact that, while we are reading a book, the author is necessarily dead to us, even if he is alive and well, is one of the reasons that makes of literature an acceptable kind of friendship (“Victor Hugo says:

Grass must grow and children must die.

To me it seems more correct to say that the cruel law of art is that people die and we ourselves die after exhausting every form of suffering, so that over our heads may grow the grass not of oblivion but of eternal life”) (IV, 615)).

²⁸⁶ On this topic, it might be worth reading “L’Étranger”, a section of “Rêveries Couleur du Temps”, in *Les Plaisirs et les Jours*, which was already discussed in the sixteenth chapter.

Still on the preface Proust wrote for his translation of Ruskin's *oeuvre*, we find one particular remark to be rather relevant to the subject we are concerned with in this chapter. Proust claims that

even the language of the book in itself is pure (in any book worthy of the name), rendered transparent by the author's thought which has removed from the book everything that is not itself until the book becomes its faithful portrait; every sentence, fundamentally, is like every other, because they have all been spoken with the unique inflection of a single personality; there is thus a sort of continuity, incompatible with the interactions we have in life and with everything foreign to thought that those interactions mix into it, a continuity which constantly enables us to follow the true line of the author's thought, the features of his physiognomy, as reflected in this tranquil mirror (*On Reading*, 34)

Once again, Proust is suggesting that the importance of egotism is that it allows writers to discover some 'sort of continuity' in life, allowing them to write books in which every phrase has 'been spoken with the unique inflection of a single personality'. It might be this Proustian characteristic that Bernard de Fallois had in mind in his preface to *Contre Sainte-Beuve* when he argues that "Proust's superiority over the majority of those who preceded him comes from the fact that those writing more books are constantly doing the same without knowing it, while he, knowing it, only wrote one (...) Above all, Proust is a one-book man" (*CSB*, 7)²⁸⁷.

In *À La Recherche*, we find a couple of moments in which friendship is unflatteringly compared with egotism. Perhaps the best example of this is a rather long passage in *À L'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs*, where Marcel reflects on the sacrifices one needs to make in order to become a writer:

And yet, perhaps I was not wrong in sacrificing the pleasures not only of society but of friendship to that of spending the whole day in this green garden. People who have the capacity to do so - it is true that such people are artists, and I had long been convinced that I should never be that - also have a duty to live for themselves. And friendship is a dispensation from this duty, an abdication of self. Even conversation, which is friendship's mode of expression, is a superficial digression which gives us nothing worth acquiring. We may talk for a lifetime without doing more than indefinitely repeat the vacuity of a minute, whereas the march of thought in the solitary work of artistic creation proceeds in depth, in the only direction that is not closed to us, along which we are free to advance—though with more effort, it is true—towards a goal of truth. And friendship is not merely devoid of virtue, like conversation, it is fatal to us as well. For the sense of boredom which those of us whose law of development is purely internal cannot help but feel in a friend's company (when, that is to say, we must remain on the surface of ourselves, instead of pursuing our voyage of discovery into the depths) - that first impression of boredom our friendship impels us to correct when we are alone again, to recall with emotion the words which our friend said to us, to look upon them as a valuable addition to our substance, when the fact

²⁸⁷ This preface is not included in the English version. The translation is, therefore, of our responsibility.

is that we are not like buildings to which stones can be added from without, but like trees which draw from their own sap the next knot that will appear on their trunks, the spreading roof of their foliage (II, 260)

Again, what underlies this passage is the idea of appropriation. Egotism allows the world to be absorbed by the writer, in this particular case by Marcel, while it forces Marcel's surroundings to become not something outside of himself, but his own sap which will eventually feed the 'spreading roof' of his foliage²⁸⁸. Friendship, on the other hand, forces things to remain the same and keeps them only surface with no intrinsic relation to Marcel.

In "Prosopopeia", Riffaterre offers us a perfect description of the notion of appropriation in Proust's novel when he describes prosopopeia²⁸⁹ as the moment when "either the subject will take over the object, or it will be penetrated by the object" (Riffaterre, 112). Proust's entire novel can be read under the light of Riffaterre's description of prosopopeia, in the sense that everything which surrounds Marcel is appropriated by him and everything appropriates Marcel.

Marcel's use of prosopopeia is a way for him to regain control and flatten the world by incorporating it in his life and in his voice. Any given object (and an object could be, of course, in this particular case, a girl one is in love with) has to be given a voice until that voice becomes Marcel's. Thus, the prosopopeia is only needed until Marcel is able to capture the object of his desire, until it doesn't resist him anymore and becomes one with Marcel²⁹⁰. Then, the object becomes silent and Marcel can begin to simply describe it as just another plain element of his world. Giving objects and people their own voice is just a steppingstone towards them losing their authenticity and falling

²⁸⁸ When, in *Du Côté de Chez Swann*, Proust makes fun of people like Mme. Des Laumes who, "not being in love themselves, feel that a clever man should only be unhappy about a person who is worth his while; which is rather like being astonished that anyone should condescend to die of cholera at the bidding of so insignificant a creature as the comma bacillus" (I, 337), he is precisely arguing in favor of this idea. Proust is saying that the impact people have on our lives is only measurable through the disarrangement they cause within ourselves, and that this internal disarrangement is not inferable from their value in the world's eyes.

²⁸⁹ Prosopopeia being the figure of speech in which an imaginary or absent person, an entity or simply an object is represented as speaking or acting.

²⁹⁰ Under this perspective, the parallel Riffaterre traces between masturbation and literary creation in Proust's work is also fundamental, as they are both an attempt to appropriate the world, to dominate and replace the object of one's desire for a more tamable and illusory image of that same object, an attempt to place oneself in the position of the creator of a world. Thus, when masturbating, Marcel is, just like a writer or any other artist, a prosopopeial agent par excellence, giving voice and life to images he intends to eventually incorporate in himself, a voice he intends to transform into his own. We will come back to this idea in the chapters on Love's Mechanism.

under Proust's control²⁹¹. As was previously argued and will be argued again, the objects Marcel is giving voice to are always partially composed of himself, hence he is always simultaneously looking and being looked at, always on both sides of the window through which he is spying the world.

Understanding this idea allows us to describe the seven volumes of the novel as a battle between the narrator and what is being narrated, since there is an obvious dispute between Marcel and what surrounds him, in which Marcel is either presented as just another element of his environment or as the nuclear center responsible for giving all those elements life and soul. He either appropriates or is appropriated by the objects and people cohabiting with him in Paris. This idea of appropriation makes Marcel a monstrous creature who simultaneously incorporates everything while being scattered all around, and it explains why many episodes which would normally be present in a traditional autobiographical narrative are almost excluded from *À La Recherche*. As for one reason or another these episodes aren't seen by Proust as universal, as they don't point out to something which somehow makes Marcel's life the life of all the other characters, and in a sense our own life, they are consigned to a peripheral place in *À La Recherche* or completely vanish.

In *À L'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs*, during a conversation with Odette and Marcel, Swann says to Odette: "I was simply trying to explain to this young man [Marcel] that what the music [Vinteuil's sonata] shows - to me, at least - is not 'the triumph of the Will' or 'In Tune with the Infinite,' but shall we say old Verdurin in his frock-coat in the palmhouse in the Zoological Gardens" (I, 524). This is a good summary of *À La Recherche*. Regarding his novel, Proust is unconcerned about writing either an autobiography or a philosophical treaty; he exclusively aims at writing a book about himself where, by capturing himself, he is also able to capture old Verdurin in a frock coat in the palmhouse of the Zoological Gardens. He intends to describe himself in a way that allows him to understand and depict others as well, hence reducing their foreignness. Thus, episodes which wouldn't allow him to find this universality in his own depth are excluded or placed in the least illuminated corners of the novel. This is, perhaps, why episodes such as the loss of Marcel's virginity, the enormous list of lovers he had prior

²⁹¹ This idea is obviously related to an argument we have already exposed regarding Proust's pastiches, as those pastiches are a way for Proust to incorporate the tone of writers he felt influencing him by reproducing their own voice until the moment their voice becomes one with Proust's or until he feels freed from their influence. Cf. Chapter 10.

and after Albertine, the trip to Germany, the duels he got involved in or the girl he suggests to have imprisoned in his house after the death of Albertine (episodes which also correspond to moments in Proust's life) are only briefly alluded to in *À La Recherche*. All these episodes constitute extremely individual experiences Proust didn't consider to be in any way universal to the point of being at some level shared by the remaining characters of the novel. Thus, by narrating them, Marcel wouldn't be one step closer to the final revelation he experienced in the *Bal des Têtes*, and wouldn't be treading the path that would eventually lead him to become a writer.

In this perspective, the final pages of *Le Temps Retrouvé* are nothing else than the discovery that Marcel's world is after all inside Marcel and in close connection with him. Those pages reflect the understanding that the bell which announced the departure of Swann from Marcel's family house doesn't remain in Combray, but that "to hear it better it was into my own depths that I had to re-descend" (IV, 623). What is even more revealing, is that Marcel once again, right at the end of his novel, associates writing with the discovery of a 'sort of continuity'. He is once more levelling up every event in his life, tying them up around his own tone, giving to his work, thence, some sort of eternity:

When the bell of the garden gate had pealed, I already existed and from that moment onwards, for me still to be able to hear that peal, there must have been no break in continuity, no single second at which I had ceased or rested from existing, from thinking, from being conscious of myself, since that moment from long ago still adhered to me and I could still find it again, could retrace my steps to it, merely by descending to a greater depth within myself. (IV, 624)

We have thus been claiming that the importance of the characters in *À La Recherche*, just like the importance of any given story included there, is not due to an objective importance they might have had in themselves, but in the relation they establish with Marcel and with Marcel's life, with this continuity they reveal²⁹². Aunt Léonie is aunt Léonie, but she is also a caricature of Marcel's (and Proust's) obsession with mapping his world, his need to understand how everything he sees from his window articulates and interacts²⁹³. Bloch is Bloch, but he is also a caricature of Proust as a young man. René Girard shrewdly noted the transformation of Jean Santeuil, Proust's alter ego

²⁹² "The rage for generalization is a deep and ineradicable element of [Marcel's] individual being. It enables him to imagine that the world is predictable and therefore controllable" (Landy, 33).

²⁹³ It is important to notice that, just like aunt Léonie only sees the world through her window, many of the most important revelations of the novel are grasped by Marcel precisely through windows and peepholes. On the topic of this mapping of the world, cf. Poulet's *The Proustian Space*.

in his first unfinished novel, into Legrandin²⁹⁴. And there has probably never been a Proustian critic who failed to see Charlus as a satirical portrait of Proust's homosexual advances²⁹⁵.

To illustrate this point, it might be useful to pay attention to an argument William C. Carter presents in *The Proustian Quest*. Carter tries to refute the suggestion made by critics like Margaret Mein and J.E. Rivers, who found an allusion to Alfred Agostinelli in the episode of *Sodome et Gomorrhe* where Marcel, while taking a horse ride after leaving Albertine at her aunt's house, is overflowed by something he had never seen before: an airplane. In that moment, Marcel is rather unexpectedly overcome with emotion and tries to hold back his tears. Carter claims that even if Albertine is clearly a portrait of Agostinelli in the latter volumes of the novel, that particular episode is not an allusion to his former chauffeur, who had died in a tragic plane accident, but rather to a story Marcel Plantevignes told Proust²⁹⁶.

According to his memoirs, Plantevignes told Proust two different stories, which were combined in this episode: the first is that Plantevignes had one day, at Cabourg, seen an airplane flying over his car which made him cry for reminding of his late grandfather; and the second is the story of when Plantevignes, who contrarily to Proust used to go on horse rides, was riding a horse which became agitated when they were overflowed by an airplane. Plantevignes claims Proust told him he completely understood what Plantevignes felt during those two moments, and asked Plantevignes' "permission to narrate the story as if it had happened to him" (Plantevignes, 352). Carter's main problem here is confounding sources and motives. Even if we take the story Plantevignes told in

²⁹⁴ "Jean Santeuil's 'artistic temperament', for example, is found in Legrandin's character" (Girard (1978), 417).

²⁹⁵ The idea here explored is reinforced if we take into consideration that on the first page of the first volume of the novel, Marcel claims he used to fall asleep reading books and, when he woke up, he always imagined that, regardless of the theme of the book, it spoke about himself. On this particular topic, Proust seems rather influenced by Henri Bergson, who was married to a cousin of Proust's, and who argued, in *Laughter*, that "we are strangely mistaken as to the part played by poetic imagination, if we think it pieces together its heroes out of fragments filched from right and left, as though it were patching together a harlequin's motley. Nothing living would result from that. Life cannot be recomposed; it can only be looked at and reproduced. Poetic imagination is but a fuller view of reality. If the characters created by a poet give us the impression of life, it is only because they are the poet himself, - multiplication or division of the poet, - the poet plumbing the depths of his own nature in so powerful an effort of inner observation that he lays hold of the potential in the real, and takes up what nature has left as a mere outline or sketch in his soul in order to make of it a finished work of art" (Bergson, 167-8).

²⁹⁶ I am indebted to Professor João Figueiredo for calling my attention to this episode.

1966 seriously ²⁹⁷, the discovery of the story's provenance isn't enough to justify its appearance in the novel, since it is very hard to imagine this episode would somehow be an homage to Plantevignes²⁹⁸. Finding the origins of an episode does not allow us to uncover Proust's intention, since Proust is neither a memorialist, nor does the story have any interest in itself. Taking Plantevignes' word as gospel (which we should at all times refrain from doing) only allows us to understand that Proust saw in it something which benefited the story he was telling as a whole. Proust behaved towards Plantevignes as someone that finds, in the middle of the street, an abandoned desk that, not particularly beautiful, would perfectly fit that person's living room, and so brings it back home. Carter himself seems to have understood this as he suggests Proust grew interested in Plantevignes' story because it reminded him of Marcel's "bondage and failure" (Carter, 180), and saw in the aviator the representation of "the creative person who is able to free himself from habits and obsessions" (Carter, 182), thus not viewing the episode as a simple curiosity in a friend's life. Therefore, even if the story was told to Proust by Plantevignes himself, it only entered *À La Recherche* because it allowed him to associate Albertine and Agostinelli in the same episode, allowing him thus to evoke the memory of someone he seems to have loved for a significant part of his life²⁹⁹.

If Proust was inspired by Plantevignes in that particular moment of his *oeuvre*, it is not because of Plantevignes, but despite him. Proust wanted everything to revolve around him and shows sorrow whenever anything can be seen objectively, outside of himself, making him just someone else's scribe. Proust states this rather clearly in the introduction he wrote to *Jean Santeuil*, where C., the novel's fictitious writer, is said to never "say to the landlord, pointing to the scribbled pages, 'You're there' (...) for he knew well enough that they, as persons or as objects, counted for nothing in those

²⁹⁷ Proust was acquainted with Plantevignes in the summers between 1908 and 1910, which he spent in Cabourg. Yet, neither Carter nor Plantevignes suggest a precise date for these episodes, failing to present (which is, of course, understandable and acceptable) any documental proof of these stories

²⁹⁸ This topic brings to mind the moment when, in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, Marcel asks "would we in fact go to so much trouble for the woman herself, if she were not complemented by these occult forces, considering that, once she has left us, we are unable to say how she was dressed and realize that we never even looked at her??" (III, 511).

²⁹⁹ From this point of view, it is rather curious to see both Agostinelli and Albertine appearing almost simultaneously driving an airplane and a horse, the modes of transportation that ended up killing them. The fact that the plane is driven hesitantly, suggesting the aviator wasn't experienced at all, is also an obvious allusion to Agostinelli. Finally, we should note that immediately after the aviator breaks free towards the sky, "as though returning to his native element" (III, 417), Proust abruptly starts talking about Morel, the character in the novel who most resembles Agostinelli. Of course, the suggestion that this episode is an evocation of Agostinelli doesn't necessarily mean it doesn't have other possible readings, more closely connected with the novel's internal structure.

moments of vision which had so often come to him in their presence” (*Santeuil*, 193). Thus, the people around Proust could only enter his novel when they were no longer themselves but an ingredient of Proust’s own sap, they could only become characters as soon as they were appropriated by Proust.

The initial scene of *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, where Marcel spies Jupien and Charlus mutually seducing each other, is crucial for the understanding of this notion of egotism we have been exploring. Proust juxtaposes this seduction scene with the description of a plant’s process of pollination:

Then, realizing that no one could see me, I decided not to let myself be disturbed again for fear of missing, should the miracle be fated to occur, the arrival, almost beyond the possibility of hope (across so many obstacles of distance, of adverse risks, of dangers), of the insect sent from so far away as ambassador to the virgin who had been waiting for so long (III, 4)

The arrival of the insect to pollinize the plant can only be seen as an almost impossible miracle if we consider one particular insect and one particular plant, since there is nothing miraculous about one of the millions of insects in Paris during spring landing on the plant Marcel was looking at. This is a lesson Marcel will learn throughout *À La Recherche*. He will realize the miracle of love is not so miraculous after all if we consider that had he never met Albertine, any other girl would have taken her place, as in fact others did after her (and Gilberte, for instance, had done before her). Hence, the importance people have in Marcel’s life has little to do with their individuality but almost exclusively with the relative position they occupy regarding himself.

In *Monsieur Proust*, Céleste has a thought similar to the one young Marcel expressed in the initial scene of *Sodome et Gomorrhe*. Céleste claims that “Albertine existed in M. Proust’s mind and in his notebooks long before Agostinelli”. Rather than demonstrating to the reader that Agostinelli didn’t play any role whatsoever in *À La Recherche*, or that Proust was never in love with his chauffeur, the latter only proves that Agostinelli came to occupy a place in Proust’s love life that had been set long before his appearance. This makes it abundantly clear that Proust’s love life, just like Marcel’s, repeated a rather predictable pattern where new people came to occupy old positions, which were constantly left vacant in a bizarre game of musical chairs.

Before moving on to one last comment regarding Proust’s egotism, it would perhaps be beneficial to take another look at a section of “Les Regrets, Rêveries Couleur du Temps” called “Présence Réelle”, already alluded to in the eleventh chapter, as it

allows us to better understand the argument exposed in the last couple of paragraphs. In this rather juvenile and hyperbolic segment of *Les Plaisirs et les Jours*, the narrator describes a trip he made to the border between Germany and Italy. On that trip, he was accompanied by someone he loved, and to whom the narrator's monologue is directed. The lover guarantees he never had enough of his loved one: "I have never left you at home. You came with me on my strolls, you ate at my table, you slept in my bed, you dreamt in my soul" (P&J, 200). Yet, the narrator admits that "I have never talked to you and I hadn't even seen you that year" (P&J, 200), lamenting "not having you with me in your material form, but only in the garments of my regrets, in the reality of my desire" (P&J, 201). What Proust is pointing at here is that feeling the 'présence réelle' of an object of desire has nothing to do with the loved ones themselves, but only with the position they occupy in relation to us and how much their presence is felt within ourselves, regardless of what they do or say, regardless of where they are and regardless of what they feel. They are there even if they are dead or gone, or even if we have never talked to them.

Believing this could be the case, that it is possible to feel the real presence of someone by carrying them inside ourselves or by placing them within a narrative, offers literature, and particularly *À La Recherche*, a therapeutic virtue. By transferring his life to his *oeuvre* Proust was, among many other things, trying to purge and control it, resurrecting the dead and achieving some sort of eternity in a place where time would, at last, stand still³⁰⁰. If the real presence of others is independent from their actual physical presence or even from their consent, then *À La Recherche* can be a way to create a real new world, where all the rules are set by Proust himself, giving him room for maneuver and allowing him to make a world more fitting with his anxieties and needs. This would also explain why there are so many repetitions of patterns in *À La Recherche*, because believing someone's real presence to be subjugated to the onlooker's subjectivity takes away from them their individuality, and makes them only as good as the role they play in the onlooker's life. A role which has probably been occupied by someone or something else before. By becoming locked up in Marcel's subjectivity, they tend to become less and less themselves and more and more a variation of Marcel³⁰¹.

³⁰⁰ Proust was of course, and more importantly, also trying to write a novel which was true to life and portrayed his own (and he believed everyone else's) perspective of life.

³⁰¹ This idea comes up often in *À La Recherche*. We find it in *Sodome et Gomorrhe* for example, when Marcel states that "my fate to pursue only phantoms, creatures whose reality existed to a great extent in my imagination" (III, 401).

Finally, reading *À La Recherche* through the lenses of egotism allows us to find a satisfying answer to a problem which has prominently occupied Tadié, but also other Proustian critics: Robert Proust's absence from *À La Recherche*. Since it is generically accepted that the novel has many autobiographical correspondences, it seems peculiar for Proust's brother to have been withdrawn from *À La Recherche*, furthermore when we are aware of the sincere and deep friendship which united Marcel and Robert (Robert was the one in charge of editing Proust's correspondence and the last couple of volumes of *À La Recherche*; he was there, at Proust's bedside, when Proust died, and was the one invited by Proust to pin the Cross of the Legion of Honor, awarded to him in 1920, on his lapel). Tadié suggests this absence could be attributed to two different reasons. Firstly, because Proust was subconsciously jealous of the attention their mother gave her elder son, thus finding some kind of vengeance in removing Robert from the novel; and secondly, because Robert's appearance would entangle *À La Recherche* in too many biographical details and allow a direct identification of sources³⁰². Not disputing the validity of the first argument (the second doesn't seem very plausible, as it could equally be applied to any member of Marcel's family and also, for example, to Françoise), we would like to offer another justification for this surprising absence³⁰³. If we take the description of the novel made in this chapter for granted, it is only natural that we also expect Marcel to occupy a central role in both the novel and, more importantly, in his family household. Everything in *À La Recherche* points to him, as all the other characters exclusively owe their existence to the position they occupy in relation to Marcel. If Marcel were made to share the nuclear position inside his own house with Robert, then the structure of *À La Recherche* could collapse, since Marcel is the novel's center of gravity, which everything and everyone is drawn to.

Yet, Marcel's centrality in both the novel and inside his own family is, from a certain point of view, only illusory. In *Proust's Lesbianism*, Elisabeth Ladenson presents

³⁰² Cf. Tadié (1986), 24.

³⁰³ We could also argue that this absence seems to be more of a transference, since Robert Proust doesn't vanish from the novel altogether. Robert de Saint-Loup shares with Robert Proust not only a first name but also their bravery during wartime, the generosity and affection towards Proust's alter ego and the gift of friendship (a gift which Proust, as it was previously argued, never seemed to greatly admire, but that nonetheless always moved him when it was manifested towards him). Tadié suggests Saint-Loup is called Robert because of Robert de Billy and Robert de Flers. Yet, in July, 1893, Proust dedicated "Mondanité et Mélomanie de Bouvard et Pécuchet" to "my dear three little Roberts, Robert Proust, Robert de Flers and Robert de Billy, to amuse ourselves" (Cf. *P&J*, 316). Recanati suggests Robert Proust is also present in the initial scene of the goodnight kiss, in the character of Charles Swann, whose role is precisely to separate Marcel from his mother (Recanati, 31).

a persuasive theory which deserves to be taken into consideration at this point. Ladenson suggests that Marcel, being a heterosexual, looks at Lesbians with an obsessive curiosity, envisioning the Lesbian world as the final frontier, whose shutters will remain forever closed to him³⁰⁴, a world he will never have access to. “[Lesbian] desire eludes and excludes him, and he both wishes to penetrate Gomorrah and figures it as self-sufficient and fundamentally impenetrable” (Ladenson, 53). It is the “epitome of ‘what one can’t imagine’” (Ladenson, 50) and, contrarily to the parties of the *faubourg Saint-Germain* and to any other circle he intends to have access to, is entirely self-sufficient. According to Ladenson, this contradicts Marcel’s ideas regarding desire, giving him a glimpse of a world where it can be satisfied, but whose doors are forever closed to him: “Gomorrah is the sole context in the *Recherche* in which the otherwise unbridgeable chasm between subject and object closes, because the laws of Proustian desire, according to which ‘love’ is predicated on the beloved’s essential indifference, cannot apply among creatures who truly desire their like” (Ladenson, 46). As time goes by in the novel, the frontiers of Gomorrah keep expanding and, by the end of *À La Recherche*, we get the feeling that Marcel is one of the few characters who, despite all his efforts, can’t get inside the Lesbian world, as heterosexual women, like Odette and Mme. Verdurin, and even men like Morel (who, at some point, is described by Léa as being one of them (“*Toi tu en es au moins*” (III, 720)) seem at some point to belong to this rather exclusive clan.

The lesbian world is, thus, as Ladenson also shows, only the epitome of a pattern which constantly repeats itself in the novel, the pattern of worlds and communities whose doors are kept closed to Marcel and which, mainly for that reason, he wishes to penetrate. This proves to him and to us readers that his centrality is only an illusion, as the world is forever escaping his own domain. Marcel’s position seems, in fact, to be similar to that of someone who moves from the center of the periphery to the periphery of the center. He is someone who is constantly seeing the world from a stand, while the show goes on stage, often in a language he doesn’t speak fluently. Marcel starts by occupying the center of the novel, but already in the first scene, sees his access denied to the dinner going on downstairs in his Combray house, to which only Swann and Marcel’s family are invited. After this initial loss, Marcel will see sickness, jealousy, snobbery, his own family, and

³⁰⁴ Ladenson points out that when Marcel was about to see a lesbian sex scene between Mme. Vinteuil and her lover, they close the shutters, contrarily to what happens with Charlus in Jupien’s brothel (Ladenson, 63).

many other aspects as keeping him forever far from the action, and preventing him from participating in a show he repeatedly wrongly reinterprets.

In the last chapter of her book, Ladenson argues that, during Marcel's grandmother's life but mainly after her death, Marcel's mother had become increasingly obsessed with the Marquise de Sevigné's *oeuvre*. According to Ladenson, more than literary admiration, Marcel's family's matriarchs' fascination with a 17th century writer serves to exclude Marcel (who never seems to sincerely share this admiration for the Marquise). Their love for the Marquise's letters keeps Marcel apart from the bond which ties the two people he most seems to love in the world during his childhood and, like the Lesbian world would later do, closes the door to their private world³⁰⁵. Thus, the centrality of *À La Recherche* is a centrality which permanently points out to an exclusion, a failure, and the sorrow of being left out of all things. Hence, for Proust, being in the center equates to being blind to the world around him, which merely offers him glimpses of a knowledge he will never obtain, despite all his best efforts.

³⁰⁵ The fact of the Marquise de Sevigné's *oeuvre* being precisely her correspondence with her daughter, leaving her son excluded from their interaction and from this motherly love, reinforces Ladenson's argument.

Chapter 18

The Posthumous Infidelity

Over the years there have been several theories regarding Proust's health. Céleste Albaret and André Gide agree on this subject (even if only on this subject), as they both have no doubt that Proust's predicaments were rather literal and not at all born out of his own mind. In 1921, Gide wrote in his diaries that "for a long time I wondered if Proust did not somehow take advantage of his illness to protect his work (and this seemed quite legitimate to me); but yesterday, and the other day before that, I could see he is really seriously ill"(Gide, 266). Céleste similarly wrote in her memories that people who argued Proust's sickness to be imaginary "have done so for their own ends. Anyone who could have seen M. Proust during that attack when he got back from Cabourg - pale as death, crouching over the fumes, choking for breath - wouldn't need any more proof that it was not play-acting" (Albaret, 51).

However, several of Proust's critics do not share this opinion. Pietro Citati maintained that Proust could easily have cured himself had he wanted to³⁰⁶. Gabrielle Rubin went so far as to claim, rather Freudianly, that "all these enigmatic and incurable illnesses, which were a defiance to medicine, a defiance to doctor Adrien Proust, and the asthmatic crisis - an ailment that would torment him his entire life and become the major cause of his death - were crisis of love and hate, of admiration and denigration casted against his father" (Rubin, 640). In his biography of Proust, Painter also argues Proust's illness was mainly of a psychiatric nature. Painter believed Proust acted sicker than he actually was so he could gain back his mother's love and attention, reminding the reader he was ill on Robert Proust's wedding-day, which leads Painter to suggest his sickness was due exclusively to envy³⁰⁷.

We are in no condition and have no interest in diagnosing Proust's mental or physical condition. It is true that many of his friends have hinted he would claim to be dying when he seemed fine, and it is also true he disregarded his doctors' orders and went out on to the streets of Paris at night, near the day of his death, in mid-November, while beginning to show clear manifestations of pneumonia. This might suggest he was often not as sick as he claimed to be and might not have been very interested in being cured either. Yet, he was followed by several doctors, and not one of them has suggested, as far

³⁰⁶ Cf. Citati, 76-8.

³⁰⁷ Cf. Painter, 293.

as we know, that he suffered from hypochondria. Furthermore, according to Edmund White, Proust had up to ten (quite real) asthma attacks per day³⁰⁸.

Between 1915 and 1919 Proust often claimed to have suffered from problems with his eyesight. More importantly than understanding if this complaint was real or psychological, we should try to come to terms with the role this alleged illness had in the construction of *À La Recherche*. If poor eyesight might have prevented him from adequately reading, writing and reviewing the proofs of the novel, it also gave him the perfect pretext to avoid social events and other responsibilities (for example, writing to his friends or reading the minor works of some of his acquaintances), allowing him to focus on his fiction by creating a wall between himself and the world. In fact, in his correspondence, particularly in the last year of his life, Proust repeatedly said he didn't like to talk about his health. By stating how he avoided talking about what he repeatedly talked about, Proust was subtly underlining to his correspondents the seriousness of his disease, thus excusing himself from the repeated absences his work required, while also preparing them for his imminent death³⁰⁹.

Proust explained to Céleste Albaret the crucial role his sickness played in *À La Recherche*. On one occasion, after hearing her master describe a kitchen, Céleste expressed her astonishment at Proust's power of observation, which led him to explain it was not a gift at all, but merely the outcome of the ailments he had suffered from throughout his entire life:

'But Céleste, it isn't a gift. It is an intellectual bent that can be cultivated until it eventually becomes a habit. Lots of activities were forbidden to me, so I spent more time than most people sitting and watching, and to pass the time, if for nothing else, I used to observe what other people did. Sometimes I watched them with envy, and that made me observe all the better. It started when I was still a child. Once I began to have asthma I had to walk instead of run in the Champs-Élysées and in the Pré Catelan at Illiers (...)' (Albaret, 252)

³⁰⁸ Cf. White, 88.

³⁰⁹ To the British novelist Sydney Schiff, Proust wrote in April, 1922 that "*mais en general je n'aime pas parler de ma santé*" (*Correspondance*, XXI, 118); that same month, he wrote to Mme. Maurice Pouquet, "*je n'aime pas beaucoup parler de ma santé*" (*Correspondance*, XXI, 137); and, one month later, to Gaston Gallimard, Proust explained that "*je n'aime pas beaucoup parler de ma santé*" (*Correspondance*, XXI, 168), adding his request that Gallimard reveal Proust's fragile state of health to Robert Kemp as a post-script, so that Proust could excuse himself for not having thanked Kemp for "an article to tell you the truth (detestable) but certainly well-intended" (*Correspondance*, XXI, 169). As in those three letters Proust had, before using this magical formula, openly referred to the ailments he allegedly didn't like to mention, it would be plausible to believe that he wanted to use these revelations also as a token of friendship, as a proof that his correspondents were given a privilege he reserved only to his closest friends.

This idea would often come up again, particularly in Proust's early writings. In "Le Don des Fés", after a fairy lamenting, over the protagonist's cradle, that all she and her sisters had to bestow upon him was suffering, he hears "the voice of what has not yet arrived but will arise from your misunderstood sorrows" (*Le Mystérieux Correspondant*, 127), explaining to him that

Certainly, illness will deprive you of several pleasures. You will barely be able to hunt, go to the theater, dine out, but it will allow you to concentrate on other occupations people tend to neglect, and which, when your day to depart life arrives, you will take to be the only fundamental occupations. Besides, and particularly if I fecund it, illness has virtues soundness does not know. The sufferers I favor often see lots of things that elude the healthy (*Le Mystérieux Correspondant*, 128)

In *Les Plaisirs et les Jours* we find this exact same idea expressed in several different ways. Just to quote one of the many examples we could offer, in the book's dedication, Willie Heath's predicament is described as containing in itself the grace of putting him in touch with the realities on the other side of death. In the same text, the narrator considers Noah to be blessed as, like Proust when he was shut down in his room due to his illnesses, Noah was never as capable of looking at the world as he did during the forty nights he was locked inside the arch³¹⁰.

Miguel Tamen stresses something which relates to some of the ideas we're presenting in this chapter. He claims Proust believed the two necessary gifts one must possess to become a writer are the gift of pastiche, which is nothing more than an aptitude for satire and forgery³¹¹, and the gift of harmony, which seems flattering at first but that, according to Tamen, is nothing more than the product of being sick, and of a defect of sensibility³¹². Thus, according to Tamen, being a writer "derives from a fault: not being able to write, not being able to have ideas" (Tamen, 153). Tamen argues that neither *Contre Sainte-Beuve* nor *À La Recherche* end with a tribute to reminiscence or imitation as, for Proust, writers are sick and shattered people with little or no illusion regarding the possibility of creating art through their own lives, and novels are by definition

³¹⁰ Cf. *P&J*, 41. We find this description of illness as something that allows us to look at the world with fresh eyes also in "Avant La Nuit" and in "La Mort de Baldassare Sylvande, Vicomte de Sylvanie". On this topic, cf. Bersani, 71.

³¹¹ "The first gift of any given writer is a special aptitude for satire and forgery" (Tamen, 152).

³¹² "Early on, however, we find some evidence that afflicts this second gift of harmony. The first piece of evidence is its description as a 'burdensome gift'. And, immediately afterwards, without any transition, Proust establishes a connection between 'discovering harmonies' and 'being sick': 'In most cases, it is when I am sicker, when I do not have any other ideas inside my head that [I perceive] those bonds between two ideas.' Which equates to saying that this perception of harmony does not equate to a surplus of perception but to a defect of sensibility" (Tamen, 152-153).

posthumous works. As we will argue in our last chapter, the apotheotic tone given to the ending of *Le Temps Retrouvé* is built, not upon some kind of artistic triumph as it has often been suggested, but precisely upon the recognition of this ultimate and unredeemable failure: the failure to see time as a continuum, the failure to avoid death.

In *Profils Juifs de Marcel Proust*, Recanati has an interesting argument which reminds us of Painter's above-quoted claim regarding the veracity of Proust's illness, and which might lead us to understand yet another advantage Proust found in sickness. Recanati quotes a letter Proust wrote to his mother, in which he expresses how her love was increased by his afflictions:

I am afflicted for not finding, in those rather desperate hours, the moral consolation I trusted you would have to offer. The truth is that, as long as I am alright, the life which allows me to be alright exasperates you, and you demolish everything up to the point that I become ill once again. It is not the first time. I caught a cold this evening; if that evolves into asthma (...) I do not doubt that you will be gentle with me again (...) But it is sad not to be able to have affection and health (Recanati, 42)³¹³

More than the disclosure of the potential pathological relationship Proust had with his own mother, Recanati rightfully finds in this letter the revelation that Proust clearly understood how the lack of emotional care translated into fever and asthma, and how it was through those ailments that emotional comfort could be regained once more.

Recanati believes sickness and money can be more or less subsumed under the description Proust made of Judaism. As we do not take *À La Recherche* to be about Judaism at all, but only consider Judaism to be an incidence of a pattern, and that it is this pattern which Proust is trying to describe in the novel, we will not follow Recanati's argument entirely. What seems to occur with Judaism, with money, and also with sickness, is that they confer upon the Gentiles, the wealthy and the healthy, an illusion of being in control, of having some sort of superiority over the Jews, the less fortunate and

³¹³ Proust would develop this idea in *Les Plaisirs et les Jours*, where, in two different moments, he refers to sickness as a gift, since it necessarily results in an increase of attention and affection devoted to the sick person, namely the attention and affection of the mother. In the dedication to Willie Heath, Proust recalls his periods of sickness, when his mother spent the nights in his room, vigilant. As convalescence came, his mother gradually became absent and her tender words were slowly replaced by severer ones (cf. *P&J*, 41). Later on, in "Confessions d'une Jeune Fille", the protagonist states the exact same idea: "My sweetest impressions are those of the years when [my mother] came back to Les Oublis, calling in because I was sick. Not only did she make one more visit than I was expecting, but above all, she treated me with nothing but sweetness and tenderness, revealing them at length without dissimulation or constraints (...) the charm of convalescence was always deadly sad to me: the day was coming when I would be well enough for my mother to go away and until then I was not suffering enough for her to refrain her severities, justice without the indulgence of before" (*P&J*, 141).

the sick. Yet, if the relationships of the novel are always a quest for power, it is those who appear to be on the down side of the equation that have the upper hand, as established in the chapters devoted to sadomasochism, since the disadvantaged are able to penetrate the life of the well-off without them taking notice, thus silently expanding their love to the point of it being no longer operable³¹⁴. Sickness, like poverty³¹⁵, creates an illusion of dominance in those in better condition, which eventually results in their ultimate defeat. They become dependent of their assumed superiority, which immediately begins to fade away, leading them to despair.

Still bearing the topic of the correlation Proust establishes between sickness and literature in mind, it is perhaps worthy to pay close attention to a long sequence in the middle of *Le Temps Retrouvé* (IV, 479-490), where Proust speaks in detail not only about how the two subjects are connected but also many other issues that have been concerning us here.

In the beginning of the sequence, Proust begins by going back to his often-repeated idea that literature consists of extracting generic and universal laws about humankind from singular individuals, without the writer ever looking at those individuals from a moral perspective. In doing so, he recurs to a metaphor of a medical nature:

The stupidest people, in their gestures, their remarks, the sentiments which they involuntarily express, manifest laws which they do not themselves perceive but which the artist surprises in them. Because he makes observations of this kind the writer is popularly believed to be ill-natured. But this belief is false: in an instance of ridiculous behavior the artist sees a beautiful generality, and he no more condemns on this account the individual in whom he observes it than a surgeon would despise a patient for suffering from some quite common disorder of the circulation; the writer, in fact, is the least inclined of all men to scoff at folly (IV, 480)

A few lines later, we will find Marcel reflecting on the therapeutic nature of literature (about which he will have more to say afterwards), again comparing the writing activity to a healing process:

And when we seek to extract from our grief the generality that lies within it, to write about it, we are perhaps to some extent consoled for yet another reason apart from those that I have mentioned, which is that to think in terms of general truths, to write, is for the writer a wholesome and necessary function the fulfilment of which makes him happy, it does for him what is done for men of a more physical nature by exercise, perspiration, baths (IV, 480-1)

³¹⁴ Cf. I, 303.

³¹⁵ The case of Jewishness seems to be, as Recanati convincingly demonstrates, rather different, as it imposes upon the members of what Proust defined as the 'accursed race', a social stain which cannot be easily eliminated, forcing them to pretend to be Gentiles and avoid being seen with other co-religionaries. We have dealt with this subject in the fifth chapter.

Marcel will then claim that not only did he not resent his ailments but, in fact, actually desired them as a just form of expiation for the lack of love he had shown Albertine, and mainly Marcel's grandmother, after their death, while having used that love to afterwards write his novel: "My grandmother whom I had watched with so much indifference while she lay near me in her last agony. Ah! could I, when my work is done, wounded beyond remedy, suffer, in expiation, long hours of abandonment by all as I lie dying". In this passage, Marcel appears to be presented as a masochist who wants to suffer in order to expiate the evil he perceives in himself, an evil that, as happened with Mlle. Vinteuil, seems to result from an excess of sensitivity rather than from an outburst of pure spitefulness.

Yet, the suffering Marcel claims to want imposed upon himself undergoes a sudden inflexion immediately afterwards when, through his literary efforts, he realizes that the abominable nature of his behavior is, after all, a trait common to all of us. Marcel maintains that we all forget the people we once loved. Even the ones who played a major role in our lives will have their place occupied by people who come after them, they all lose their extreme individuality over the generalizing tendency which engulfs our lives. Thus, Marcel seems to have exaggerated regarding the monstrosity of his behavior, so that he could see it in its actual size, in front of his own eyes, and then exorcize it by reducing it to a simple human pattern. He starts showing us how he is unafraid to reveal the rottenness of his inner self, only to excuse such decay by describing it simply as a universal human trait:

All those men and women who had revealed some truth to me and who were now no more, appeared again before me, and it seemed as though they had lived a life which had profited only myself, as though they had died for me. Saddening too was the thought that my love, to which I had clung so tenaciously, would in my book be so detached from any individual that different readers would apply it, even in detail, to what they had felt for other women. But had I a right to be shocked at this posthumous infidelity, shocked that strangers should find new and alien objects for my feelings in unknown women, when this infidelity, this division of love between a number of women, had begun in my lifetime and even before I had started to write? (IV, 482)

This idea would be restated more explicitly a couple of pages later, again with recourse to medical vocabulary:

Certainly we are obliged to re-live our individual suffering, with the courage of the doctor who over and over again practices on his own person some dangerous injection. But at the same time we have to conceptualize it in a general form which will in some measure enable

us to escape from its embrace, which will turn all mankind into sharers in our pain, and which is even able to yield us a certain joy (IV, 484)

As we have previously argued in chapter 12, by the time he wrote *Jean Santeuil*, Proust had understood he could not avoid sorrow. Thus, one of the decisive realizations Proust had when the time came to write his major novel was that literature could provide him a way to transform sorrow into something which caused less suffering, something resembling joy and happiness. By converting individuals into generalities (with those individuals still remaining completely particular³¹⁶), he could pass over the causes of sorrow, probing its essence and consequently avoiding its unwanted fruits. Through the process of fictionalizing his world, Proust could convert his sorrows not into suffering but into something generic which had little impact on his actual life. By transferring his world onto the pages of *À La Recherche*, Proust would turn his own heartaches into something impersonal and universal, with no direct impact upon how he perceived himself. Through fiction, heartaches are therefore converted into mere physical pain, things that might hurt momentarily but do not affect who one is³¹⁷.

With the process of writing *À La Recherche*, Proust comes to realize that fiction has the power of converting what has happened to ourselves into things we look at from the other side of a window. It converts things we have lived through into things we have glimpsed at in other people's lives. Then, if life is constituted (at least as Proust perceived it) as an agglomeration of painful moments, by converting our sorrows into somebody else's, into something that happens not only to us (or, more specifically, no longer to us) but with everyone around us, the pain brought by sorrow simply becomes an idea, one

³¹⁶ Regarding the limits of Proust's generalization, cf. Chapter 19.

³¹⁷ "But from another point of view the work is a promise of happiness, because it shows us that in every love the particular and the general lie side by side and it teaches us to pass from one to the other by a species of gymnastic which fortifies us against unhappiness by making us neglect its particular cause in order to gain a more profound understanding of its essence. Indeed—as I was to experience in the sequel—even at a time when we are in love and suffer, if our vocation has at last been realized, we feel so strongly during the hours in which we are at work that the individual whom we love is being dissolved into a vaster reality that at moments we succeed in forgetting her and we come to suffer from our love merely as we might from some purely physical disease in which the loved one played no part, some kind of malady of the heart." (IV, 483). In *Proust and The Art of Love*, J.E. Rivers suggests, in passing, something resembling our argument here. In Mme. Scheikévich's exemplar of *Du Côté de Chez Swann*, Proust wrote: "Alas, Madame, I'm running out of blank pages just as the suffering was becoming less acute". Regarding this, Rivers comments that "as long as there are more blank pages to be filled with writing, with analysis, with self-confrontation, the grief can be controlled and the pain understood" (Rivers (1983), 96). Rivers acutely claims that this can be seen as both a symptom of the disease and its treatment, as we have also argued in the chapters devoted to sadomasochism. We will come back to this idea in the last chapter.

that can no longer hurt us as severely as an heartache³¹⁸. What is more, if writing is this process of finding universality in ‘those beings who revealed truths to me and who were no longer there’, and of extracting ‘generality from our sorrow’, then sorrow becomes the path for artistic creation. Thus, art, according to Proust, has this bizarre ability to convert the pain caused by sorrow into the joy of creation. Whereas worldly happiness, when seen under this light, is merely one of the paralyzing instruments of habit which eventually leads to misery. However, if approached in the right way, this misery might ultimately direct us to acquire knowledge of the most consistent and deep manifestations of happiness, the type of happiness only sorrow can bring³¹⁹.

³¹⁸ “Ideas come to us as the substitutes for griefs, and griefs, at the moment when they change into ideas, lose some part of their power to injure our heart; the transformation itself, even, for an instant, releases suddenly a little joy. But substitutes only in the order of time, for the primary element, it seems, is the idea, and grief is merely the mode in which certain ideas make their first entry into us.” (IV, 485).

³¹⁹ “Happiness is salutary for the body but sorrow develops the powers of the spirit”; “Happiness serves hardly any other purpose than to make unhappiness possible. When we are happy, we have to form very tender and strong links of confidence and attachment for their rupture to cause us the precious shattering called misery. Without happiness, if only that of hoping, there would be no cruelty and, therefore, no fruit of misfortune” (IV, 486).

Chapter 19

Un Amour de Marcel

At this point of the argument, we are finally prepared to answer one of the most pressing questions regarding “Un Amour de Swann” and the structure of *À La Recherche*, a question already posed, for instance, by Roger Shattuck in “Lost and Found: The Structure of Proust’s Novel”: “Why this apparent digression into the past? Why introduce a 200-page subplot about Swann just when the protagonist’s story should begin in earnest?” (Bales, 77). This problem becomes even more puzzling if we remind ourselves the above-mentioned digression into the past takes us back to a period when Marcel wasn’t yet born.

Regarding this topic, Tadié presents a series of arguments we will now pay some attention to, not necessarily because of their accurateness but because they allow us to introduce some aspects of Proust’s *oeuvre* we consider relevant to our discussion. Tadié suggests that up to the moment Proust began writing articles on Ruskin he frequently recurred to the third person, but somewhere around 1900 the author discovered the use of *je* would better suit his interests, definitely ridding himself of the tone he had used until then³²⁰. However, Tadié adds that “one fragment in *À La Recherche* remains in the third person: ‘Un Amour de Swann’; is it a remnant of a version in the third person?” (Tadié (1986), 20). Tadié goes as far as to suggest “we can conclude Proust had thought about a version in the third person (...) and he had abandoned it, limiting it to ‘Un Amour de Swann’, where it is a perfect accomplishment” (Tadié (1986), 20).

It is hard to agree with Tadié on this topic. Firstly, because Tadié’s argument hints that Proust was making some kind of homage to his past views in “Un Amour de Swann”, whereas, as we have been arguing, Proust is always extremely violent towards his past selves and particularly towards his accomplishments as a young writer. Secondly, even if in the beginning Proust was somehow hesitant to exclusively adopt the first person, his third person was always rather explicitly tied up around his own life, being therefore a rather autobiographical *il* (or, as happens in the case of “Avant La Nuit” for example, an autobiographical *elle*), not that different thus from Marcel’s *je*. So, it is only natural to notice that, as soon as he started the process of writing *À La Recherche*, Proust became comfortable in the voice he found for his *oeuvre* and never looked back, exclusively

³²⁰ Cf. Tadié (1986), 20.

assuming the first person from then onwards. As Tadié himself put it, at some point “*le Je dévore (...) tout*” (Tadié (1986), 21). Thirdly, and most importantly, we should stress that “Un Amour de Swann” is not a case of a third person narrator, as it is still Marcel telling the story, and Marcel reminds the reader (even if not nearly as often as in the rest of the novel) that he hasn’t yet vanished, pointing out the proximity between Swann’s experience and his own life, and describing the life of Charles Swann in terms so reminiscent of Marcel that we cannot help but notice a parallel is being traced³²¹.

Tadié takes the argument even further when claiming that, by telling a story which took place before Marcel was even born, Proust was indicating Marcel is not that different from the remaining characters and the *je* of *À La Recherche* is impersonal and generic, in every way similar to an *il* or an *elle*. This thesis is indebted to Tadié’s intuition that the architecture of the novel is entirely dependent on Marcel’s perspective of things and that such perspective is more important than the things themselves. We owe a great deal to Tadié’s description of *À La Recherche* as a story of the construction of a perspective, more than a story about time, Paris or any other subject. *À La Recherche* is the story of a vision instead of the envisioning of a story, since Marcel is clearly far more concerned with constructing and describing the perspective he had on things than with how those things actually took place. And, even if we take that to mean something else entirely, we also agree with Tadié’s suggestion that Marcel is not very different from the remaining characters in the novel. Notwithstanding, if we recognize Tadié’s importance on those particular points, we shouldn’t accept some of his other claims in *Proust et le Roman*, namely that the narrator’s voice is an ‘impersonal *je*’ (Tadié, (1986), 33). Tadié reinforces his argument by claiming Marcel is almost nameless (he has no surname and his name is pronounced only twice during the novel, in the first of those occurrences rather hesitantly³²²) and, contrarily to what occurs with practically every other character in the novel, there are almost no physical descriptions of him. Tadié raises the question only to

³²¹ Before beginning “Un Amour de Swann”, Marcel prepares it by stating he would later become aware that Swann experienced at the hands of Odette the same anguish he felt in the initial scene of the novel, thus showing us that Swann’s story is only relevant insofar as it illuminates Marcel’s: “as I was to learn in due course, a similar anguish had been the bane of [Swann’s] life for many years, and no one perhaps could have understood my feelings at that moment so well as he” (I, 30). Later, when beginning to tell Swann’s tale, Marcel imposes his own presence, forcing the reader to keep in mind that the story should be read in synch with what came before and that, somehow, Marcel is still the main character of “Un Amour de Swann” (“I began to take an interest in [Swann’s] character because of the similarities which, in wholly different respects, it offered to my own (...)” (I, 191)).

³²² “[Albertine] would find her tongue and say: ‘My—’ or ‘My darling —’ followed by my Christian name, which, if we give the narrator the same name as the author of this book, would be ‘My Marcel’, or ‘My darling Marcel’” (III, 583).

answer it immediately afterwards: “What is the meaning of that anonymity? It means every reader may be able to read himself in the novel, the narrator’s I should have enough generality: not only it is not Proust’s I but, in his absence, it shouldn’t be anybody’s I in order to be everyone’s” (Tadié (1986), 30)³²³.

We could find many different justifications for the absence of physical traits and a proper name for Marcel. We might argue, for example, that Proust was probably reluctant to physically describe Marcel or give him a proper name because he knew he wouldn’t be able to portray his most explicit alter ego in the novel very differently from himself, by making him blond and fat or calling him Pierre, for example. Marcel’s physical aspect, were Proust to explore it, would be very similar to his own, and he knew that as soon as the resemblance between the two of them moved from the psychological sphere to their physical aspect and identity, *À La Recherche* would be even more simplistically read by his critics as an autobiography, something Proust intended to avoid at all costs. Despite the obvious connection Marcel had with Proust himself, the author wanted Marcel to remain a character and not become an actual person. Nonetheless, it is rather peculiar to suggest, as Tadié did, that Marcel lacked a personality and could be read as a generic character, as ‘nobody’s I’. Marcel’s personality is not only very present but also very distinct, obvious, and shocking, which makes it absurd to imagine him as just an anonymous character who could easily be replaced by ourselves. As if we could unproblematically picture ourselves imprisoning women in our luxurious apartments in Paris, and raping them during their sleep, forcing our loved ones to abandon some dinner only to ease our selfish anxieties or spending a significant part of our days in anguish due to our inability to become a writer.

We could also believe, as Recanati did, that only Céleste Albaret was given permission to make physical descriptions of Marcel, thus explaining their scarcity³²⁴. Recanati claimed that Céleste was the only character allowed to depict Marcel because she was the only ‘actual person’ in *À La Recherche*. Thus, we would not only be persuaded to take her words seriously but also project those descriptions onto Proust himself. By believing Céleste’s words, we would take her description of Marcel as someone who had all of Proust’s Judaism decanted for granted, making of him a Christian

³²³ Tadié is not alone in this idea. Cf., for instance, Philip Kolb’s “Proust’s Protagonist as a Beacon”.

³²⁴ Cf. Recanati, 20. Céleste Albaret, Proust’s housemaid in the last nine years of the writer’s life, lends her name to one of Proust’s secondary characters, that briefly shows up in the third and fourth volume.

just like all the grand seigneurs of the novel. Having Marcel purified of his Jewishness would, according to Recanati, lead us to purify Proust as well, in a movement that expanded from the novel to the outer world, a movement which occurred frequently in Proust's life, as we have already argued.

Even if Recanati's argument seems rather far-fetched and too dependent on Proust's alleged endemic anti-Semitism, we could recognize some plausibility in it. Yet, we should be warned against blindly following Tadié's words on this particular topic, particularly when Proust himself seems to have done his best to argue otherwise inside *À La Recherche*. Proust claimed, in *La Fugitive*, that man is "the creature that cannot emerge from himself, that knows his fellows only in himself; when he asserts the contrary, he is lying" (IV,34) and explained, in *Le Côté de Guermantes*, that "people foolishly imagine that the broad generalities of social phenomena afford an excellent opportunity to penetrate further into the human soul; they ought, on the contrary, to realize that it is by plumbing the depths of a single personality that they might have a chance of understanding those phenomena" (II, 626). Thus, for Proust, the path to finding a character who is everyone's I, and speaks for every one of us, doesn't imply giving that character traits so generic that he or she becomes nobody's I. It is precisely the opposite; it is to give him or her an accentuated individuality so that we can descend to the depths of that character and find ourselves there, even if we end up seeing ourselves in the most eccentric and bizarre traits of this particular character.

Before presenting our argument for the insertion of "Un Amour de Swann" in Marcel's story, we need to take a break and recall the numerous similarities between the way Marcel and Swann are described by Marcel in *À La Recherche*, so that we can establish that "Un Amour de Swann" revolves around Marcel just as much (in fact, considerably more) as it does around Charles Swann. For this purpose, we shall divide the characters' similarities in three groups:

Firstly, we need to look at how Swann and Marcel perceive art. Not only do they tend to compare the people they know to works of art³²⁵, but they also have a profound admiration for Vinteuil's sonata and they both look at it trying to find within it not a 'Synthesis of the Infinite' or the 'Will in Itself' but both "old Verdurin in his frock coat in the palmhouse at the Zoological Gardens (cf. I, 524), and the "national anthem of their love" (cf. I, 215).

³²⁵ Cf., for instance, I, 220-2 and III, 78.

Still on this topic of Swann and Marcel's relationship with art, it is useful to underline that Swann being a blonde Jew, as Recanati has convincingly argued³²⁶, contributes to him being a creature of frontier, moving in different social circles while never completely belonging to any of them. Marcel is not Jewish (we have discussed this topic previously in the fifth chapter), but he is a wealthy bourgeois with aristocratic connections. Due to that condition, with time he will be granted access to the most exclusive clans of Paris without actually ever being part of them. These characteristics are important in what their take on art is concerned, because it is partly due to this common condition that, as we will now try to establish, they both disregard what Swann calls the 'hierarchy of arts' (I, 96).

This disbelief in an artistic hierarchy is far more than just a philosophical consideration and is related to their social mobility. Marcel and Swann tend to look at art, as we have already suggested, as a description of people in their regular lives and not as the conceptualization of deep, unfathomable concepts. Their perception of this subject is shaped by their ability to trespass the frontiers which separate the different Parisian communities at will³²⁷. By seeing these different communities in all their glory, both Swann and Marcel grasp their absolute pointlessness and, what is more, begin to disregard the differences those communities believe to distinguish themselves from the remaining little clans, realizing that what stands out most is their absolute similarity. Thus, they soon understand there is no shelter where truth and beauty hide, no privileged place to find what they are looking for, and that no community holds the monopoly of the world's secrets and enchantments³²⁸. So, they will search everywhere for objects capable of

³²⁶ Cf. Recanati, 17.

³²⁷ These communities are usually social communities, but it is not necessarily so. Marcel, a disbeliever in the 'hierarchy of arts', constantly places the revelations he had in brothels and illustrated editions of the Old Masters, symphony concerts, and guidebooks to historic towns on equal terms, as we have already shown (cf. I, 566). He is thus desacralizing art forms we tend to look at with reverence, arguing that there is no privileged place for the occurrence of the revelations which led him to eventually become a writer.

³²⁸ Swann, in his love for women, recurrently moves from one social circle to another entirely different one in search of some young girl who might give him the pleasures he is looking for, refusing to believe that the kind of women he likes can only be found in the *faubourg Saint-Germain*. Swann cannot conceive there is a hierarchy of privileged places where one can find beauty and pleasure. Just to quote two examples of Swann's iconoclastic behavior, cf. "Swann was so fond of women that, once he had got to know more or less all the women of the aristocracy and they had nothing more to teach him, he had ceased to regard those naturalization papers, almost a patent of nobility, which the Faubourg Saint-Germain had bestowed upon him, except as a sort of negotiable bond, a letter of credit with no intrinsic value but which enabled him to improvise a status for himself in some out-of-the-way place in the country, or in some obscure quarter of Paris, where the good-looking daughter of a local squire or town clerk had taken his fancy" (I, 188); and "Swann, who behaved simply and casually with a duchess, would tremble for fear of being despised, and would instantly

satisfying their utmost desires, disregarding the possibility of the pleasures they seek being satiated exclusively in the places where doors are wide open. This will, as we might expect, force others concerned with the preservation of their private ecosystems to perceive them as a menace to the stability of those places. People like the Verdurins will, therefore, always see people like Swann as the carriers of an outside virus which threatens the fragile equilibrium of the Parisian social circles and will, as such, try their best to get rid of the unwelcome intruder³²⁹.

Marcel and Swann will, hence, tend to compare the works of great artists with the banal people they are acquainted with, as they understand art mainly as a way of seeing and not as divine inspiration which reveals the great mysteries of the universe. Through the description of other people in their day-to-day lives, Proust also aims to describe himself and, ultimately, ourselves³³⁰. Descombes, in *Philosophy of the Novel*, points in this direction when he claims that, for Proust, “the most exalted goal of literature, which makes it a ‘search for truth’ is to relate Life by relating a life” (Descombes, 48). Therefore, art will be relevant as long as it allows us to see our faces in someone rather different from ourselves, to see our anxieties and fears in the anxieties and fears they experienced doing things we have never done and never will do.

Thus, *À La Recherche* is constantly forcing the argument that art is a way for us to trace connections with other people, while showing us that we are irretrievably alone and will never truly get to know what goes on inside other people’s mind. That even if we can see Odette as Botticelli’s Zipporah, Albertine as Odette, or Swann’s anguishes as Marcel’s terrors, we still won’t get to know exactly what Odette does when the night falls. That the major point of contact Swann finds between Botticelli’s Zipporah and Odette is his own inability to understand them, to pierce through their mysteries.

One witty remark in *À La Recherche* helps us reinforce this argument. In *La Fugitive*, when Marcel’s love for Albertine is once again compared to Swann’s love for Odette, Proust expatiates on the lack of a direct correspondence between their feelings for their loved ones and their ‘objective’ beauty, closing his considerations with this perfect

begin to pose, when in the presence of a housemaid (...) He did not immure himself in the edifice of his social relations, but had made of them, so as to be able to set it up afresh upon new foundations wherever a woman might take his fancy, one of those collapsible tents which explorers carry about with them” (I, 189).

³²⁹ Cf., for example, I, 254. We are here portraying Marcel as the kind of health hazard Doctor Adrien Proust spent his days fighting, a metaphor Proust would probably see as adequate.

³³⁰ This possibility, raised by art, of seeing ourselves in other people, will in fact be part of the answer we will later have to offer regarding the problem we are concerned with in this chapter.

sentence: “Let us leave pretty women to men with no imagination” (IV, 23). What Proust is reinforcing here is that only people living ‘immured in the edifice of their social relations’ trust descriptions imposed upon them, only those who abdicate their individuality and live blindly, according to the precepts of the world, believe in hierarchies which establish where they might and where they might not find truth and meaning for their own lives. Men devoid of imagination, Proust seems to stress, rather randomly attribute to conventional definitions of beauty what should be up for their hearts and minds to decide. Proust is thus reinforcing that men who lack imagination feel dishonored to search for love in the arms of an ugly housemaid on the outskirts of Paris and look with disdain upon men like Marcel and Swann while kissing their objectively beautiful aristocratic lovers. Because these people are anonymous pawns of their own lives, ruled by habit, fear and random hierarchies when facing their desires³³¹.

Secondly (at least in the first six volumes of the novel) both Swann and Marcel remain in a sterile position, forever postponing the moment when they would finally abandon their social lives and consecrate their efforts, the former to the study of Vermeer he is always allegedly working on, and the latter to his fiction. Until then, Swann will insist on never saying anything seriously, hiding his opinions behind an ironic smile which prevents his listeners from confronting him with his own ideas and, ultimately, with himself, while Marcel will keep believing that by indefinitely delaying his decision to become a writer, he is not in any way compromising the plausibility of that scenario ever coming true³³².

It is peculiar to notice they both truly desire to know more about the world, but when the chance comes for new revelations that would allow both Swann and Marcel to better understand the people around them, namely the person whose interiority they are more interested in getting to know, they always silently but firmly reject that hypothesis³³³. In a way, they are like dogs tied up to imaginary poles, running and barking loudly towards the object they wish to get in touch with and claim to want to know, but being immediately pulled back by a self-imposed invisible leash when they reach a certain

³³¹ In “Un Amour de Swann”, Proust explains that Swann tended to fall in love with “women whose beauty was of a distinctly vulgar type, for the physical qualities which he instinctively sought were the direct opposite of those he admired in the women painted or sculpted by his favorite masters” (I, 189).

³³² Cf. I, 207-8; I, 471-4.

³³³ The kimono scene, which we will later allude to in in this chapter, is under that perspective obviously relevant. On this topic, cf. the analysis Landy makes not only of that particular scene but also of the fact that Marcel seems to choose as his spies “the worst possible candidates for the job”, precisely to remain comfortably in the dark (Landy, 85-100).

level of knowledge and become dangerously close to it. They are not like the packs of drowsy dogs we find in places such as the clan of the Verdurins, but they seem, at least up to a certain point of the novel, equally in love with the leash which keeps them out of trouble.

Thirdly, Swann and Marcel are obviously similar in the way they relate to women, namely Odette and Albertine. Both of them repeatedly pretend not to be interested in the girls of their fancy so those same girls become closer to them. They appear to behave this way as a consequence of having already been on the receiving end of this same mechanism time and again. Marcel and Swann (at least according to Marcel's description of Swann) believe the attraction they feel for women is directly correlated with the lack of importance those women attribute to them³³⁴.

They are also both jealous of the women they like, because for them being in love equates to the need of taking full possession of the person of their fancy. When in love, they intend to be able to predict and control every move the loved one makes, something they know to be impossible³³⁵. We find an example of this liaison between love and possession in *La Prisonnière*, when Marcel states:

We imagine that [love] has as its object a being that can be laid down in front of us, enclosed within a body. Alas, it is the extension of that being to all the points in space and time that it has occupied and will occupy. If we do not possess its contact with this or that place, this or that hour, we do not possess that being (III, 607)³³⁶

Unsurprisingly, this remark is made immediately after evoking the jealousy Marcel felt towards Swann's claim over Odette.

Later on, conjuring this 'being (...) laid down in front of us', Marcel will find Albertine fallen asleep in his bed and will incur the mistake he had previously diagnosed, perceiving this moment as a privileged occasion to possess Albertine ("I sensed this

³³⁴ On this topic, cf., for instance, the scene in which Marcel suggests Swann realized his love for Odette increased when she made him wonder where she was at night; or the moment when Swann begs Odette not to go to the theater while swearing his request goes against his best interests, as he would much prefer to be alone; or the conversation in which Marcel explains to Albertine that he wants to break up, when we know that not to be the case at all (I, 231; I, 285-6; III, 842).

³³⁵ Elisabeth Ladenson convincingly argues that the 'casser le pot' scene (where Marcel becomes desperate when hearing Albertine interrupt herself in the middle of a sentence he takes to be of a rather sexual and vulgar nature) brings anguish to Marcel because it shows him that Albertine had ways of speaking and acting that were acquired away from him, in places he had never visited. In this sense, Ladenson opposes this scene with the ice-cream scene, where Albertine describes ice-creams in terms similar than those Marcel would have used, thus bringing him joy (cf. Ladenson, 108).

³³⁶ On this passage, Proust is preparing both the episode we will quote afterwards and also the final scene of the novel, where he compares the perception he has of people to monsters occupying every point in space and time (cf. IV, 623).

motionless and living semicircle, in which a whole human life was contained and which was the only thing to which I attached any value; I sensed that it was there, in my despotic possession” (III, 868))³³⁷. This intent of controlling a loved one is also present in Swann. In “Un Amour de Swann”, he decides to rent a chateau in Bayreuth, for Odette to spend some weeks with the Verdurins and Forcheville (who Swann reasonably suspects to be Odette’s lover), only to have the illusion of owning Odette and controlling her every move, and thus trying to force her to love him by gratitude to this magnanimous gesture imposed upon her³³⁸.

They resemble each other inasmuch as they both believe letters grant privileged access to the inner life of the objects of their love. By writing letters they imagine to be able to somehow stabilize the interpretation of their words, thus more easily obtaining the favors they intend, penetrating deeper into the minds of their loved ones³³⁹.

More importantly, both Swann and Marcel believe that having access to the letters written by their loved ones (Odette and Albertine), particularly when addressed to others, allows them to clearly understand what goes on within them. Letters to other people are a way of obtaining a stable description of a part of these women’s lives, which is by definition foreclosed to them and, what is more, will remain the same forever, giving them hope of one day being able to fully and correctly interpret them, without fearing, as often happened, to have forgotten or neglected some crucial detail. In a stolen letter, Swann and Marcel believe everything to be right there for their eyes to observe: the deepest and innermost thoughts of the girls who constantly shut the door of their intimacy on them³⁴⁰.

³³⁷ Earlier, in an episode where Albertine is also asleep, Marcel not only tells us that his illusion of possession only lasted until she woke up, but also goes so far as to confess having transformed this psychological possession into a rather literal one, during Albertine’s sleep (cf. III, 582).

³³⁸ It is worth keeping in mind that the characters who resemble Proust the most (Marcel, Swann, M. de Charlus and Robert de Saint-Loup), tend to fall in love with people belonging to a lower caste. This is due to their naïf believe that belonging to a higher social class puts them in a better position to dominate and control others. This illusion is one of the ingredients which leads them to later fall hopelessly in love, then realizing the control is exercised in an entirely different direction, that it is the one in a position of inferiority who tends to subjugate the one on top in *À La Recherche*. The similarity between Marcel, Proust and Charlus will be explored in the chapter consecrated to homosexuality in *À La Recherche*, where most of what is said regarding “Un Amour de Swann” is once again used to understand the Baron, which allows us to see this section of *Du Côté de Chez Swann* as a pattern which will keep repeating itself all throughout the novel. Cf. also the first three chapters of this thesis.

³³⁹ Cf., for example, I, 222.

³⁴⁰ Cf., on this subject, the letter Odette wrote to Forcheville and that Swann intercepted or the moment when Albertine is asleep and Marcel rejects the possibility of reading the letter she had hidden in her kimono (cf. Chapter 14) (cf. I, 277-280; III, 581-2).

Finally, still on the topic of Swann and Marcel's interaction with their loved ones, the two main characters of *À La Recherche*'s first volume share the will to respectively enclose Odette and Albertine, so they can thoroughly analyze them and extract the love they feel, since that love is always presented as a matter of discomfort and never as something desirable or in any way pleasing and rewarding. When in love, they both seem to want to run away and minutely plot out an escape, which is always presented as imminent (even if it never arrives), depending exclusively on their ability to rightly interpret Odette and Albertine's behavior to reclaim control and dominion over their own lives, ease their anguish and eventually move on³⁴¹.

Marcel himself is constantly pointing out to this similarity between the two³⁴². In fact, this resemblance is so blatant that even Françoise, in *La Prisonnière*, discerns it. During the tumultuous permanence of Albertine in Marcel's house, Marcel finds Françoise "rummaging through my papers and replacing among them a sheet on which I had jotted down a story about Swann and his utter inability to do without Odette" (III, 868), obviously trying to pass on a message to the narrator³⁴³.

The way some stories are told is also orchestrated to underline this similitude between "Un Amour de Swann" and Marcel's loves: the terror Swann is in while looking for Odette through the streets of Paris at night is simultaneously reminiscent of the anguish Marcel felt during the evening Swann came to pay his parents a visit, and the terror later experienced by the narrator when he imagined Albertine to be planning to meet Léa at the Trocadéro³⁴⁴; the scene in which Mme. Verdurin prevents Odette from going home with Swann is devised by Proust so Swann corresponds to Marcel, Odette to Marcel's mother and Mme. Verdurin to Françoise, in the first scene of the novel. To force the parallel even further, Swann claims he has something rather important to say to Odette, leading Mme. Verdurin to recommend he write her a letter, which is precisely what Marcel does to bypass Françoise's fierce vigilance³⁴⁵; and, finally, the endings of both the third and fourth chapters of "Sodome et Gomorrhe II", are built to remind the reader of the ending of "Un Amour de Swann". In the last sentence of the third chapter,

³⁴¹ Cf., for example, I, 301-2.

³⁴² Cf., for example, II, 199-200; III, 228.

³⁴³ It is important to bear in mind that the resemblance Françoise notices between Marcel's love and Swann's is only related to the way these loves are perceived and described by Marcel. That we know of, Françoise wasn't particularly informed regarding Swann's love life. She probably just read Marcel's texts and noticed the parallel between his character and himself.

³⁴⁴ Cf. I, 13-43; I, 307-317; III, 624-7.

³⁴⁵ Cf. I, 280.

Marcel claims that the idea of marrying Albertine “appeared to me to be madness” (III, 497), while the last words of the fourth chapter, less than twenty pages afterwards, are “I absolutely must marry Albertine” (III, 515). At the end of “Un Amour de Swann”, Swann is famously found lamenting himself: “To think that I’ve wasted years of my life, that I’ve longed to die, that I’ve experienced my greatest love, for a woman who didn’t appeal to me, who wasn’t even my type!” (I, 375). However, immediately afterwards, in the beginning of “Noms de Pays: Le Nom”, we are informed that he and Odette have married. This scheme is exactly reversed at the end of “Sodome et Gomorrhe II”, where we are first told by Marcel he will never marry Albertine, only to be told shortly thereafter that he will. Yet, in the beginning of *La Prisonnière*, this illusion once again fades away as we understand Marcel did not marry her, and never will. Through these deceiving endings, already analyzed in our introduction, Proust is simultaneously highlighting the connection between Marcel and Swann’s stories and underlining the importance of never taking what one is told seriously. He is reminding us not to read the characters’ last words as certain and irrevocable, a lesson we should bear in mind when reaching the final pages of the novel.

Yet, it would be rather simplistic to state that “Un Amour de Swann” appears in *À La Recherche* merely as the acknowledgement of how Swann and Marcel resemble each other.

Joshua Landy and Roger Shattuck make similar suggestions regarding the inclusion of this story in *À La Recherche*, and we tend to agree. Shattuck states that “Swann’s character will reveal many similarities to [Marcel’s] (...) ‘Swann in Love’ works as an internal replica or miniature of the whole, a microcosm that leads into the macrocosm that surrounds it” (Bales, 77), while Landy claims that

given its position almost at the incipit of Marcel’s writing life, it is tempting to understand the importance of *Un Amour de Swann* not in terms of its content – that is, not because the events of Swann’s life prefigure certain events in Marcel’s – but in terms of its form: Marcel writes it as a warm-up, so to speak, for his own autobiography (Landy, 178)

Thus, like Landy and Shattuck suggested (and contrarily to Tadié’s take on the subject) the importance of “Un Amour de Swann” seems not to be derived from the story itself, but from how it helps shape Marcel’s story while simultaneously being shaped by it as well. When telling Swann’s love story, Marcel is learning things about himself, fashioning himself, but the things he has lived will also shape the way he looks at Swann and how he tells the story of Swann’s liaison with Odette. Hence, the microcosm

composed by Swann and Odette's story informs and is informed by the macrocosm of *À La Recherche*³⁴⁶. This description of "Un Amour de Swann" has the considerable advantage of making these two hundred pages just another incidence of a pattern repeated throughout the novel. Marcel himself often states he is always being shaped by the remaining characters of the novel, whose importance should be found not in themselves but in how they allow Marcel to tell his own story³⁴⁷.

This idea of looking at characters as people who derive their lives from Proust's not only allows us to evoke the argument we have developed in the seventeenth chapter but, more importantly, a scene we have already analyzed in the chapters on sadomasochism. Proust alludes to people drinking someone else's tears twice in *Les Plaisirs et les Jours*, once in a fragment of "Reveries Couleur du Temps" and another in "Avant La Nuit". This idea of people feeding themselves with other people's suffering and other people's lives is exactly Proust's vision of his creation. He feeds himself of those around him so he can become robust enough to come up with something as grand as *À La Recherche*. Proust is, in many ways, a vampire. He thrives on other people's blood, lives by night, lays down for the whole duration of his days in a coffin-like room and, more importantly, cannot look into a mirror. He is only able to understand himself by seeing his reflection in other people, which allows us to further understand why Marcel cannot have a name or a physical description: Proust is trying to figure out who he is by studying the people who surround him.

In *À La Recherche*, self-analysis doesn't possess a special cognitive or epistemic status. It is only possible to study ourselves after clearly understanding the place we occupy in the world around us and, in order to do that, one needs to project oneself onto other people, to see our love as other people's love. Only then can we distinguish what we share with others and what is actually unique about ourselves.

In "The Myth and Science of Homosexuality in *À La Recherche du Temps Perdu*", J.E. Rivers argues Proust is a disciple of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs' theory of homosexuality

³⁴⁶ Under this perspective, "Un Amour de Swann"'s connection with *À La Recherche* can be resumed in a Riffaterre's sentence, in which the critic describes prosopopoeia as the moment when "either the subject will take over the object, or it will be penetrated by the object" (Riffaterre, 112). Cf. Chapter 17.

³⁴⁷ Cf., for instance, "No doubt it was foolish to judge Albertine by Odette and Rachel. But it was not her that I was afraid of, it was myself" (III, 508); "it was highly probable that the example of M. de Charlus had guided me unwittingly in the sort of lying scene which I had so often seen him enact with such authority" (III, 863); and "a life of Saint-Loup painted by me would have as its background the various scenes of my own life, would be related to every part of that life, even those to which it was apparently most foreign, such as my grandmother and Albertine" (IV, 607).

and gender identity. Even if, as we will come to argue in “Love’s Mechanism II: The Unfathomableness of Oneself”, we cannot agree with Rivers on that particular point, there are two suggestions in his essay which are very relevant to this chapter. Rivers argues that Proust illustrates “man's cosmic potential for recapitulating within his own life the totality of the biological and the mythological history of the race” (Rivers, (1979) 277) and that “once the masculine and feminine aspects of the narrator's personality reunite, [Proust] is able to begin dividing himself once again, this time to create the world of the novel and people it with characters” (Rivers, (1979) 278). As Rivers suggests, Proust divides himself amongst all the characters while summing up the entire history of the human race in himself. Swann is inhabited by Marcel and Marcel is inhabited by Swann, and this is never viewed as a victory or, in other words, as the absorption of the whole world by the author, but rather as a sign of his ultimate defeat. If Marcel (and, by extension, Proust) can occupy all these places, he is also always aware of the fact they all comprise a loss. Even when he takes Swann’s place, he is still unable to fathom the mysteries of the world personified in Odette³⁴⁸. Even when Marcel can finally divide himself amongst other people, Albertine remains a fleeting character, whose behavior keeps evading interpretation. Proust can only penetrate characters like Swann, who are forever unable to uncover the secrets they intend to discover. Marcel’s ubiquity ends where Albertine begins³⁴⁹.

Proust also seems to have integrated “Un Amour de Swann” in *À La Recherche* to prove to himself and the reader there was absolutely no possibility of escape. Marcel sees the object of his desire run away only to have to come to face with her untimely death in a horse riding accident in the countryside, leaving him anguished as he will now never be able to interpret Albertine the right way, thus failing to obtain full possession of what went on inside her mind. As a result, he is prevented from freeing himself of Albertine’s influence. We could therefore believe that if they had married, the problem might have had a solution, that this failure to get a hold on Albertine was merely contingent. If instead of running away Albertine had decided to remain under Marcel’s fierce vigilance, his anxieties could have found a way to extinguish themselves. However, by tracing such a

³⁴⁸ On this subject, cf. the anonymous letter Swann receives and proves to him he will never be able to get to know Odette, or anyone else for that matter, that he is locked up in his own subjectivity but also in his fear of seeing things as they are (I, 350-354).

³⁴⁹ What is extremely bizarre in Proust is that he seems to believe we can only look at ourselves by looking at other people, and yet, when we look at other people we are never able to see anything, which makes the whole process an activity that necessarily ends in defeat (cf. II, 366-7).

close parallel between Marcel and Swann's lives and solely changing their final outcome, Proust is showing us that even if Marcel and Albertine had chosen different paths, had they decided to stick together for instance, Marcel wouldn't have found peace anyway and would have ended up just like Swann.

There is another plausible reason for Proust to have composed "Un Amour de Swann" the way he did. When near the end of the tale Swann is surprised with Vinteuil's sonata, the 'national anthem' of his love for Odette, he is suddenly reminded, through a rather Proustian epiphany, of his blissful past with Odette. He is then overcome with emotion by the remembrance of those days when Odette truly loved him and they were irrefutably happy. The description is apothotic and drastically contrasts with the present sadness he is living in. Nonetheless, the scene ends with Swann distinguishing, "standing motionless before that scene of remembered happiness, a wretched figure who filled him with such pity, because he did not at first recognize who it was, that he had to lower his eyes lest anyone should observe that they were filled with tears. It was himself" (I, 341). Proust is showing us in this passage that Swann, like any of us, tends to believe his past was more joyful than it in fact was. Proust does this by telling us a significantly shorter version of Marcel's own story, so we can keep its beginning in mind. A beginning full of anguishes, sorrow and despair, just like Marcel's, but that becomes magically different as time goes by, only due to the miseries of the present. The story being about someone other than the narrator helps further demonstrate the lack of correspondence between how Swann imagined his past with Odette and how it in fact was.

Finally, "Un Amour de Swann" helps us understand something that will remain crucial for the rest of the novel and is related to the famous last sentence of "Un Amour de Swann". During the novel, Marcel will try to provide numerous justifications for someone to do such a strange thing as to fall madly in love with a person who isn't even his type, and we are constantly hinted that Marcel himself believes to have suffered from the exact same disease at the hands of Albertine³⁵⁰.

³⁵⁰ Cf., for instance, "There had been a time when she had found Swann attractive, which had coincided with the time when she to him had been 'not his type'. The truth was that 'his type' was something that, even later, she had never been. And yet how he had loved her and with what anguish of mind! Ceasing to love her, he had been puzzled by this contradiction, which really is no contradiction at all, if we consider how large a proportion of the sufferings endured by men in their lives is caused to them by women who are 'not their type'. Perhaps there are many reasons why this should be so: first, because a woman is 'not your type' you let yourself, at the beginning, be loved by her without loving in return, and by doing this you allow your life to be gripped by a habit which would not have taken root in the same way with a woman who was 'your type', who, conscious of your desire, would have offered more resistance, would only rarely have consented to see you, would

This bizarre incident of loving someone who is not our type also shows us we shouldn't be trusted when it comes to describing ourselves, that we have no privileged access to our own minds and we do not even know (or at least refuse to acknowledge) which kind of person fits 'our type'. In "The Impossibly Many Loves of Charles Swann", Hervé Picherit presents nine different moments when Swann falls in love with Odette for the first time, many of them mutually incompatible³⁵¹. Picherit also notes that because Marcel states it is easier to discern patterns at a distance, and tells Swann's story with such marked assurance in his tone (which is then lacking during the remainder of the novel), we feel tempted to believe his word. Yet, by presenting nine different moments in which Swann falls in love with Odette for the first time, we are subtly being shown the reliability we lend this story has no place in *À La Recherche*³⁵². Hence, "Un Amour de Swann" is also a way for Proust to show us the trust we have in the person telling us the story is misplaced, since we have no assurances as to the truth of our descriptions of ourselves, of the world or of those around us. *À La Recherche* is, thus, a novel about how wrong our perspective over things generally is.

not have installed herself in every hour of your days with that familiarity which means that later, if you come to love her and then suddenly she is not there, because of a quarrel or because of a journey during which you are left without news of her, you are hurt by the severance not of one but of a thousand links. And then this habit, not resting upon the foundation of strong physical desire, is a sentimental one, and once love is born the brain gets much more busily to work: you are plunged into a romance, not plagued by a mere need. We are not wary of women who are 'not our type', we let them love us, and if, subsequently, we come to love them we love them a hundred times more than we love other women, without even enjoying in their arms the satisfaction of assuaged desire. For these reasons and for many others the fact that our greatest unhappinesses come to us from women who are 'not our type' is not simply an instance of that mockery of fate which never grants us our wishes except in the form which pleases us least. A woman who is 'our type' is seldom dangerous, she is not interested in us, she gives us a limited contentment and then quickly leaves us without establishing herself in our life, and what on the contrary, in love, is dangerous and prolific of suffering is not a woman herself but her presence beside us every day and our curiosity about what she is doing every minute: not the beloved woman, but habit" (IV, 599). Proust had already spent lots of time wondering about this topic, as we may understand by taking a look at his first *oeuvre*: *Les Plaisirs et les Jours*; where the subject is addressed and Proust hints that people who are not our style make us fall in love because they blatantly show us we cannot subjugate or restrain the world, that they are creatures who do not fall under our simple categorizations and, for that reason, will perpetually escape us, becoming, before that escape, sufficiently close to us to reveal our impotence (cf. *P&J*, 127-128. This idea reappears in *CSB*, 93).

³⁵¹ Picherit notes the same will happen with Marcel when he tries to explain why he fell in love with Albertine.

³⁵² "Marcel narrates this section of the story with a sustained self-assurance he does not resume anywhere else in the Recherche; he recounts Swann's life as though nothing were wrong with this tale. What's more, we can assume that Marcel had time to mull over Swann's story long enough to isolate—and perhaps even sort out—any inconsistencies Odette's husband may have introduced into it. Yet Marcel expresses no misgivings about what he recounts, and our 'training' leads us to believe that there is no reason to question the reliability of the narration in *Un amour de Swann*. Proust in fact appears to misguide us with respect to this section of the novel: he teaches us to trust Marcel, and because Marcel does not signal that there is anything wrong with Swann's story, we are not inclined to search for inconsistencies—even at the end, in retrospect" (Picherit, 637).

Chapter 20

Love's Mechanism I: The Unfathomableness of Others

At this point of the argument, we would like to dwell on Proust's perspective of love's mechanism, firstly analyzing the nature of Marcel's feelings for his mother, for Odette, for Gilberte, for the Duchesse of Guermantes and, finally, for Albertine, always with that goal in mind. Later, in the following chapter, we will pay close attention to the theme of homosexuality in *À La Recherche* while trying to analyze it from a strictly narrative perspective, aiming to undermine the biographical interpretations many Proustian critics have been so prone to put forward, and trying to argue against what we will come to refer to as the 'transposition theory'.

Yet, before stepping into that analysis, we would like to argue that the mechanism of love doesn't differ from how several other things operate in *À La Recherche*. Proust seems to believe that all human things tend to obey a pattern, and understanding the intricacies of a particular pattern, coming to terms with its irredeemable incomprehensibility (at least for those who try to grasp the pattern from within), will allow us a glimpse, even if only an incomplete one, of the mechanism of love, but somehow also of human behavior in all its variants³⁵³.

In one of the most well-known moments of *La Fugitive*, Marcel receives a letter from Gilberte announcing her engagement with Saint-Loup. At that moment, Marcel understands that the previous letter he had taken to be from a resurrected Albertine was, after all, just another message from Gilberte, but one whose signature he had misread. Proust then artfully describes how reading works in such a way that we cannot help but imagine this description to suit the functioning of love as well. Marcel states:

How many letters are actually read into a word by a careless person who knows what to expect, who sets out with the idea that the message is from a certain person? How many words into the sentence? We guess as we read, we create; everything starts from an initial error; those that follow (and this applies not only to the reading of letters and telegrams, not only to all reading), extraordinary as they may appear to a person who has not begun at the same place, are all quite natural. A large part of what we believe to be true (and this applies even to our final conclusions) with an obstinacy equaled only by our good faith, springs from an original mistake in our premises (IV, 235)

³⁵³ "Of those elements which compose our personality, it is not the most obvious that are most essential. In myself, when ill health has succeeded in uprooting them one after another, there will still remain two or three, endowed with a hardier constitution than the rest, notably a certain philosopher who is happy only when he has discovered in two works of art, in two sensations, a common element" (III, 522).

The process of reading reminds us of the process through which Marcel fell in love with Albertine (and also, in a way, the process which led Swann to fall in love with Odette). He thought he knew what to expect from Albertine, imagined he understood who she was and took her to be someone who could be read like his previous loves, someone who could be subsumed under the perception he had of Gilberte, for instance. Thus, while reading Albertine he was in fact creating her by misreading. Albertine's story is the story of Marcel's failure, of his inability to truly see other people. It is the story of a hallucination which forces Marcel to realize he can never entirely grasp anyone. Albertine's story is the story of a mistake and when Marcel finally understands the extent of that mistake, she is already too close to his life to be painlessly detached from him, he is already in love and that love is no longer operable³⁵⁴. Proust is rather explicitly pointing towards this parallel between the functioning of reading and love, or any other human mechanism, when he parenthetically claims that his description applies not only to the reading of telegrams and letters, but to any kind of reading and to other processes involving reading only in the metaphorical sense of the word³⁵⁵.

Throughout the novel, we are given access to several different communities, but what stands out most in all of them, even more than the differences their members find most distinguishing about themselves, as we have already claimed in the nineteenth chapter, is their drastic similarity. This is made blatantly clear, just to mention a single example, in the funny description Proust makes of the 'marquise' of the little pavilion, who perceives her bathroom cubicles exactly the way the Verdurins imagine their little clan.

Yet, Proust's vision of repeating patterns doesn't exclusively apply to rarefied social circles or individual human interactions. In *À La Recherche*, Marcel will offer us his vision of war and diplomacy, and will repeatedly point out that the most important decisions made by a nation are often influenced not by philosophically dense considerations regarding its best interests, or by some obscure notions of diplomacy, but by the jealousy of one particular individual or the exaggerated sensibility of another. Thus, the best way to interpret a military action is by facing it exactly as we would any

³⁵⁴ Cf. I, 303.

³⁵⁵ In such moments, Proust is reinforcing an idea we have already discussed, namely in the ninth chapter, that artistic creation immerses from a process of misreading, from an unsurmountable mistake. The idea that art is a process which depends on getting people wrong. He is also, as the second parenthesis shows, asking the reader not to absolutely trust the novel's final conclusions. We will return to this topic in the last chapter.

art form or any social interaction. This suspicion is raised not only in Marcel's conversation with Saint-Loup in Doncières, but also through the descriptions of war in *Le Temps Retrouvé*³⁵⁶. Bersani was particularly illuminating on this topic in *The Fictions of Life and of Art*, when he sustained that

the interest of this remark is not so much in the 'rightness' or 'wrongness' of the narrator's ideas about love or politics, but is rather in his refusal to admit any break of continuity between his personal experience and his views of social life, war, and international diplomacy. In refusing to be optimistic about the moral capacities of nations, he implicitly rejects the idea that what he himself has not encountered can somehow become an effective reality when large groups of people are involved (Bersani (2013), 156)

Even Marcel's devotion to literature can frequently be understood exclusively through the continuity Bersani evokes above. From the start, when Marcel intends to become a writer, his main motivation seems simply to be to remain in Paris forever, near Gilberte³⁵⁷. Later on, when his article finally appears in *Le Figaro*, Marcel's happiness comes, once again, from the social impact it may have over those around him³⁵⁸. Art, in Proust, is thus never exclusively for art's sake.

³⁵⁶ Cf., for instance, the moment in *Le Côté de Guermantes*, where Marcel states he is becoming interested in the military art: "I feel that I could become passionately involved in the art of war, but first I should want to be sure that it is not so very different from the other arts, that knowing the rules is not everything" (II, 412). Charlus' vision of war efforts seems to be a caricature of Marcel's and, just like Proust did with Sainte-Beuve when he felt their perspectives could be confused, Marcel will vehemently attack Charlus' opinions, so that they wouldn't become entangled. In *Le Temps Retrouvé*, Charlus suggests the alliance between Germany and Bulgaria during the First World War could be explained by their leaders' homosexual preferences. To this, Marcel adds: "at this stupid explanation M. de Charlus pealed with laughter as though he really found it most ingenious—an explanation which, even had it been based upon true facts, was in the same puerile category as the observations which M. de Charlus made about the war when he judged it from the point of view of a feudal lord or a Knight of St John of Jerusalem" (IV, 367). On the topic of Proust's vision of war as a mere pattern repetition found throughout the novel, cf. also IV, 350.

³⁵⁷ "My father had always wanted me to be a diplomat, and I could not endure the thought that, even if I were to remain for some years attached to the Ministry, I might run the risk of being sent later on as ambassador to capitals in which there would be no Gilberte (...) My happiness at the prospect of not being separated from Gilberte made me desirous, but not capable, of writing something good which could be shown to M. de Norpois. After a few labored pages, the tedium of it made the pen drop from my fingers, and I wept with rage at the thought that I should never have any talent, that I was not gifted, that I could not even take advantage of the chance that M. de Norpois' coming visit offered me of spending the rest of my life in Paris" (I, 431).

³⁵⁸ "I thought of some female reader into whose room I would have loved to penetrate and to whom the newspaper would convey, if not my thought, which she would be incapable of understanding, at least my name, like a eulogy of me. But eulogies awarded to somebody one doesn't love do not captivate the heart any more than the thoughts of a mind one is unable to penetrate attract the mind. With regard to other friends, however, I told myself that if the state of my health continued to grow worse and I could no longer see them, it would be pleasant to continue to write, in order thus to have access to them still, to speak to them between the lines, to make them share my thoughts, to please them, to be received into their hearts" (IV, 152).

In the rare moments he expresses a more apotheotic vision of literature, Marcel is still unable to see his interest for it as anything more than a mere manifestation of a human pattern. A pattern he finds everywhere around him and not at all on an ethereal level. Near the end of *Le Temps Retrouvé*, Marcel compares his (and Proust's) method of attaching numerous side notes on his *paperoles* to Françoise's mending of dresses with parts of other worn-out clothes. A few lines below, he takes the comparison even further and asks himself if his style of writing was not, after all, similar to how "Françoise made that boeuf à la mode which M. de Norpois had found so delicious, just because she had enriched its jelly with so many carefully chosen pieces of meat" (IV, 612).

Having emphasized these parallels, we are now prepared to focus our attention on Proust's depiction of love, as it allows us to recognize several patterns he believes to be omnipresent in the world. Love allows him, for instance, to illustrate the metonymic nature of our interests, since we tend to confuse feelings for one object with its contingent proximity to another which lies close to our heart. In the final pages of *Du Côté de Chez Swann*, Marcel argues that, by seeing Odette as the epitome of beauty, instead of considering Odette and everything surrounding her beautiful, he does exactly the reverse, considering beautiful everything which touches Odette. She is the one who defines beauty and, hence, becomes Marcel's way of measuring it. Therefore, something's beauty depends on its proximity to Odette, on its degree of Odetteness, its participation in the idea of her³⁵⁹. More revealing still is that even Marcel's admiration for Odette metonymically derives from the fact she is Gilberte's mother, just as Proust's admiration for Mme. Strauss seems to derive from the fact of her being Bizet's mother, as if beauty and love were some kind of virus which spread from an original source and contaminated everything it touched.

From this idea another one necessarily originates, one very close to Proust's heart. If our feelings have a metonymic way of spreading, they have to derive from a strong original impulse which sets them in motion, an impulse Proustian critics unanimously agree to have been generated by the mother, when giving the famous good-night kiss. It

³⁵⁹ "I assigned the first place in the order of aesthetic merit and of social grandeur to simplicity, when I saw Mme. Swann on foot, in a polonaise of plain cloth, a little toque on her head trimmed with a pheasant's wing, a bunch of violets in her bosom, hastening along the Allée des Acacias as if it had been merely the shortest way back to her house (...) But instead of simplicity it was to ostentation that I must assign the first place if (...) I saw [Mme. Swann] at length emerging from the Porte Dauphine - figuring for me a royal dignity, the passage of a sovereign, an impression such as no real queen has ever since been able to give me" (I, 411).

is this first rejection that introduces Marcel to the world of desire and anxiety³⁶⁰. Proust was, of course, not the first one to discern this tendency to confuse causes and contingencies, or the human predisposition to repeat itself. In 1900, Bergson, whom Proust very much admired, wrote in his essay on laughter: “it seems possible that, after a certain age, we become impervious to all fresh or novel forms of joy, and the sweetest pleasures of the middle-aged man are perhaps nothing more than a revival of the sensations of childhood, a balmy zephyr wafted in fainter and fainter breaths by a past that is ever receding” (Bergson, 23a)³⁶¹. A century and a half earlier, Rousseau confessed that when he pictured girls during his childhood, they all had the face of Mlle. De Lamercier, and that the pleasure he felt on being punished by her would shape the pleasure women would later have to offer him³⁶².

This idea had already made a subtle appearance in *Jean Santeuil*, where Proust compares life to when, “looking at a small pattern of material, we can see the whole piece which after all is no more than the repetition on a larger scale of the same threads similarly woven” (*Santeuil*, 855). Yet, it is in *À La Recherche* that this topic is explored more significantly. Swann’s love for Odette shapes his perception of the women he would meet throughout the remainder of his life, just like Marcel’s future relationships would be shaped by his love for Albertine³⁶³. But it is the fondness he feels for his mother which in fact teaches Marcel the ways of his own affections. As from the moment she fails to soothe his anguish, the virus spreads and she becomes the main responsible for molding Marcel’s future loves. This idea is explicitly stated by Proust, in a rather Freudian moment

³⁶⁰ Cf., for example, Bersani when he states that “as long as Marcel’s desire is, so to speak, carried for him by his mother, he needs to ask no questions about either her or himself. But once the loved one abandons Marcel’s desiring, the most turbulent displacements occur: she is catapulted out of herself and into Marcel in order to torture him with the remoteness of *his* desires, the mystery of *his* subjectivity” (Bersani (1994), 864).

³⁶¹ Proust seems to have had this Bergsonian sentence in mind when he wrote, in the beginning of *Du Côté de Chez Swann*: “But of late I have been increasingly able to catch, if I listen attentively, the sound of the sobs which I had the strength to control in my father’s presence, and which broke out only when I found myself alone with Mamma. In reality their echo has never ceased; and it is only because life is now growing more and more quiet round about me that I hear them anew, like those convent bells which are so effectively drowned during the day by the noises of the street that one would suppose them to have stopped, until they ring out again through the silent evening air” (I, 36-7).

³⁶² Cf. Rousseau, 15.

³⁶³ “Swann was in love with another woman, a woman who gave him no grounds for jealousy but none the less made him jealous, because he was no longer capable of altering his mode of loving, and it was the mode he had employed with Odette that must serve him now for another” (I, 515); “I was keeping a girl in Paris who slept in a bachelor flat which I had rented. As other people need the aroma of forests or the ripple of a lake, so I needed her sleep by my side during the night and, by day, to have her always by my side in the carriage. For even if one love has passed into oblivion, it may determine the form of the love that is to follow it” (IV, 255-6). On this subject, cf. Kubala’s “Love and Transience in Proust”.

of the novel, when he explains that all his loves derived from the way he perceived his own mother, and that his mistresses were always unable to give him the comfort he once found in his mother's kiss:

... at the hour when there awakened in me that anguish *which later transfers itself to the passion of love*, and may even become its inseparable companion - I should have wished for a mother *more beautiful* and more intelligent than my own to come and say good night to me. No: just as the one thing necessary to send me to sleep contented - in that untroubled peace which no mistress, in later years, has ever been able to give me, since one has doubts of them even at the moment when one believes in them, and never can possess their hearts as I used to receive, in a kiss, my mother's heart, whole and entire, without qualm or reservation, without the smallest residue of an intention that was not for me alone—was that it should be she who came to me, that it should be her face that leaned over me, her face on which there was something below the eye that was apparently a blemish, and that I loved as much as all the rest (I, 182-3, my emphasis)

Therefore, it is no surprise to find that in *La Prisonnière* his love for Albertine is often compared to the relationship he had with his own mother. In *La Prisonnière* Marcel is particularly focused on showing the reader how Albertine's kisses were, to a great extent, a variation of his mother's good-night kiss, and how much this variation failed to soothe him, naturally reminding him of the anguish he felt during the opening episode of the novel³⁶⁴. Marcel will even claim, in *À L'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs*, that a novelist could, without failing to be truthful, describe a character's successive loves as exactly similar, not giving, thus, the impression of "repeating himself but that he was creating" (II, 248).

Bearing this idea in mind, we would need to provide an explanation for the fact that Albertine led Marcel to fall obsessively in love, whereas in Gilberte or Oriane's cases, for example, which had also inevitably derived from his love for his own mother, Marcel was able to distance himself, without suffering nearly as much as he did with Mlle. Simonet. However, in order to understand this, we simply need to recall what Marcel himself stated regarding the subject in both *À L'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs* and in *La Fugitive*. According to Marcel, in Gilberte's case, he "was still young enough, still courageous enough to undertake the attempt, to subject myself to that most cruel grief which springs from the certainty that, whatever time one may devote to the effort, it will prove successful in the end" (I, 621). Besides his older age and diminished bravery, two other aspects came into play to make his separation from Albertine harder than the

³⁶⁴ On this topic, cf., for instance, III, 585-7; 595; 612-4.

previous ones. In *La Fugitive*, when confronted with Albertine's escape, Marcel explains that

I lacked the strength to give her up as I had given up Gilberte. Even more than to see Albertine again, what I wanted was to put an end to the physical anguish which my heart, less robust than of old, could endure no longer. Then, by dint of accustoming myself not to use my will-power, whether it was a question of work or of anything else, I had become more cowardly. But above all, this anguish was incomparably more intense for a number of reasons of which the most important was perhaps not that I had never tasted any sensual pleasure with Mme. de Guermantes or with Gilberte, but that, not seeing them every day, and at every hour of the day, having no opportunity and consequently no need to see them, there had been lacking, in my love for them, the immense force of Habit (IV, 12-13)

Thus, although the effect Albertine had on Marcel has certainly something to do with the particular characteristics features which distinguish her from the other women he fell in love with, it is more strongly related to the contingent features which came to alter Marcel's pattern of behavior towards the object of his love. According to Marcel, Albertine has such a tremendous impact on him because he is now more of a coward, because he is older (which makes it harder to find a suitable replacement for her)³⁶⁵, because he had sexual intercourse with her, and because she had by then become so attached to Marcel's habits that he is no longer capable of breaking up with her without getting rid of a considerable part of himself. Apart from that Marcel is merely repeating with Albertine what he had done throughout all of his life until then, "using her to objectify a stable image of himself" (Bersani (2013), 34), a project which, as we have previously argued, is doomed to failure in *À La Recherche*³⁶⁶.

Marcel's problem with love seems to be that he perceives his fate to be "to pursue only phantoms, creatures whose reality existed to a great extent in my imagination" (III, 401). He is condemned to project onto others what is in fact within him, and he cannot find a way to restrain or understand. Barthes illustrates this rather curiously when, while describing the scene in which Marcel is inspecting Albertine's body in search of his own desire, he compares Marcel to "those children who take a clock apart in order to find out what time is" (Barthes, 71).

Marcel will therefore be simultaneously scared of what he has in common with Albertine and of what differentiates them. The jealousy Albertine inspires, for example, is made worse by Marcel's very clear notion of what she might be doing or thinking, precisely because he has been through all that. What scares Marcel the most is the

³⁶⁵ This second justification will be crucial for our argument regarding the last volume of the novel.

³⁶⁶ On the reasons behind that necessary failure, cf. also Pippin, 324-325.

possibility of Albertine going behind his back to do what he had done to her without her knowledge:

And yet perhaps, had I myself been entirely faithful, I might not have suffered because of infidelities which I would have been incapable of conceiving; whereas what it tortured me to imagine in Albertine was my own perpetual desire to find favor with new women, to start up new romances, was to suppose her guilty of the glance which I had been unable to resist casting, the other day, even while I was by her side, at the young bicyclists seated at tables in the Bois de Boulogne. As there is no knowledge, one might almost say that there is no jealousy, except of oneself. Observation counts for little. It is only from the pleasure that we ourselves have felt that we can derive knowledge and pain (III, 887)

In *La Prisonnière*, Marcel will compare his love for Albertine with Vinteuil's sonata, since "Vinteuil's sonata and, as I later discovered, his other works as well, had been no more than timid essays, exquisite but very slight, beside the triumphal and consummate masterpiece now being revealed to me". Similarly, Marcel confesses that "if I now considered not my love for Albertine but my whole life, my other loves too had been no more than slight and timid essays that were paving the way, appeals that were unconsciously clamoring, for this vaster love: my love for Albertine" (III, 756-7)³⁶⁷.

Understanding the nature and the functioning of Marcel's love for Albertine will, thus, be essential to understand the functioning of any love (and, for reasons above stated, of anything else) in *À La Recherche*.

In his biography of Proust, Painter suggests that, similarly to his brother Robert, there was within Marcel Proust "something of the surgeon who dissects in order to heal" (Painter, 5). It could be argued in favor of Painter's claim that we already find this surgeon revealing himself in *Jean Santeuil*, through one of the rare scenes in the novel where Jean doesn't come out victorious. In the Santeuil garden, Jean is seen intensively studying a lilac "but, no matter how deeply he concentrated his senses upon smelling it, he always failed to discover the secret he was seeking and, in point of fact, derived less pleasure from it than he had found, a while back, when, startled by the vision of the flowering lilac, he had ecstatically approached the living bush" (*Santeuil*, 323). Jean is here behaving exactly according to Barthes' diagnosis: he is trying to dissect and extract from the lilac a mystery which resides within himself³⁶⁸.

³⁶⁷ Here Proust is obviously tracing a parallel between the meaning of Vinteuil's septet amidst Vinteuil's work and of *À La Recherche*'s amidst his.

³⁶⁸ We find Jean behaving similarly later on the novel, this time not with plants but with women he intended to make wholly *his* cf. *Santeuil*, 583.

As Jean did with his lilac, Marcel will try to isolate Albertine and enclose her so that she cannot fall away from his careful vigilance, thus hopefully allowing him “to kill the intolerable love” (III, 605). As such, the moments in which Marcel equates Albertine’s predictability to that of a devout housewife, a pet or a plant, the moments when she is either asleep or under control, are the ones in which he feels his liberation from her is still possible³⁶⁹. Yet, what Marcel will learn at the end of *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, in the little train to Balbec, is that these moments never last for long. Albertine will forever escape him. She cannot be tamed, since “the beloved model does not stay still; and our mental photographs of it are always blurred” (I, 481). Marcel becomes obsessed with the impossibility of getting to know Albertine completely, a despair which doesn’t end with Albertine’s tragic death.

It is precisely this desire Marcel seems to recognize in *La Prisonnière*, when he confesses that

The image which I sought, upon which I relied, for which I would have been prepared to die, was no longer that of Albertine leading an unknown life, it was that of an Albertine as known to me as it was possible for her to be (and it was for this reason that my love could not be lasting unless it remained unhappy, for by definition it did not satisfy the need for mystery), an Albertine who did not reflect a distant world, but desired nothing else - there were moments when this did indeed appear to be the case - than to be with me, to be exactly like me, an Albertine who was the image precisely of what was mine and not of the unknown (III, 583)

If for Marcel love cannot last unless it remains unhappy, as clearly shown in the quotation above, then he has only four options left³⁷⁰.

The first would be to allow the ‘intolerable love’ to live on, remaining forever with a perpetually unknowable partner and making one’s life miserable due to such eternal foreignness, as happened with Swann.

One could also impede anyone from becoming sufficiently close, as Marcel tried to do after ending his friendship with Gilberte and as Swann tried to do before meeting Odette, so the ‘immense force of Habit’ doesn’t find a way to settle in. It would therefore be essential to constantly seek new partners and new pleasures, all while guarding oneself

³⁶⁹ Cf., for example, III, 525; III, 578. The pattern of behavior we are here merely hinting at is further developed in the next chapter regarding homosexuality in *À La Recherche*.

³⁷⁰ As we have argued in the nineteenth chapter, there is an obvious similarity between the couples Swann-Odette and Marcel-Albertine that nevertheless leads one to end in a tragic death while the other to what appears to be an unhappy marriage. As we have claimed then, this seems to be Proust’s way of showing us the impossibility of finding blissful love, at least if love is perceived the way Marcel did. It is Proust proving us that ‘love could not be lasting unless it was unhappy’.

by taking measures to prevent those partners from becoming dangerously close. And yet this would probably prove to be useless, as Odette and Albertine had no difficulty in breaching Swann and Marcel's fortress.

The third option would be to follow the footsteps of the young and unhealthy child we are introduced to in the sixth section of "Les Regrets, Rêveries Couleur du Temps". This child once fell in love with a girl, but the lack of correspondence between the imperfection she had to offer him and the perfection his imagination ushered him to place upon her, led the boy to the utmost despair and an unsuccessful attempt to kill himself.

Finally, there is a fourth option, that of a restless search for new lovers or the acceptance of the unavoidable unhappiness of love. Marcel finds this fourth option in literature, more specifically in *Le Temps Retrouvé*. If love is unable to provide him the comfort he is looking for, and if all human things tend to repeat this loose pattern, then he can look for a replacement for love elsewhere. In *Le Temps Retrouvé*, he is too old to seek new lovers but hopeful enough not to give up entirely. Thus, he turns his back on love and immerses himself in literature, finding in it the shelter he spent his entire life looking for. In literature, he will find what he was no longer able to find in love: the possibility of pursuing a 'stable image of himself'. That pursuit will be, therefore, the object of our final chapter.

Chapter 21

Love's Mechanism II: The Unfathomableness of Oneself

In 1921, Proust allegedly openly confessed his sexual orientation to André Gide. He would nevertheless hide it from Céleste Albaret, with whom the writer spent the last nine years of his life and who swore not to have witnessed the least sign of her master's homosexuality during this entire period. Proust's secrecy on the subject naturally led to many rumors involving not only his love-affairs but also his bizarre fetishes, which are thoroughly documented in each one of his biographies³⁷¹.

In his correspondence, Proust rarely and covertly referred to the subject, and only did so until around 1902, when he was still thirty-years old. After that, we have practically no letters alluding to his homosexuality. Proust evidently realized how important it was not to leave any traces of his sexual orientation behind because, by then, his literary career was just about to finally take off, and also because society's perspective on the subject was becoming rather tense. Between 1895 and 1909, just to offer three major examples, Europe was agitated by scandals involving Hector MacDonald, the Prince of Eulenburg-Hertefeld, and Oscar Wilde. The rumors, the trials and the public outcry which followed these scandals would lead McDonald to commit suicide; the Prince to be imprisoned, fall from power and become debilitatingly and permanently depressed; and Wilde to be humiliated, imprisoned and exiled to France, where he would die in misery. Even if the French law was, at the time, considerably milder than in the German Empire or the United Kingdom, Proust feared the consequences of exposing his sexual orientation, particularly because he was also a Jew in a country dealing with the controversial Dreyfus affair³⁷².

However, before 1902 Proust wrote a few letters which demonstrate how aware and apparently unconcerned he was about his homosexuality³⁷³. In 1888, Proust tried to

³⁷¹ Gide, 265-7; Albaret, 185-198; White, 122; Painter, 582-587.

³⁷² Proust's fear of being exposed as a homosexual is patent, for example, in White's description of the first time Proust met Antoine de Bibesco. According to White, when the two friends were introduced to each other, Bibesco instructed Proust on how to shake hands with virility. Proust then told Bibesco that if he did as Bibesco recommended, people would take him for a homosexual. White argues that this indicates "how devious the thinking of a homosexual of the period could become – a homosexual affects a limp handshake so that heterosexuals will not think he is a homosexual disguising himself as a hearty hetero – whereas in fact he is exactly what he appears to be: a homosexual with a limp handshake" (White, 76). We could also, however, imagine this to be Proust's clumsy and fearful attempt to figure out if Bibesco was a homosexual himself. On the relation between Judaism and homosexuality, cf. "La Race Maudite", in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*.

³⁷³ Later in his life, he would come to regret having written those letters, since he started seeing them as "arrows that will be turned against me" (Albaret, 201). Unsurprisingly, Proust was vague about the content of those letters when he said this to Céleste Albaret, but it seems uncontroversial to admit

convince Halévy that the attraction he felt for his cousin Bizet was something natural and not at all a sign of what Proust referred to as pederasty, even if it could eventually lead them to “masturbate together” (*Lettres*, 73)³⁷⁴. That same year, he would write his own self-portrait in a letter to his friend Robert Dreyfus, where Proust describes himself as a pederast who “under the pretext of loving a comrade as a father, loves him as a woman” (*Écrits de Jeunesse*, 66). In that particular letter, Proust would hide himself under a thin layer of what he called ‘transcendental farce’ while claiming he found no reason to see his confession as a sin, yet asking for Dreyfus’ opinion all the same. Even in the correspondence with his own mother, usually believed to have been unaware (or at least to have pretended to be unaware) of his preferences, Proust seems to have vaguely alluded to his homosexuality³⁷⁵.

The fact Proust’s sexuality was being hidden under so many secrecies, winks and complicit smiles was perhaps one of the main reasons a considerable number of critics read *À La Recherche* in the light of Proust’s biography, subsuming Marcel’s life under Proust’s and believing the novel to be a veiled confession. Thus, under this perspective, if Proust was in fact homosexual, there should be no reason to doubt Marcel shared the same orientation.

It is hard to find a critic who fails to recognize that snobbery and futility, for instance, even having played a major role in Proust’s life, are added to the novel because of their importance in the construction of the architecture and what we could call the argument of *À La Recherche*. These critics would immediately come up with a theory to shrewdly warn us against scavenging Proust’s biography in search of *À La Recherche*, as Proust himself did in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*. They might even argue that Proust’s life was just the starting point for something which infinitely exceeds it, and we shouldn’t be facing the novel as a portrait of the writer’s acquaintances but rather as the depiction of,

he was, at least partially, thinking of the ones in which he wrote more openly about his own homosexuality.

³⁷⁴ “I know... that there are young boys (...) mainly between the age of eight to the age of seventeen that like [*aiment*] other guys (as I like Bizet), that cry and suffer far away from them (...) Love leads them to masturbate together (...) and I do not understand why is that love more disgusting than the usual forms of love”.

³⁷⁵ “I will not hide from you that Dr. Cottet seemed to be infatuated [*emballé*] by me (...). Naturally (and I only add this stupid remark due to my mother’s imagination), I say infatuated in a good way, don’t you start imagining a bad relationship, good God!!!!” (*Correspondance*, II, 341). During the summer of 1902, even if cautiously, Proust also repeatedly alluded to his own homosexuality in a few of his letters to Bibesco, whom he had asked to spy on Fénelon, thus acting similarly to Marcel when he asked Andrée to spy on Albertine. Yet, in one of those letters, as we might have expected, he would jokingly state that should someone come across these letters he might be wrongly taken as homosexual.

let's say, human desire. However, those same critics, apt to making such fine distinctions, also believe the problem concerning the characters' homosexuality or gender was of an exclusively biographical nature, and that the answer is simple: the novel as it is written makes no sense, but we solve the nonsense by simply reverting Albertine and her friends' gender and by reading Marcel not as the heterosexual he claims to be but as the closeted homosexual he most certainly is³⁷⁶.

Ergo, in this chapter, we will start by presenting our motives for rejecting what we will designate as the transposition theory³⁷⁷. This will allow us to present our own vision on homosexuality in *À La Recherche*, one not so much related to Proust's biography but to his vision of human behavior (a vision undoubtedly shaped by his biography), and which allowed him to better depict how the mechanism of love works within the novel. Therefore, we may deduct that although Proust didn't intend his novel to follow the pattern of his own life, his biography offered him a vantage point to observe and dissect patterns of behavior which are somehow universal. After presenting our suggestions regarding the way Proust depicts homosexuality and its importance in understanding Proust's vision, we will then turn our attentions to the character a serious analysis of homosexuality in Proust could never neglect: the Baron de Charlus. We will do so in order to shed some light on the inner turbulence male homosexuals experience in the novel. Finally, we will try to grasp how *À La Recherche* articulated itself with the medical opinion on homosexuality in Proust's days.

Some of the arguments put forward by the advocates of the transposition theory are in fact quite unpromising. Edmund White, who never completely agrees with the

³⁷⁶ In 1949, Justin O'Brien provided us with a thorough historization of the idea that some feminine characters in *À La Recherche* (namely, Albertine) should after all be read as male characters. In that same essay, O'Brien puts forwards several of his own arguments on the subject, which are bizarre, to say the least. He states, for instance, that Albertine "is described in detail but only in relation to her face and hair (...) and occasionally her clothing is mentioned" (O'Brien, 937), leaving us wondering how that shows Proust's ambiguity regarding Albertine's appearance and what else should Proust have described in order to constitute enough proof of femininity to O'Brien (if O'Brien is referring to Albertine's naked body, it is described in detail in III, 587, as O'Brien himself later acknowledged in passing). George Bataille, a strong advocate of the theory of inversion, has a funny lapsus when he argues that Albertine is "en réalité le chauffeur Albert Agostinelli" (Bataille, 103), suggesting we only need to remove three letters from Marcel's lover's name to obtain the truth hidden behind it. Agostinelli's first name was Alfred and not, as Bataille claimed, Albert.

³⁷⁷ In this transposition theory of ours we will congregate two different theories regarding *À La Recherche*, neglecting the fact that some critics agree with one half of the theory and refuse the other, since, as a general rule, both theories tend to appear together. Thus, when mentioning the transposition theory, we are referring not only to the idea that some women in the novel, namely the *jeunes filles en fleurs*, should be read as young boys and not as young girls, but also to the idea that homosexual males are described in *À La Recherche* as men who are, in fact, women, men on the outside and women within. We will provide arguments to refute both hypothesis.

transposition theory, suggested the jealousy Marcel felt regarding Albertine's putative lesbian affairs was "a reflection of the homosexual Proust's fury when his bisexual lovers drifted back to women", since heterosexual men "at that time did not feel particularly alarmed when their wives had passing affairs with other women" (White, 23). The idea that we should infer what Marcel felt from how the remaining men of his time behaved is rather peculiar because, as we have previously claimed in the nineteenth chapter, Marcel is a person in his own right and cannot be simply explained through a pattern of behavior attributed to the Parisian heterosexual men of his days. Thus, the jealousy he feels regarding Albertine's potential Lesbianism comes, as Elisabeth Ladenson shrewdly points out, from the fact that lesbian desire "eludes and excludes him, and he both wishes to penetrate Gomorrah and figures it as self-sufficient and fundamentally impenetrable" (Ladenson, 53). Lesbianism, for a heterosexual like Marcel, is the "epitome of 'what one can't imagine'" (Ladenson, 50). Therefore, we have no reason to subsume Marcel's behavior under Proust's biography when we have such a reasonable justification for it within the narrative's own economy³⁷⁸. In this chapter, we will thus try to provide an alternative explanation for the way homosexuality is depicted in *À La Recherche*, one which neglects Proust's biography while establishing the novel's portrait of homosexuality as the way Proust found to best underline his vision of love's mechanism, a mechanism we have already taken into consideration in our previous chapter.

However, although we will try to refute the transposition theory, there are several moments in *À La Recherche* where it seems to have some plausibility and be accurately suited to describe Proust's vision of the world.

In the scene of *À L'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs* where Marcel is shocked by Albertine's refusal to kiss him, he will use arguments which remind us of those in the above-quoted letter, where Proust uses Halévy to try and convince Bizet to give in to him, since the sexual favors he was asking were, after all, almost irrelevant. This might suggest to the informed reader that Albertine was indeed a portrait of the young men Proust unsuccessfully tried to seduce³⁷⁹; the conversation Marcel has with Albertine regarding Dostoevsky, in which Marcel sustains that nothing should be concluded about an author's life from what can be read in his novels, brings to mind the alleged conversation he had

³⁷⁸ On this topic, cf. also Bersani (1996), 139-143 and Landy, 17-21.

³⁷⁹ "I'm sorry to have annoyed you, but even now I cannot say that I think I was in the wrong. What I feel is that all that sort of thing is of no importance really, and I can't understand a girl who could so easily give pleasure not consenting to do so" (II, 293).

with André Gide regarding Baudelaire, during which he supposedly argued the exact opposite, i.e. that we were able to conclude Baudelaire was homosexual exclusively from the interest he showed on the subject in his works³⁸⁰; and, in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, it is true that Proust appears to suggest homosexual males are men on the outside and women within when he describes Charlus as a female who presents herself as a male, going so far as to claim that “it is perhaps more gracious to think that for long years a certain number of angelic women have been included by mistake in the masculine sex” (III, 357).

Regarding the first argument in favor of the transposition theory, the one which states Marcel often seems to have experiences with Albertine remarkably similar to those Proust had with some of his male friends and/or lovers, we would like to point out that we see no problems in imagining the novel was built around and informed by many of Proust’s homosexual experiences.

This transformation of homosexual experiences into heterosexual ones is, after all, rather obvious in two moments of the novel. The first one occurs in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, when Marcel and Albertine are on a train. Marcel is aroused by the suspicion that Albertine could be interested in Saint-Loup, which somehow, in his mind, allows him to conclude she was not attracted to other women after all. Then, Marcel looks at Albertine and sees

Albertine’s mackintosh in which she seemed to have become another person, the tireless vagrant of rainy days, and which, close-fitting, malleable and grey, seemed at that moment not so much intended to protect her garments from the rain as to have been soaked by it and to be clinging to her body as though to take the imprint of her for a sculptor; I tore off that tunic which jealously enwrapped a longed-for bosom

Here, Albertine uncontroversially seems to be a woman, as the close-fitting mackintosh enhances precisely her ‘longed-for bosom [*poitrine*]’. Still, if Albertine is undoubtedly described as a woman, in what follows Marcel seems to have been evidently informed by Proust’s sexual experiences with men. Immediately after tearing apart Albertine’s mackintosh and exposing her naked bosom, Marcel will grab “her head in my hands, and showing her the wide meadows, flooded and silent, which extended in the gathering dusk to a horizon closed by the parallel chains of distant blue hills” (III, 258-9). The same goes, evidently, for the *casser le pot* scene, in which Albertine fantasizes (or at least Marcel imagines Albertine to fantasize) about the possibility of getting rid of Marcel so that she

³⁸⁰ Gide, 265; III, 878-883.

could have anal sex with other people³⁸¹. It is, therefore, very difficult to disagree with the idea that most of Marcel's heterosexual experiences were informed and inspired by Proust's homosexuality³⁸².

When it comes to Proust's refusal of Marcel's argument regarding Dostoevsky in his conversation with Gide on the alleged homosexuality of Baudelaire, we would like to once more claim that interpreting descriptions of conversations as direct quotes from an author is very problematic. This consideration is particularly relevant when we are dealing with an author as subtle and complex as Proust, someone who in any given conversation is constantly acting as a chess-player playing several different boards at the same time³⁸³.

Finally, about the third possible argument dealing with Charlus' femininity, we will gradually try to understand what Marcel seems to be implying when he suggests 'a certain number of angelic women have been included by mistake in the masculine sex'. even if Marcel is often contradictory in his theories, making it very often impossible to have a polished, unified theory which completely and unproblematically explains Proust's ideas on any given topic³⁸⁴. We will therefore try to shed some light on what is implied both in Proust's vision of homosexual love and his portrait of male homosexuals in the novel.

At first glance there are some other moments which might seem to hint Proust saw homosexuals as the transposition theory claimed he did, passages that were in fact often used as definite proof of this theory's accurateness. Nonetheless, we have only to quote them in their full extent to refute these alleged evidences. We will, thus, provide two

³⁸¹ Cf. III, 841.

³⁸² If we were to trust Gide's report of his conversations with Proust, we would not necessarily, as some critics have done, jump to favorable conclusions about the transposition theory. According to Gide, Proust told him he had included in the novel "all the attractive, affectionate, and charming elements contained in his homosexual recollections" (Gide, 267). Thus, concluding that we should read female characters as males equates to formulating a theory about the novel based exclusively on the phenomena which contingently inspired it. The reasoning these critics stand by is in every way similar to believing a novel to be about Italy only because the writer was visiting Rome when he came up with the idea for it. Yet, it is extremely ironic to think *À La Recherche* is, among many other things, a novel about the mistaken belief that two things are related simply because they tend to occur simultaneously (one famous instance of this mistake is Marcel's idea that the weather in Tansonville was different from Méséglise, only because he used to go through the shortest one when it was raining). What happens in cases of transposition like this is, in fact, no different from what Proust states regarding Charlus' way of reading, when he claims that "inscribed in those eyes through which he beholds everything in the universe, a human form engraved on the surface of the pupil, for them it is not that of a nymph but that of an ephebe" (III, 16). Proust is projecting onto his own feminine characters images of the men he once loved.

³⁸³ On this topic, cf. Chapter 16.

³⁸⁴ Proust seems to have taken Ruskin's maxim very seriously: "For myself, I am never satisfied that I have handled a subject properly till I have contradicted myself at least three times" (Ruskin XVI, 187). Joshua Landy is particularly elucidating on this subject in *Philosophy as Fiction*.

obvious examples of those moments, both present in the scene where Jupien and Charlus first met, in the beginning of the fourth volume. While describing Jupien, Proust writes: “the female - Jupien - no longer giving any sign of response”. To read this as a sign that homosexual men are women trapped inside men’s bodies, we would have to neglect that Charlus is, in the same sentence, described as ‘the male’ (III, 8)³⁸⁵.

A few pages later, however, Marcel seems to take a rather drastic step back, one that appears to directly contradict the previous description. At the end of this episode, Marcel claims to have, through this revelation of Charlus’ homosexuality, finally understood why he had earlier

managed to arrive at the conclusion that M. de Charlus looked like a woman: he was one! He belonged to that race of beings, less paradoxical than they appear, whose ideal is manly precisely because their temperament is feminine, and who in ordinary life resemble other men in appearance only (III, 16)

What we will go on to argue in the rest of this chapter is that Proust’s theory is subtler than it would appear to be were the passage to end in the exclamation mark. Thus, what Proust seems to believe is that homosexuality produces a change in one’s personality, separating homosexuals from the remaining men, but that this difference between homosexuals and heterosexuals can be often reduced to a difference in temperament³⁸⁶.

³⁸⁵ Bersani complexifies this problem substantially when he reminds us that “Jupien is doing everything he can to bring the woman within him to the surface, but if Charlus is himself a woman he can’t be desiring Jupien ‘la femelle’ unless ...Charlus is a lesbian. And then, given Proust’s resolute heterosexualizing of homosexuality, we would have to say that Charlus the female invert is really a man desiring a woman, for it is only by becoming a lesbian that Charlus could become the man capable of desiring Jupien the woman. The very stringency of these sexual categories thus demands an incessant crossing over from one sex to the other, and it wreaks havoc with the boundaries that usually keep each category in place. For in Charlus there may be two quite different women: the one who has a ‘manly ideal’ and desires the male figure he is not, and the other who, in responding to an effeminate male invert like Jupien, is revealing the man ‘she’ really is by pursuing a woman. Or it may simply be that Charlus is not entirely a woman, and that the real man in him is responding to the feminized Jupien—as if it were only by taking the so-called virile role, by being a top with a submissive, coquettish male, that the Baron can express his troubled or repressed heterosexuality. Finally, Jupien is responding as if Charlus were indeed a man. Is he, like most inverts according to Proust, tricking himself into believing that this *tante* is a *demitante*, or is he excited by the real (straight) man he divines in the Baron, or is he simply responding to the male body in which, after all, male inverts present themselves to the world, and behind which the invisible real woman is hidden?” (Bersani (1996), 137). It could also be argued that, were we to follow these biographical readings, Albertine could only be read as Agostinelli if we took Marcel to be Anna, Agostinelli’s extremely jealous companion, which would force us, of course, to see Andrée as Proust himself. On this topic, cf. also Sedgwick, 219 and Freud’s “The Sexual Aberrations” in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, an essay Proust in all probability didn’t read but that is closer to Proust’s thought on the subject of homosexuality than any of the medical treaties we will be referring to during this chapter.

³⁸⁶ This idea can also be found elsewhere, in “La Race Maudite”, where it is stated that “I had understood, he *was* one [a woman]. He was one of them. He belonged to that race of beings who are in effect, since it is precisely because [*justement parce que*] their temperament is feminine that they worship manliness, at cross-purpose with themselves” (CSB, 249).

Therefore, Proust never seems the least interested in compartmentalizing human beings or in dividing them in categories grouped by their behaviors, but, instead, in finding the perfect description for every one of his characters, one that might allow him to depict the human experience and, for that matter, the mechanism of love, as well as possible. It is not that homosexual males are women within but that they are composed, in their essence, of male and female elements, in a way more drastic (but not essentially different) than heterosexuals are, leading them to be segregated from heterosexual communities. Yet, as we will argue henceforth, it is not accurate to believe this adaptation problem could be simply solved by theoretically transferring their souls into women's bodies, as a firm believer of the transposition theory would be forced to conclude³⁸⁷.

Our argument will mostly revolve around both Proust's hesitations towards the word homosexual³⁸⁸, and his constant comparison of homosexuals to plants throughout 'Sodome et Gomorrhe I'³⁸⁹, as these ideas are strongly correlated.

It is relatively easy to understand why Proust doesn't seem to appreciate the term 'homosexual', coined in 1869 by the Austro-Hungarian writer Karl Maria Kertbeny, since *À La Recherche* repeatedly describes love as something which can only happen while the other remains hetero. The effort Marcel, Swann and Charlus make when in love is precisely the effort to transform something hetero (which remains outside of themselves, different from themselves) into something homo (something like themselves which they can understand, predict and incorporate). As soon as this occurs, as soon as love becomes truly homosexual, these characters are freed from the nefarious influence of love³⁹⁰. The problem throughout the novel is, in fact, their absolute inability to do so. Therefore, for Proust, the expression 'homosexual love' is extraordinarily antithetic, yet particularly

³⁸⁷ Four months prior to his death, Proust himself showed the utmost repugnance for the idea of transposition of sexes in *À La Recherche* in a letter to Jean Schlumberger (cf. *Lettres*, 1116-1117).

³⁸⁸ "... what is sometimes, most ineptly, termed homosexuality" (III, 9).

³⁸⁹ Due to the scope of this essay we won't be able to explore this topic in great detail, yet we cannot help but to briefly point out that this comparison was certainly inspired by Anatole France and Balzac. The fecundation of the plants through bees, which constantly reappears during the scene in which Jupien and Charlus first meet, plays a major role in Anatole France's *Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard*. In fact, Sylvestre Bonnard's last study is precisely on that topic. Proust seems also to have been inspired to compare homosexuality to botany by *Séraphita*, Balzac's novel dealing with androgyny (a novel which played a major role in shaping Proust's vision of homosexuality).

³⁹⁰ It is impossible, however, to fall in love with someone who is not, in the terms of our argument, initially 'hetero'. One can never fall in love with someone exactly similar to oneself. Love only occurs when the difference between ourselves and the object of our love is made blatantly clear. We could speculate without incurring in many risks that this is precisely the reason why Marcel never falls in love with Andrée: she is perceived to be too much like himself. Cf., for instance, II, 247; II, 266-278.

accurate in describing the mechanism of love, even when we are dealing with what we would usually refer to as heterosexual couples³⁹¹.

The doomed effort of love is precisely the attempt to transform other people into a double of their own selves, so that they could “kill the intolerable love” (III, 605). As such, homosexuality, more than a sexual deviation, would become the portrait of the labors of love *par excellence*³⁹². Homosexuality is, hence, simultaneously love’s ultimate goal and the path for love’s destruction.

Famously, in “Sodome et Gomorrhe I”, Proust constantly juxtaposes the seduction scene going on between Jupien and Charlus with the process of pollinizing a plant. Even if Charlus is compared twice to a bumblebee³⁹³, the main comparison equates homosexuals to plants. What Proust is trying to hint at through this comparison is that, more than women trapped inside men, homosexuals are, after all, hermaphroditical souls, just like plants or snails³⁹⁴. Proust seems to believe that homosexuals are, on the inside, composed of both men and women, as Bersani convincingly pointed out in *Homos*³⁹⁵. Yet, as we have been claiming, homosexuals differ from the remaining characters only in the degree of their hermaphroditism, since, for Proust, this inner mixture of men and women inside oneself constitutes the human experience *par excellence*. In order to prove the constitutive hermaphroditism of homosexuals, we need only to recall passages such as the one in which Marcel explains that those he defines as ‘professional homosexuals’ sometimes look with repugnance to newcomers who tend to accentuate their feminine side. Marcel will then admit that “among certain of these newcomers, the woman is not only inwardly united to the man [*intérieurement unie à l’homme*] but hideously visible”

³⁹¹ Leo Bersani illustrates this problem brilliantly. Cf. Bersani (1996), 131.

³⁹² Therefore, it is no coincidence that the characters engaging in masochistic activities are always homosexual, as they are the ones who intuitively grasp the mechanism of love with greater clarity. Like masochism, homosexuality exaggerates the functioning of love so the characters can hopefully get rid of its nefarious influence. Yet, they unvaryingly fail to do so, passing on to the reader the idea that love is an omnipotent enemy against which one has no chance of winning and that the alterity of others is unsurmountable.

³⁹³ Cf. III, 8; III, 32.

³⁹⁴ “It is true that inverts, in their search for a male, often content themselves with other inverts as effeminate as themselves. But it is enough that they do not belong to the female sex, of which they have in them an embryo which they can put to no useful purpose, as happens with so many hermaphrodite flowers, and even with certain hermaphrodite animals, such as the snail, which cannot be fertilized by themselves, but can by other hermaphrodites. In this respect the race of inverts, who readily link themselves with the ancient East or the golden age of Greece, might be traced back further still, to those experimental epochs in which there existed neither dioecious plants nor monosexual animals, to that initial hermaphroditism of which certain rudiments of male organs in the anatomy of women and of female organs in that of men seem still to preserve the trace” (III, 31).

³⁹⁵ Cf. Bersani (1996), 137.

(III, 21). Therefore, what we can naturally infer from this is that within homosexual males there is a woman ‘inwardly united to the man’ and not a woman within the man³⁹⁶. This vision of homosexuality explains why Marcel would come to define the homosexual man, a couple of pages later, as a particular case of femininity [*une espèce de femme*] (III, 24)³⁹⁷.

At this point of the argument, it would be important to turn our attention to one particular aspect of Proust’s portrait of homosexuality, a particularity which led Gide to feel considerably reticent and bitter towards Proust for a while. Whereas lesbians, in *À La Recherche*, tend to be described as secretive, elusive and charming women, like Odette, Albertine or Gilberte, homosexual men are represented by Charlus, an over-weight middle-aged man with a moustache, prone to be exalted, loud and rather indiscreet. This could be partially explained by the arguments Elisabeth Ladenson puts forward in *Proust’s Lesbianism*, which we have already brought into discussion. But there is something more to it. While lesbianism was seen at the time with some condescendence and as a passing but exciting manifestation of a somehow regular feminine sexuality, homosexuality in men was seen as a serious psychosis which should be criminally persecuted, driving those men if not to prison at least to be casted away from society, so as not to corrupt younger and more susceptible minds. This social ambivalence is one of the main explanations for the fact Proust’s lesbians are so often harmonious and discreet, whereas his gay male characters tend to be unable to hide their homosexuality, failing to restrain the women they have within them, inwardly united with their inner men.

This social justification comes up, for instance, in the scene where Charlus appears to be incapable of refraining from pinching the chins of Mme. Surgis le Duc’s sons. There, Marcel explains to the reader that Charlus justified the legitimacy of his homosexuality by evoking the examples of Plato and Virgil. Yet, according to Marcel, the comparison was an imperfect one since he failed to recognize that

for nineteen hundred years (...) all conventional homosexuality (...) has disappeared, that what survives and increases is only the involuntary, the neurotic kind, which one conceals from other people and misrepresents to oneself (...) The shepherd in Theocritus who sighs

³⁹⁶ The same occurs, of course, in the case of lesbians, as Proust made very clear when he described Mlle. Vinteuil as someone inside whom, “a shy and suppliant maiden entreated and reined back a rough and swaggering trooper” (I, 161).

³⁹⁷ In the famous second Proustian Questionnaire, at an early age, Proust had already shown that his vision of men and women (and not only of homosexuals) was of people composed by elements of both sexes. There, Proust would write that his favorite qualities in a man were ‘*des charmes féminins*’, while his favorite qualities in a woman were ‘*des vertus d’homme*’ (E&A, 32).

for love of a boy will have no reason later on to be less hard of heart, less dull of wit than the other shepherd whose flute sounds for Amaryllis. For the former is not suffering from a disease; he is conforming to the customs of his time. It is the homosexuality that survives in spite of obstacles, shameful, execrated, that is the only true form, the only form that corresponds in one and the same person to an intensification of the intellectual qualities. (III, 710)

What is being inferred here is not only that, by a change of social perspective on male homosexuality, homosexuality was now restricted to those Proust diagnosed with ‘involuntary homosexuality’, those who could not cross over to heterosexuality and had their feminine side more accentuated. More significant still is that, through this paradigm shift, homosexual men were condemned to a double life, since they had to hide their sexual orientation from heterosexuals but disclose them cautiously to homosexuals. Thus, as all homosexuals behaved in this manner, gay men could never know if their flirting would be welcomed by someone prone to those advances or by a homophobic heterosexual who could easily beat, humiliate or uncloset them. Naturally, this contributed to the neurosis Marcel associated to homosexual men, making them almost unvaryingly disharmonious in *À La Recherche*. Lesbian women, on the other hand, as we have already pointed out, lived a less stressful and dangerous life, which allowed them to be gracious and charming, more like Albertine and less like Charlus³⁹⁸.

Charlus’ lack of harmony is blatant in two very revealing episodes of the novel. The first occurs in *À L’Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs*, during the first detailed description of the Baron. There, Marcel explains that Charlus’ voice, is similar to

certain contralto voices in which the middle register has not been sufficiently cultivated, so that when they sing it sounds like an alternating duet between a young man and a woman, mounted, when he expressed these delicate sentiments, to its higher notes, took on an unexpected sweetness and seemed to embody choirs of betrothed maidens, of sisters, pouring out their fond feelings (II, 122-3)

A couple of pages before this digression about Charlus’ voice, Marcel, who at that time didn’t yet know the Baron to be a homosexual, had already told us no man seemed manly enough when compared to M. de Charlus³⁹⁹. What we are being shown here is that Charlus, unable to find a middle term which allowed his feminine side to cohabit

³⁹⁸ We should keep in mind, however, that, as we have previously argued in this chapter, the main reason for the perceived harmoniousness of the lesbians we find in *À La Recherche* is due to lesbianism being something that by its nature occurs away from Marcel. It is due to lesbianism being, as Ladenson claimed, ‘the epitome of what one can’t imagine’, a place Marcel has no access to and that, due to that restriction, aggrandizes in his own eyes.

³⁹⁹ Cf. Chapter 2.

peacefully with his masculinity, unsuccessfully tried to smother his femininity, by drowning it in frozen streams and not making the least concession to its wants and needs.

Later in the novel, in the last volume, we will find the same Charlus enchained and being whipped by Maurice, a vigorous man Charlus pretends to believe to be an assassin of old ladies. In this famous masochistic scene (which we have analyzed in detail in our third chapter), Charlus seems to be trying to thread the same path he did in the above-mentioned episode, but now in the opposite direction. Krafft-Ebing, in his *Psychopathia Sexualis* (a study Proust most certainly was aware of) shaped the vision of sadism and masochism generally accepted at the time. Krafft-Ebing claimed that “while sadism may be looked upon as a pathological intensification of the masculine sexual character in its psychical peculiarities, masochism rather represents a pathological degeneration of the distinctive psychical peculiarities of woman” (Krafft-Ebing, 201). Therefore, it is easy to imagine Charlus in chains trying (once again unsuccessfully) to give in to his feminine side, thus decomplexifying the internal conflict between his two different *côtés* by reducing them to a single unproblematic *côté*.

There is, however, one brief moment when Charlus seems to find the harmony and peace he spent his life looking for, which we tend to come across in the lesbian characters of the novel. This moment occurs in the opening scene of *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, where Marcel is inadvertently spying on Charlus. Charlus is unaware of the presence of others and he is simply enjoying the sun. Free from the constraints imposed upon himself by society and the image he wants to project onto others, he allows himself to relax and accept who he is. At that moment Charlus’ two conflicting sides unite in peaceful harmony. This leaves Marcel amazed but doesn’t last long, as it is immediately interrupted by Jupien’s sudden appearance⁴⁰⁰.

⁴⁰⁰ “At this moment, when he did not suspect that anyone was watching him, his eyelids lowered as a screen against the sun, M. de Charlus had relaxed that artificial tension, softened that artificial vigor in his face which were ordinarily sustained by the animation of his talk and the force of his will. Pale as a marble statue, his fine features with the prominent nose no longer received from an expression deliberately assumed a different meaning which altered the beauty of their contours; no more now than a Guermantes, he seemed already carved in stone, he, Palamède XV, in the chapel at Combray. These general features of a whole family took on, however, in the face of M. de Charlus a more spiritualized, above all a softer refinement. I regretted for his sake that he should habitually adulterate with so many violent outbursts, offensive eccentricities, calumnies, with such harshness, touchiness and arrogance, that he should conceal beneath a spurious brutality the amenity, the kindness which, as he emerged from Mme. de Villeparisis’, I saw so innocently displayed upon his face. Blinking his eyes in the sunlight, he seemed almost to be smiling, and I found in his face seen thus in repose and as it were in its natural state something so affectionate, so defenseless, that I could not help thinking how angry M. de Charlus would have been could he have known that he was being watched; for what was suggested to me by the sight of this man who was so enamored of, who so prided himself upon, his virility, to whom all other men seemed odiously effeminate, what he

Amidst Proust's theorization of homosexuality, we tend to find words such as 'disease' and 'neurotic' (as found in the previously quoted passage regarding the shepherd in Theocritus) or descriptions of homosexual males like Charlus as people living a "debauched life betrayed by moral degeneration". A life which, furthermore, "is never slow to materialize and proliferates upon a face, especially on the cheeks and round the eyes, as physically as the ochreous yellows of jaundice or the repulsive reds of a skin disease." (III, 712). It would, nevertheless, be a mistake to interpret these moments like Painter did, as Proust is merely echoing visions of homosexuality contaminated by his own contemporaries' homophobia. Painter saw in Proust's depiction of homosexuality a moral fervor that "sprang from self-accusation" (Painter, 629). To be fair with Proust, we have to at least juxtapose these accusations with the scenes in which he vehemently refuses to incur in any form of condemnation regarding homosexuality. In the first chapter of *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, Marcel underlines on three different occasions that it is inadequate to define homosexuality as a vice⁴⁰¹. In *La Fugitive*, Marcel explicitly states that "Personally, I found it absolutely immaterial from a moral point of view whether one took one's pleasure with a man or with a woman, and only too natural and human that one should take it where one could find it" (IV, 264).

Moments when Proust refers to homosexuality with the abovementioned bluntness should be read with more tolerance and understanding by modern readers. Eve Sedgwick has quite rightly claimed that in episodes such as the opening pages of *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, Proust often recurs to adjectives such as 'grotesque', 'repelling' or 'ridiculous', but he only does so because "it is from the borrowed shelter of that adjectival closet that the three abstract nouns ('empreinte d'une *étrangeté* ou si l'on veut d'un *naturel* dont la *beauté* allait croissant') can then issue with their almost operative definitiveness" (Sedgwick, 229).

suddenly suggested to me, to such an extent had he momentarily assumed the features, the expression, the smile thereof, was a woman" (III, 6-7). The artistic world provides a curious exception to this general rule of disharmony imposed by society upon homosexual men. Homosexual artists seem to have a free pass which allows them to behave with harmony and graciousness, despite the fact of them being males. One remarkable example is present in the scene where Saint-Loup is jealous of a dancer in the theater Rachel performed in. The dancer's feminine side is clearly underlined by Marcel when he describes the character. However, instead of making this dancer a creature similar to Charlus, his femininity is always portrayed as gracious, elegant and charming, probably due to the liberties conceded to the world of theater. Instead of a handicap, the woman trapped within the dancer works in his advantage and Rachel cannot refrain from commenting that she would be unable to imitate what the dancer is capable of doing with his hands (cf. II, 476-7). We have, nonetheless, to bear in mind that at this point Rachel was evidently trying to make Robert jealous.

⁴⁰¹ "Man's vice (we use the term for the sake of linguistic convenience)" (III, 15); "their vice, or what is improperly so called" (III, 19); "their vice (as it is called)" (II, 26).

Proust was very much aware that in order to be taken seriously as a novelist, he could not afford to openly and frontally contradict the medical theories of his time, particularly when he came from a family of doctors and his own father was a friend and colleague of Ambroise Tardieu and Paul Brouardel, two of the greatest authorities on the topic of homosexuality, and which Rivers described as “homophobic in the extreme” (Rivers (1983), 157).

Proust seems, thus, to have shielded behind Karl Ulrichs (considered today to have been one of the pioneers of the LGBT movement) and Krafft-Ebing’s theories on homosexuality so, like a Trojan Horse, he could attack from within the medical perspective, subverting and rebuilding it in a considerably more humane way⁴⁰². As Anna Katharina Schaffner argutely pointed out, if homosexuality in *À La Recherche* is often described as a pathology, it is a pathology similar to love itself⁴⁰³, forcing us to condemn it only insofar as we condemn love.

Furthermore, Proust also seems to have felt he could better depict love through his description of homosexuality, as it allowed him to focus the novel on what necessarily remains sheltered and hidden from society. Thus, Proust felt that through homosexuality he would be able to better expatiate on the radical difference between a character’s behavior when in society and when in his own privacy. Proust found in homosexuality a way to describe the terrible mechanism which operates love, a mechanism that leads Swann, one of the most elegant and desired bachelors in Paris, someone who was granted access to the most exclusive Parisian salons, to be frantic and desperate in his attempts to capture the love of a cocotte like Odette. Therefore, it is no coincidence that in the final volume of the novel Proust obsessively concentrates his efforts on showing us how every single character we imagined to be heterosexual was, after all, homosexual. More than proving the omnipresence of homosexuality in the Paris of his time, Proust argues homosexuality to be the most perfect depiction of how love works. By this he is

⁴⁰² Anna Katharina Schaffner, in constant reference to Lucille Cairns’ “Homosexuality and Lesbianism in Proust’s *Sodome et Gomorrhe*”, argued something very similar when she claimed that “whilst the orthodoxies of sexological theories, such as the innate and, to a lesser extent, the acquired argument, as well as a generally pathological view of homosexuality, seem to be embraced on the surface, the subversion of these takes place at ‘a largely subterranean level of metaphor, allusion, comparison and parenthesis’ (...)Proust too thus participates in the characteristically modernist revalorization of the perversions: not yet fully able to leave the pathological paradigm behind, he nevertheless gestures towards its undoing” (Schaffner, 201).

⁴⁰³ “Rivers is thus right to argue that owing to the pervasive presence of the ‘love-as-illness figure’ in *In Search of Lost Time*, ‘we need a tolerance for paradox in approaching the disease imagery the narrator applies to homosexuality’” (Schaffner, 203).

suggesting that, all things considered, love is always homosexual, or at least tends to homosexualize its object.

In “The Myth and Science of Homosexuality in *À La Recherche du Temps Perdu*”, Rivers was, as far as we know, the first to point out the influence of Ulrichs’ famous formula *anima muliebris virili corpore inclusa* (‘a woman’s soul enclosed in a man’s body’) in Proust’s novel. Yet, in some moments, Rivers fails to see how Proust considerably expanded Ulrichs’ rather simplistic formulation, as we have been arguing. Rivers recurs to the passage in *Sodome et Gomorrhe* where homosexuals are compared to “a man, a man-bird, a man-insect and so forth” (III, 8), but sometimes he seems not to take notice that Ulrich’s Manichean scheme has nothing to do with Proust’s vision. As Rivers claims, the question is not that Proust populated his novel with characters, “some of whom are male, some of whom are female and some of whom are male-female” (Rivers (1979), 278). It is far more complex than that. In Proust, no character is simply one thing, be that a man, a woman or any other restrictive concept for that matter. Rivers is much closer to the truth when he is the farthest away from Ulrichs, claiming that, more than reiterating the formula of the German author, Proust was showing us how any given person recapitulates “within his own life the totality of the biological and the mythological history of the race” (Rivers (1979), 277).

Before moving on, we would like to point out the close resemblance between this chapter and the arguments put forward in chapter 19, as it is quite obvious that, as happened with Swann, Proust is constantly stressing the similarity between Marcel and Charlus and, more importantly, between Proust himself and Charlus. Thus, as we have previously argued, Proust seems to want to make sure we remember his characters’ lives are directly extracted from himself, and they walk and talk only so Proust can describe himself, so he can recapitulate in himself the ‘biological and mythological history of the race’. This parallel starts being sketched in the opening pages of *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, where Charlus is said to have changed the time of his visit to Mme. Villeparisis “not [because] he could not see Jupien elsewhere and with greater convenience, but because to him just as much as to me the afternoon sunshine and the blossoming plant were, no doubt, linked together in memory”, thus showing how Charlus’ reasoning tends to work metonymically, just like Marcel and Proust’s.

In *La Prisonnière*, we find two other instances of how Proust fed his characters from himself, in this particular case M. de Charlus. First, during a conversation with the Baron, Marcel explains that “I must remark that M. de Charlus ‘possessed’ – and this

made him the exact opposite, the antithesis of me - the gift of observing minutely and distinguishing the details of a woman's clothes as much as of a painting" (III, 712). Here, Proust is obviously joking about the way we tend to read *À La Recherche*. Knowing Proust, it is impossible to imagine his alter ego in this particular moment to be Marcel and not Charlus. Proust was perhaps one of the writers most attentive to the smallest of details in paintings and dresses to have ever lived. By stating this difference between Marcel and Charlus, Proust is providing us enough evidence to believe that reading the novel as a form of autobiography would imply believing him to be everyone at the same time, or at least that there are several moments like this, when, just as in a relay race, one character passes the baton of Proust's self-representation to another. Thus, Proust spreads himself through Marcel, Charlus, Léonie, Swann, Legrandin and through many other of his characters.

Later on in the same volume, Proust mocks himself through Charlus, in a scene where the Baron spends a significant part of the evening discussing his theories on homosexuality (discussion during which he uses expressions that very explicitly evoke Marcel's manner of speaking), only to add that he is merely "a curious, a tireless investigator" of the homosexual phenomenon. When we laugh of Charlus' absurd attempt to cover his tracks, we are of course laughing with Proust of his own often repeated suggestion that he is devoting so many pages to homosexuality only out of scientific and literary curiosity⁴⁰⁴.

⁴⁰⁴ On this pretense attempt to pass himself as an anthropologist visiting the distant lands of Sodom and Gomorrah, Proust is particularly funny when, after a long description of his vision of homosexuality, he also writes in *La Prisonnière*: "What asylum doctor has not had his own attack of madness by dint of continual association with madmen? He is lucky if he is able to affirm that it is not a previous latent madness that had predestined him to look after them. The subject of a psychiatrist's study often rebounds on him. But before that, what obscure inclination, what dreadful fascination had made him choose that subject?" (III, 711).

Chapter 22

The Masked Autobiography

In the last volume of *À La Recherche*, it is not unusual to find Marcel in an ecstatic frenzy while narrating the truths regarding the nature of Time he believed to have discovered on his way to the *Bal des Têtes*, at the Guermantes' mansion. One obvious example of this enthusiasm occurs during what we could consider the fourth epiphanic moment of *Le Temps Retrouvé*, when one of the Prince de Guermantes' old servants brings Marcel some cookies and an orangeade. After tasting these treats, Marcel cleans his mouth with a napkin, which immediately triggers an involuntary memory of his first day at Balbec. The tone of that description is obviously over-joyous:

the napkin which I had used to wipe my mouth had precisely the same degree of stiffness and starchedness as the towel with which I had found it so awkward to dry my face as I stood in front of the window on the first day of my arrival at Balbec, and this napkin now, in the library of the Prince de Guermantes' house, unfolded for me - concealed within its smooth surfaces and its folds - the plumage of an ocean green and blue like the tail of a peacock. And what I found myself enjoying was not merely these colors but a whole instant of my life on whose summit they rested, an instant which had been no doubt an aspiration towards them and which some feeling of fatigue or sadness had perhaps prevented me from enjoying at Balbec but which now, freed from what is necessarily imperfect in external perception, pure and disembodied, caused me to swell with happiness (IV, 447)

These moments of rapture have understandably shaped the way many critics read *À La Recherche*, leading them to take the novel to be about the eventual victorious capturing of the ideal essence of things surrounding Marcel, whereas the artist is seen as being similar to a demigod who, from high above, is able to perfectly grasp the functioning of the world we, miserable humans, blindly walk upon. Two famous instances of this reading of *Le Temps Retrouvé* are found in Julia Kristeva's *Le Temps Sensible* and in Gilles Deleuze's *Proust and Signs*.

Kristeva describes what we are confronted with in the last volume of the novel as "a reality that is truer than nature and more accurate than the limited reality we are confronted with in our personal experiences. We believe in it and seek for the 'clés'" (Kristeva, 35), while also claiming that, in Proust, these epiphanic moments constitute a way of "writing as transubstantiation" (Kristeva, 36).

Even if considerably more restrained than Kristeva in his arguments, Deleuze similarly believed that in the world of art we find "the ultimate world of signs, and these signs, as though *dematerialized*, find their meaning in an ideal essence" (Deleuze, 13).

Deleuze also claims that “what art regains for us is time as it is coiled within essence, as it is born in the world enveloped by essence, identical to eternity” (Deleuze, 46) and “it is only on the level of art that essences are revealed” (Deleuze, 38).

What we would like to put forward in this last chapter is a reading of Proust’s perception of time, a perception strictly related to Proust’s envisioning of literature, and which is somehow different from what Proustian critics have so far, to the best of our knowledge, provided. After having stated this, we will try to provide an explanation for Marcel’s rapture during epiphanies such as the one quoted above. Our reading will considerably tone down Proust’s literary theory, directly relating it with Marcel’s (and in many ways also Proust’s) realization of his own mortality. We would therefore like to suggest that Proust’s literary theory is nothing else than the recognition of unredeemable defeat, one that is in absolute coherence with the remainder of the novel and refutes both Kristeva and Deleuze’s above-mentioned arguments.

Our argument here will be established in constant reference to the discussion of the remaining chapters. This is a *sine qua non* because our thesis sustains that the suggestions we have put forward regarding the novel in the previous twenty-one chapters can only be fully understood if wrapped around a broader view, which takes into consideration a rather particular theory of how Proust perceived art, time, and love, a view in which death plays a major role. Thus far, we have been suggesting there is a constant effort in Proust to avoid any compartmentalization, since Proust never intended his work to be dissected under the lens of any self-enclosed literary department. To understand Proust, or at least the way we perceive him, we will need a strong structure which integrates any given element found in *À La Recherche*, but is also malleable enough to avoid the pretense of explaining anything fully or leaving any incongruence behind. More importantly, it will be a structure that won’t deem *À La Recherche* a Jewish, philosophical, psychoanalytic, moral or queer novel. Therefore, the literary theory we will present takes into consideration all elements analyzed so far, and suggests we should read *À La Recherche* simply as a Proustian novel, which might, in the end, prove itself to be more challenging but also more rewarding than the above-mentioned approaches.

The fact we will only introduce the literary apparatus we consider suitable to read Proust at the end of our thesis is revealing of how we think literature, and particularly *À La Recherche*, should be analyzed. A way which presents the theory of how to read the novel after, and not before, reading it, and builds its own ideas regarding literature as we leaf through its pages.

In order for our description of Proust's take on literature to make sense, we must be particularly careful when it comes to taking Marcel's postulates at face-value, the way Kristeva and Deleuze seem to have done. One of the main things we learn throughout *À La Recherche* is that the narrator tends to have a tone of certainty regarding observations he knows to be false. An obvious instance of this pattern is found in *Du Côté de Chez Swann* when Vinteuil, who would come to represent the example of the ultimate artist in the novel, is described as someone who had, at the end of his life, "finally given up hope of finishing the task of copying out the whole of his later work, the modest pieces, we imagined, of an old piano-teacher, a retired village organist, which we assumed were of little value in themselves, though we did not despise them because they meant so much to him" (I, 158). Proust himself wrote in great detail about this particularity of *À La Recherche* in a famous letter to Jacques Rivière, where he explained that

what I have stated at the end of the first volume (...) is the *opposite* of my conclusion. It is a stage, which appears subjective and dilettante, on the path to the most objective and hopeful conclusion (...) I am thus forced to depict errors without feeling the need to state that I have them for mistakes, so much worse for me if the reader takes them for the truth. The second volume will accentuate the mistake. I hope that the last one will come to dissipate it (*Lettres*, 667-668)

According to the terms of this letter, it would be only natural to believe that the skepticism one is supposed to be armed with throughout the novel was to be set free when reaching the final pages of *Le Temps Retrouvé*. However, we would like to counterintuitively argue that those final 'objective and hopeful conclusions' should be taken with a pinch of salt. In order to understand this, we would like to evoke in this chapter three authors who heavily influenced Proust: Emerson, Ruskin and, particularly, Pascal.

Even if it does seem plausible to take the final words of a book as somehow being its conclusion, as the moment when the author ultimately tells the reader what he has in fact figured out regarding the functioning of the world, dissipating all his former mistakes, we would like to suggest that, in that last moment, Marcel is still not someone we should trust without hesitation⁴⁰⁵. This reasoning could induce frustration in the reader, as a result of reaching the end of the novel without any assurance of what has been read and seen

⁴⁰⁵ Robert Pippin, in the essay "On 'Becoming Who One Is' (And Failing): Proust's Problematic Selves", suggests something similar, when he claims that "there is no reason to take Marcel's 'death bed' conversion away from the radical temporal instability (...) as any more authoritative than these other putative moments of redemption" (Pippin, 317).

during this never-ending book. Yet, it has the advantage of allowing us to face Marcel as someone essentially similar to all the remaining characters of his story, and not as a person magically exempt from all the mistakes and blindness everyone else repeatedly evidences, and which, according to Proust, constitute the human experience *par excellence*. If the reading we propose forces us to perceive the novel as unable to reach a stable and reassuring conclusion regarding life or the nature of time, at least it doesn't confer to one person, even if only one person, the ability to grasp how the world functions. An ability which the novel repeatedly states to be born solely from delusion, habit and misplaced confidence in our own importance. Thence, the following reading allows us to take Marcel as someone who doesn't belong to a different species than Charlus, Swann, or the Verdurins, which should come as a relief, because neither are we.

In the beginning of *Proust and Signs*, Deleuze claims that “the hero does not yet know this or that; he will learn it later on (...) He is under a certain illusion, which he will ultimately discard. Whence the movement of disappointments and revelations” (Deleuze, 3-4). What we will present during this chapter is a deflated version of this argument. *Le Temps Retrouvé* consists in nothing more than this eternal movement between disappointment and revelation. However, if Marcel systematically discards all his illusions, he remains very much aware that, precisely because he had lived through so many disappointments, even his last theories are, in a way, provisional and consist in little more than a paradoxically skeptical creed. When we reach the end, we understand Marcel believes that all his opinions are vulnerable, that he knows there is no certainty regarding his convictions and all the epiphanies that flood down upon him do not provide any assurance regarding the possibility of fully understanding the essence of Time, or anything else for that matter. By the time we get through the novel, we realize that, for Proust, all knowledge is fragile and cannot be separated from a considerable degree of self-delusion. We are, evidently, unable to believe that what we accept as true is certainly wrong, as this would be a contradiction in terms. But, by the end of it all, we could repeat in regards to *À La Recherche* what Miguel Tamen had already claimed in reference to *Contre Sainte-Beuve*: it is a novel written by “a writer rather sceptic towards the idea of perfection, be it his own perfection or anyone else's” (Tamen, 150).

In *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, René Girard argues that “the novelist-narrator is none other than Marcel cured of all his errors, who has overcome his desires and is rich with novelistic grace. The great Cervantes is also a Don Quixote who has overcome his desires, a Don Quixote who can see a barber's basin as a barber's basin, but who

nevertheless remembers that he once saw it as a Mambrino's helmet" (Girard (1965), 232). Contrarily to what Girard suggests, there is no evidence pointing out that Marcel was in any way 'cured of all his errors'. As we will later argue, it is not so much that he has 'overcome his desires', becoming an ethereal and stoical being, but rather that he has simply introduced some minor changes in those desires so he could go on satisfying them all the same. Furthermore, there is also no evidence that Marcel is now able to see a barber's basin while recalling the time he saw it as a Mambrino's helmet. What seems to be the case in *À La Recherche* is that, by the end of the last volume, he becomes aware of how hard it is for him to tell the difference. Until the end, Marcel will remain unsure of what he had in fact seen, and it is precisely the realization of such difficulty which is offered to him in *Le Temps Retrouvé*. The mere detached observation of his surroundings doesn't provide Marcel with any secure epistemic conclusions, because the observation and apprehension of facts do not lead to any palpable certainty⁴⁰⁶. This explains why Marcel remains forever unable to provide a single confident justification for his or any other character's behavior.

Still on this topic, Picherit claims Marcel repeatedly suggested that it is considerably easier for us to grasp patterns at a distance. Thus, according to Picherit, one of the major roles "Un Amour de Swann" plays in the novel is showing us that even when telling Swann and Odette's story, which has nothing to do with his own (at least explicitly) and took place some years before his birth, Marcel still remains unable to understand what had occurred exactly, what Swann and Odette had felt, and the nature of the love that had united the couple⁴⁰⁷. What we are taught throughout those two hundred pages is that, in *À La Recherche*, no knowledge is definitive and the narrator is utterly unreliable, even when Marcel appears to be most detached from himself and when we detect a tone of certainty in his voice, as occurs in the final pages of *Le Temps Retrouvé*⁴⁰⁸. Thus, we would like to juxtapose more enthusiastic readings of *Le Temps Retrouvé* to Descombes' deflated vision of it, when he writes that the change in Marcel's life, from an outsider's perspective, is simply that he now "neglects the duties of civility; he forgets to answer his mail" (Descombes, 300), or when he claims that the last volume is

⁴⁰⁶ "The facts of life do not penetrate to the sphere in which our beliefs are cherished; they did not engender those beliefs, and they are powerless to destroy them; they can inflict on them continual blows of contradiction and disproof without weakening them; and an avalanche of miseries and maladies succeeding one another without interruption in the bosom of a family will not make it lose faith in either the clemency of its God or the capacity of its physician" (I, 146).

⁴⁰⁷ We have already discussed this topic in the nineteenth chapter.

⁴⁰⁸ Cf. Picherit, 637.

concerned with nothing more than the depiction of Marcel's successive errors, without a corresponding increase in trust regarding his final conclusions⁴⁰⁹.

To gain a better understanding of Marcel's idea of Time, we will now turn our attention to the literary vision which permeates *À La Recherche*. In order to do so, we must first of all recognize that there are moments when writing is presented as an activity which elevates a chosen few above the rest of mankind. One example of this is found in *À L'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs*, when Bergotte is seen flying over all the worldly people who used to despise him:

The day on which the young Bergotte succeeded in showing to the world of his readers the tasteless household in which he had spent his childhood, and the not very amusing conversations between himself and his brothers, was the day on which he rose above the friends of his family, more intellectual and more distinguished than himself; they in their fine Rolls-Royces might return home expressing due contempt for the vulgarity of the Bergottes; but he, in his modest machine which had at last 'taken off', soared above their heads (I, 545)

Yet, this superiority, which we find so blatantly expressed here, should be qualified to a degree that allows one to adjust it to the terms in which it is described throughout the rest of the novel. As we have previously stated⁴¹⁰, in *À La Recherche*, literary activities are constantly compared to the most prosaic activities. This is so because, just like Marcel doesn't belong to a species different from the remaining characters, creating art is not essentially distinct from many other activities, namely from cooking, loving or receiving a kiss from one's mother⁴¹¹.

Thus, for Proust, the skills necessary for one to be a writer are of a rather prosaic nature⁴¹². One does not need to have a robust intellect, an extraordinary vision or deep philosophical ideas in order to become a great artist. One has merely to possess the ability to reflect one's world within a single narrative. This is exactly what Marcel expresses when, in the beginning of *Le Temps Retrouvé*, he enumerates the skills necessary to become a Bergotte: "it is not the man with the liveliest mind (*le plus spirituel*), the most well-informed (*le plus instruit*), the best supplied with friends and acquaintances, but the

⁴⁰⁹ Cf. Descombes, 80. Cf. also Rivers' argument when he claims that "the narrator's struggle is a struggle undertaken with the knowledge that it can never be totally successful. In the end, suffering, death, and destruction will triumph and the rest will be silence" (Rivers (1983), 132) or when he immediately afterwards sustains that, in the end, Marcel is stripped of all illusions and is merely trying to recreate in his novel some of the beauty and sorrow of the world. Later in this chapter, we will further analyze the relation between death and literary creation Rivers is here alluding to.

⁴¹⁰ Cf. Chapter 1.

⁴¹¹ Cf. I, 27.

⁴¹² Cf. Chapter 18.

one who knows how to become a mirror and in this way can reflect his life, commonplace though it may be, who becomes a Bergotte" (III, 722). In a sense, in Proust's depiction of literature as the activity that consists in reflecting a banal world as if through a mirror, he appears to inherit a vision that permeates both Ruskin and Emerson's works.

In "The Poet", Emerson claims that all men "stand in need of expression" (Emerson, 320) and it is the poet's task to become an interpreter, he has the power "to receive and to impart" (Emerson, 321). More importantly still, for Emerson, exactly as for Proust, the activity of reading is based upon misreading, "we lose ever and anon a word, or a verse, and substitute something of our own, and thus miswrite the poem" (Emerson, 322)⁴¹³. If we considerably mitigate Emerson's apothotic and enthusiastic tone, we come close to what Proust himself seems to believe. Emerson's interpreter will become Proust's mirror and, like in Emerson, in Proust, the activity of writing down the world forces the author to settle for an imperfect version of it.

Ruskin, who Proust translated and, for several years, idolized, also sustains that the activity of an artist consists in the recognition of an irreconcilable failure to capture the essence of what he aims to seize, and finds its best expression when it points out to the artist's inability to equal the greatness of God's creation. In the Inaugural Address he gave, in 1858, at the Cambridge School of Art, Ruskin concluded by saying that the major lesson a school of art should offer to its pupils is to teach them

Not so much what they can do, as what they cannot; to make them see how much there is in nature which cannot be imitated, and how much in man which cannot be emulated. He only can be truly said to be educated in Art to whom all his work is only a feeble sign of glories which he cannot convey (...) the great and untraversable gulf which God has set between the great and the common intelligences of mankind: and all the triumphs of Art which man can commonly achieve are only truly crowned by pure delight in natural scenes themselves, and by the sacred and self-forgetful veneration which can be nobly abashed, and tremblingly exalted, in the presence of a human spirit greater than his own (Ruskin XVI, 201)

This Ruskinian idea of art as the recognition of failure will appear throughout Proust's work time and again. Unsurprisingly, it is found more often in *Le Temps Retrouvé*, as this is the volume in which Proust dwells on these topics, although we also come across it in several other places. In *Contre Sainte-Beuve's* prologue, just to offer one of many possible examples, Proust explains the secondary role he attributes to intellect in the resurrection of the past, a subject which will be nuclear in both the novel

⁴¹³ Cf. Chapter 9.

he was about to begin and the idea of literature he would build throughout his entire life. In that prologue, Proust states that “it is not merely that intellect can lend no hand in these resurrections; these past hours will only hide themselves away in objects where intellect has not tried to embody them. The objects which you have consciously tried to connect with certain hours of your life, these they can never take shelter in” (*CSB*, 46). At the end of the prologue, Proust would add that intellect always comes second and its role is merely to crown the creative instinct.

When we find Proust so vehemently repeating the idea that intellect has a very narrow scope of action in the recovery of Time, we cannot help but read this as a statement regarding the limits of literature. If intellect is unable to resurrect these past moments and if these past moments constitute life’s sole beauty, then, for Proust, literature could only be triumphant were it written during, and not after, these epiphanic incidents. But, as Proust repeatedly reminds us, these revelations last for just a couple of seconds, which forces the writer to lean on his own intellect in order to imperfectly recreate them⁴¹⁴. Thus, from this point of view, *À La Recherche* is the recognition of failure and impotence: the failure to capture beauty as it was once grasped, since art is reduced to the exercise of pointing out the place where beauty used to be without ever replacing or accurately resurrecting it, and the consequent disappointment of seeing true beauty forever slipping through our fingers. This idea also underlies the section of *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, which Proust named “Le Rayon de Soleil Sur le Balcon”. Here, the author, in a reminiscence of Ruskin, claims we should look at the best things surrounding us so we can understand how they too inevitably fail to satisfy us⁴¹⁵. It is, thus, rather hard for us to read the end of *À La Recherche* as optimistic and victorious, as so many critics did, when Proust’s tone is so frequently skeptical and defeated.

This vision of the world we find expressed in Proust appears to also be inherited from Pascal. Pascal seems to always look at the universe like Augustine and Aristotle did, considering we can infer from worldly objects that surround us the mark of their creator, that they have imprinted within them the face of God. Yet, in Pascal, that face is chaotic

⁴¹⁴ “For if art is long and life is short, we may on the other hand say that, if inspiration is short, the sentiments which it has to portray are not of much longer duration. It is our passions which draw the outline of our books, the ensuing intervals of repose which write them.” (IV, 486).

⁴¹⁵ “That is why one must live among desirable objects, attend balls at the best houses, walk about the streets, observe passing loveliness and lay stratagems to see it again, in order to afford one’s soul the sense of having accomplished – though to be disillusioned – the most perfect thing this world can offer and the best matched to the claims of desire; that is why one must watch flower-like beings moving through a garden and gather them, look out of windows, go to dances, say to oneself, ‘There go the loveliest possibilities’ and enjoy them” (*CSB*, 107).

and incomprehensible. The world, according to Pascal, was an unsolvable mystery because it was in such a way he depicted God. Pascal also claimed that the realization of their inability to solve the enigma of existence induces despair in men, forcing them to forge alternatives. One of those alternatives is the creation of systems which allow the enormosity of the universe to be cut down into small, digestible pieces. Pascal said that “through space, the universe contains me and devours me up like a speck; through thought I contain it” (Pascal, 513). In Proust, just like in Pascal, as we have argued before and will presently develop, one is confronted with the idea that thought, art, sadomasochism or habit are ways for the characters to delude themselves regarding the control they may have over things infinitely bigger than themselves. Literature is, therefore, a failed attempt of self-delusion, a desperate search for something which might allow Marcel not to be devoured like a speck.

However, before going into that, it would be relevant to remember exactly how pessimistic Proust and Marcel can be during the novel towards the possibility of getting to truly know anything. In order to demonstrate this, we have to keep in mind the number of occasions the reader is reminded of the limitations the human experience is faced with, and how unlikely it is for one to get into the long-awaited Eden. The first glimpse we have of this impossibility is given to us in the first volume, when we are informed Marcel was never able to visit Roussainville, that he never knew anything of Méséglise, besides its ‘way’, and he never went so far in the Guermantes way to get to the Vivonne’s spring or even to Guermantes itself. This, naturally, led him to confer a magical aura to those places, so mystically different from the predictability of Combray⁴¹⁶. As such, it was only reasonable for him to infer that it must have been there that beauty and truth were hidden after all. From quite a tender age, Marcel had the strong intuition that the Paradise he was looking for would have to be located somewhere inaccessible, because if he did happen to enter its gates, the desired Eden would immediately perish in front of his eyes,

⁴¹⁶ “Roussainville, within whose walls I had never penetrated” (I, 150); “Roussainville into which I had long desired to penetrate” (I, 154); “Of Méséglise-la-Vineuse, to tell the truth, I never knew anything more than the ‘way’, and some strangers who used to come over on Sundays to take the air in Combray” (I, 132); “Never, in the course of our walks along the Guermantes way, were we able to penetrate as far as the source of the Vivonne, of which I had often thought and which had in my mind so abstract, so ideal an existence that I had been as surprised when someone told me that it was actually to be found in the same department, at a given number of miles from Combray, as I had been when I learned that there was another fixed point somewhere on the earth’s surface, where, according to the ancients, opened the jaws of Hell. Nor could we ever get as far as that other goal which I so longed to reach, Guermantes itself. I knew that it was the residence of the Duc and Duchesse de Guermantes...” (I, 169). This last passage also offers us a plausible, metonymic justification for Marcel’s devotion to the Duc de Guermantes.

becoming something very similar to the vision he had of the Verdurin's clan or the vision aunt Léonie had of Combray⁴¹⁷.

The same reasoning allows us to understand Marcel's disappointed tone when he tells the reader that in the act of physical possession, "the possessor possesses nothing" (I, 230) or when he ascertains that "happiness [*le bonheur*] can never be achieved" (I, 614). Marcel is incapable of believing that he was given the instruments needed to have full access to other people's inner life⁴¹⁸ or that there is any way for him to have a blissed and meaningful existence. As for Pascal, for Proust, the world seems to be nothing more than a sick joke told by an unfathomable being, a joke we were never meant to understand but laugh at all the same.

Therefore, in order to go against this incomprehensibility of the world, Proust would come to feel the need to recur to Pascal's strategy, presented in the aforementioned *pensée*. In *Proust and The Art of Love*, Rivers tells us that, in Mme. Scheikévitch's copy of *Du Côté de Chez Swann*'s first edition, Proust wrote a long dedication which ended with him venting: "Alas, Madame, I'm running out of blank pages just as the suffering was becoming less acute". Without further developing this idea, Rivers rightly sustains that Proust had by then realized that "as long as there are more blank pages to be filled with writing, with analysis, with self-confrontation, the grief can be controlled and the pain understood" (Rivers (1983), 96). Here, Rivers seems to have grasped the importance literature had in Proust's eyes. Literature was, for Proust, a way to regain some control over the grief induced by the universe, hence delaying the moment when this latter universe would swallow him 'like a speck'. Through literature, Proust could regulate his world by unilaterally deciding the terms in which his own life took place, deciding what is and what is not said to him, what he is, and how he behaves towards the suffering

⁴¹⁷ As we suggested in the seventeenth chapter, recurring to the arguments of Elisabeth Ladenson on the subject, this is one of the reasons Marcel had such a tremendous fascination for the lesbian world.

⁴¹⁸ On this topic, cf., for instance, the passage of *Le Côté de Guermantes* where Marcel is unsuccessfully trying to figure out if Françoise liked him or not. At that moment, Marcel shares with the reader that for the first time this reflection had led him to the realization that "a person does not, as I had imagined, stand motionless and clear before our eyes with his merits, his defects, his plans, his intentions with regard to ourselves (like a garden at which we gaze through a railing with all its borders spread out before us), but is a shadow which we can never penetrate, of which there can be no such thing as direct knowledge, with respect to which we form countless beliefs, based upon words and sometimes actions, neither of which can give us anything but inadequate and as it proves contradictory information—a shadow behind which we can alternately imagine, with equal justification, that there burns the flame of hatred and of love" (II, 367).

imposed upon himself by the remaining characters. Characters he had also invented to replace the people who surrounded him, over whom he had little or no control⁴¹⁹.

In “Le Balzac de Monsieur de Guermantes”, Proust remarks that he was confused regarding what some critics meant when they claimed one part of a book is magnificent while another is not, or even that one book of a given writer is excellent while another one is banal⁴²⁰. For Proust, an artist’s *oeuvre* should be read as if it were a single book, since it is the creation of an entire world taking place, and it is precisely the strength and concision of such world that is up to us, readers, to measure. Proust is, famously, the perfect counterexample to this theory, as everything he wrote up until 1913 never even got close to the excellence of *À La Recherche*. Yet, it is easy for us to understand what he was hinting at with this. For Proust, artistic creation is nothing more than the forging of a fictional world which can replace the actual reality the writer seems condemned to live in, allowing him to migrate there, and thus evading the suffering caused by the untamable anthropophagic universe. Art, for Proust, is only interesting when it allows the writer to set the tone of the song. It is not about creating credible, colorful narratives but about finding the set of lenses which allow its author to see the world as just right, about finding the intonation better suited to describe oneself⁴²¹. The readers’ task is, thus, merely to check if those lenses offer them a clearer vision. If not, instead of blaming the writer for the plank in their own eyes, they should look for a better suited optician elsewhere⁴²².

Under this light, we might understand the despair Marcel feels during the first half of the novel a little better. In those volumes there are several moments during which Marcel tells us how anguished he felt from seeing the world populated by monsters and gods⁴²³. Paris, Balbec, and Combray were crowded with things which appeared to share no common origin, leading the young Marcel to believe he would never be able to understand the functioning of the world he happened to fall upon⁴²⁴. With time and the

⁴¹⁹ Robbie Kubala’s “Love and Transience in Proust” is rather illuminating on this topic.

⁴²⁰ Cf. *CSB*, 233-234.

⁴²¹ For more on the topic of Proust’s quest for the right description of himself, cf. Pippin’s “On ‘Becoming Who One Is’ (And Failing): Proust’s Problematic Selves”.

⁴²² “It is only out of habit, a habit contracted from the insincere language of prefaces and dedications, that the writer speaks of ‘my reader’. In reality every reader is, while he is reading, the reader of his own self. The writer’s work is merely a kind of optical instrument which he offers to the reader to enable him to discern what, without this book, he would perhaps never have perceived in himself” (IV, 489-9-490).

⁴²³ “thronged with monsters and with gods, we know little peace of mind” (II, 90).

⁴²⁴ “How could I be expected to believe in a common origin uniting two names which had entered my consciousness, one through the low and shameful gate of experience, the other by the golden gate of imagination?” (II, 58).

discovery of the potential of metaphors, Marcel eventually began to see those disparate beings had much in common not only amongst themselves but also with him. As the years and the volumes went by, Marcel realized that, contrarily to what he used to believe, there was no abyss separating Françoise from the Duchesse of Guermantes⁴²⁵, a realization which brought relief by allowing Marcel to feel slightly at home in his own shoes, making some (although, of course, limited) sense of his life, integrating it in a wider narrative. At that point, Marcel began to grasp that all those things surrounding him could belong to the same story, the story of his own life. He understood he was now capable of beginning his novel, which presented him with the possibility of finding a way to make his suffering less acute, provided the blank pages were filled with his own words, written in his own tone.

Literature offered Proust yet another advantage worth considering in this chapter, an advantage which, once more, we find drafted in Emerson's "The Poet". There, Emerson claims that

Thought makes everything fit for use. The vocabulary of an omniscient man would embrace words and images excluded from polite conversation. What would be base, or even obscene, to the obscene, becomes illustrious, spoken in a new connection of thought. The piety of the Hebrew prophets purges their grossness. The circumcision is an example of the power of poetry to raise the low and offensive. Small and mean things serve as well as great symbols. (Emerson, 329)

This idea would often reappear in *À La Recherche*, particularly when Marcel attempts to explain Bergotte's *oeuvre*⁴²⁶. For Proust, literature was a way of transforming the basest human experiences into a reflection and exposition of the inner workings of the human soul. Boring conversations, sadomasochist sexual relationships, and crippling jealousy, when converted into the scenes of a novel, became ways for him to expose the functioning of the world. They are no longer the product of bizarre human traits but tools for exploring further into his own selfhood, and through it, into ours as well. Thus, Proust pierced the Verdurins' superficiality, Charlus' fetishes and Albertine's mysteriousness, seeing in them expressions of the deepest human desires within him.

What is more, by converting the pains of love into episodes of *À La Recherche*, Proust realized he was now in a condition to regain some control over his own destiny and, thus, what he sought to avoid became something absolutely necessary for him to get

⁴²⁵ Cf. Chapter 19.

⁴²⁶ Cf., for instance, I, 549.

in touch with himself. At the end of the novel, Marcel starts to see happiness as just another obstacle in his track, since only sorrow enables one to become a writer and, thus, to find a lasting joy in life, a joy that (and this, as we will later argue, plays a crucial role in Proust) makes one indifferent to death⁴²⁷. Thence, literature produces a significant twist in one's life, transforming what was once base into something illustrious, and what was once sorrowful into something leading to a lasting bliss. As such, literature allowed Marcel to convert something he had an almost unlimited stock of (sorrow) into a source of some form of happiness.

Yet, this inversion, when turned towards the past Marcel is now trying to re-describe, changes it considerably. Deleuze suggested the main difference between voluntary memory and involuntary memory is that "it is obvious that something essential escapes voluntary memory: the past's being *as past*" (Deleuze, 57). We will have to disagree with Deleuze on that particular aspect. It is not, from our point of view, the past as it once was that Marcel reencounters in *Le Temps Retrouvé*, but a past purged of all its suffering, a past which converted this suffering into a path for joy, hence a rather different past indeed. On this topic, it is worth recalling Bersani's argument in *The Fictions of Life and of Art*, when he claims that

There is little or no attempt to place us at the emotional point of view of the past; the dramatic discovery of important truths about love is swallowed up into a retrospective analysis of past moments from the point of view of the truths deduced from them. What is being lived in the narrative is not, for example, the moments of anguish when Marcel learns that Albertine knows Mademoiselle Vinteuil and her friend, but rather the moment of intellectual satisfaction enjoyed in analyzing what happened then (Bersani (2013), 104)

Thus, it is not the essence of the past Marcel recaptures, but a past faced from a vantage point which transforms all its rottenness (or barrenness) into something fruitful. The satisfaction the aged Marcel finds in those moments long gone was not present in those memories themselves, but in the perspective which transforms them into objects that provide him with intellectual satisfaction and, more importantly, keep death away while

⁴²⁷ "For if unhappiness develops the forces of the mind, happiness alone is salutary to the body. But unhappiness, even if it did not on every occasion reveal to us some new law, would nevertheless be indispensable, since through its means alone we are brought back time after time to a perception of the truth and forced to take things seriously, tearing up each new crop of the weeds of habit and skepticism and levity and indifference" (IV, 484-5); "As for happiness, that is really useful to us in one way only, by making unhappiness possible. It is necessary for us to form in happiness ties of confidence and attachment that are both sweet and strong in order that their rupture may cause us the heart-rending but so valuable agony which is called unhappiness. Had we not been happy, if only in hope, the unhappinesses that befall us would be without cruelty and therefore without fruit." (IV, 486); "once one understands that suffering is the best thing that one can hope to encounter in life, one thinks without terror, and almost as of a deliverance, of death" (IV, 488).

offering Marcel a sample of what would be his own voice⁴²⁸. We are now getting closer to providing an answer for a significant problem Deleuze raised regarding the madeleine episode, when he claims that “it remains to be explained why we experience so intense and so particular a joy” (Deleuze, 12). If Marcel’s childhood in Combray is summed up around an anxious episode such as his mother’s refusal to give him a goodnight kiss, why does he experience an overwhelming happiness when going back to that particular period of his life? The answer to that question will be the subject of the remainder of this chapter.

To provide a satisfying solution for this enigma, we will have to thoroughly examine the relationship Marcel and some other Proustian characters establish with their own past and their memories of it. In “La Confession d’une Jeune Fille”, the protagonist refers to her past bliss as a happiness completely projected onto her future plans⁴²⁹. What we would like to argue is that, in Proust, the bliss of the past is always somehow correlated to what the present had in store. It does not lay in the *temps perdu* but in the way the characters’ present taints their own past. In this short story, the protagonist (and we could speculate this could easily be said of Proust as well) looks with longing at her past due to the fact her mother was then still alive and very close to her. Now, the *jeune fille* is not only dying, just like Marcel, but she is sorrowful for her mother’s death, which she had inadvertently caused. The *jeune fille* states that rather clearly when she confesses she had never imagined the possibility of a situation in which she would long for those past days, thus allowing the reader to infer that her past was seen as idyllic not due to its excellency but due to the fact it is now utterly lost, while death is imminent⁴³⁰.

Also in *Les Plaisirs et les Jours*, this time in “Le Fin de la Jalousie”, we are again elucidated regarding the nature of the past in Proust’s *oeuvre* when we see Honoré, in two different moments, recalling his own prior thoughts inexactly⁴³¹. By recurring to a heterodiegetic narrator, Proust is able to show us how memories of Honoré’s past do not coincide with how they were lived in those departed moments, a tool he wasn’t able to

⁴²⁸ “In the past he felt that the women he loved were perversely keeping their lives a secret from him and depriving him of a reassuring image of himself; now, with the appeasement of these terrifying fantasies, he can show how they gave him personality, so to speak, by contributing to the history that is uniquely his” (Bersani (2013), 112).

⁴²⁹ Cf. *P&J*, 144.

⁴³⁰ “I never imagined that there would come a day when I would miss it [my fourteen-year-old soul]” (*P&J*, 143). Cf. Chapter 1.

⁴³¹ In the beginning of the short-story, when dining at Princesse d’Áleriouvre’s house, Honoré hears M. de Buires say about Honoré’s lover that François de Gouvres had rejected her due to her not being very elegant (“*elle n’est pas bien faite*”) (*P&J*, 219). This sentence will obsess Honoré throughout his life and he will come to recall it in a slightly different version, one offered with a ruder, more violent meaning: “*elle est affreusement faite*” (*P&J*, 229).

recur to so explicitly in *À La Recherche*, as we only have access to Marcel's memories while he is summoning them, only being able to see them while tainted by Marcel's present and his perspective. We begin to see what is at stake when, in *Le Temps Retrouvé*, we read that "the true paradises are paradises that we have lost" (IV, 449). It is not that we are unlucky to always let go of those paradises or that we are incapable of seeing those paradises due to their proximity, but rather that they can only become paradises when they are already lost, and when we begin seeing our own present as a hell we are trapped in.

To be fair, throughout the novel Marcel repeatedly states he was for some reason unable to see his past as blissfully as it had in fact been. One instance of this can be found in *La Fugitive*, when Marcel claims, regarding a dinner he had with Albertine in Paris, that

At the time I had paid no attention to the dinner which we had eaten together after our return from the Bois, before I went to the Verdurins', and towards the beauty, the solemn sweetness of which I now turned with my eyes full of tears. An impression of love is out of proportion to the other impressions of life, but when it is lost in their midst we are incapable of appreciating it. It is not from immediately below, in the tumult of the street and amid the thronging houses nearby, but when we have moved away, that, from the slope of a neighboring hill, at a distance from which the whole town seems to have vanished or forms only a confused heap at ground level, we can appreciate, in the calm detachment of solitude and dusk, the towering splendor of a cathedral, unique, enduring and pure. (IV, 75)

Here, the reader is undoubtedly told this dinner was immersed in beauty and sweetness, and Marcel is to blame for not having noticed it in due course, mainly because of his proximity to the event, which didn't allow him to properly appreciate the 'unique, enduring and pure' splendor of that moment, a splendor that is in this passage equated to that of a cathedral. A few lines above, Marcel had lamented that the life "that had bored me (or so I thought) had been on the contrary delightful" (IV, 75)⁴³². It is rather confusing to imagine what it means for a social interaction to be delicious when, at the time of the event, we saw it as boring. To accept this as a possibility, we would have to imagine that for Marcel those interactions had an intrinsic value in themselves, being exempt from his own perspective. Yet, the novel rejects this idea over and over again. To make sense of

⁴³² On this topic, cf. also the passage when Marcel evokes "the travelers who come home enraptured by the over-all splendor of a journey from which day by day they experienced nothing but tedium; and let us then declare whether, in the communal life that is led by our ideas in the enclosure of our minds, there is a single one of those that makes us most happy which has not first sought, like a real parasite, and won from an alien but neighboring idea the greater part of the strength that it originally lacked" (I, 472-3).

this reading, we have to attribute it to a grieving Marcel, who had just lost his loved one in a horrible accident and is looking back with sorrow at what was forever gone. Not taking what Marcel is saying seriously corresponds to taking *À La Recherche* seriously, as a novel which is more concerned with constructing Marcel's perspective over his own life than with the philosophical value of the conclusions he eventually arrives at⁴³³. It is a novel about ways of seeing more than about the validity of what one ends up seeing.

The idea we are trying to put forward in this chapter is in many aspects similar to Landy's argument that *À La Recherche* "is rather a successful (or at least preliminary) effort at self-fashioning on the part of a fictional character, Marcel" (Landy, 47). However, it could be said that, even if at times Marcel taints his past with the colors suggested by his own present, this is never the case during the so-called epiphanies. The argument could be made that, in these moments, he recaptures those departed days exactly as they occurred, which is what seems to underlie passages such as the one where Marcel claims the information given to him by his voluntary memories preserves "nothing of the past itself", while other ones, those provided by involuntary memory, resurrect our past days so they can "return to share our life" (I, 44).

Yet, to refute this possible counterargument, we simply need to evoke a passage from the first volume and another from the last. In the very first pages of *Du Côté de Chez Swann*, Marcel explains his perception of the mechanism of dreams, which during the novel is often compared to the mechanism of involuntary memory⁴³⁴. There, the reader is told the images Marcel would grasp while awaking were soon to be replaced by more accurate ones his vigil had to offer him, and the enchantment sleepiness attributed to his lost days made him imagine them "to be in the present without being able to picture them exactly, and which would become plainer [*je reverrais mieux*] in a little while when I was properly awake" (I, 6). Here, when Marcel refers to vigil as the period during which he would see better, he is clearly undermining the validity of memories brought back by dreams and epiphanies, as they feed themselves from illusions and intersected recollections. Precisely the same could be said regarding the moment in *Le Temps Retrouvé* when Marcel refers to these epiphanies as an optical illusion, forcing the reader

⁴³³ At this point, we would like to recall one of the most famous passages of *Le Temps Retrouvé*, in which Marcel claims that "a work in which there are theories is like an object which still has its price-tag on it" (IV, 461).

⁴³⁴ Cf., for instance, III, 149.

to become aware of the impossibility of taking these resurrections of the past at face-value⁴³⁵.

This optical illusion, a result of looking at the past, is better understood when taking into consideration the several moments in which Marcel depicts the human tendency to tremendously aggrandize what is lost and will never return⁴³⁶. The happiness Marcel feels in those particular moments seems to derive exclusively from the fact he is returning to a place he imagined to be irretrievable, albeit there were not many reasons to want to go back in the first place. It is the happiness of seeing a familiar face we imagined would never be seen again, even if it only brought us sorrow, anguish, or boredom in the past. This particular type of happiness could be summed up in the words of the prodigal son's father, when he is explaining to his eldest son (which, in this parallel, would be a skeptical reader) why he was joyful by the return of someone who, in the past, had only brought him disappointments: "we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Luke, 15:32). It is the joy caused by the miracle of resurrection more than by what was resurrected, because if what is dead may be alive once more, then death is not something to be scared of. However, contrarily to the message the biblical parable tries to convey, this joy is the result of an illusion, since these resurrections have a narrower scope than we would tend to believe if we gave full credit to Marcel's enthusiastic descriptions of it, thus making the eldest son the character who better grasps the full meaning of what is in fact going on⁴³⁷.

Proust elucidates us regarding this pattern of behavior when, in *À L'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs*, he tells us that the beauty of the girls he found himself attracted to in Balbec was more related to their elusiveness than to their physical traits⁴³⁸. It is also

⁴³⁵ "But this species of optical illusion [*ce trompe l'oeil*], which placed beside me a moment of the past that was incompatible with the present, could not last for long" (IV, 452).

⁴³⁶ From this perspective, the title of the novel accurately reflects the argument we have here been trying to put forward. Marcel is *à la recherche du temps perdu* because, as time is utterly lost, it becomes suitable to be the object of a search. This reinforces our previous suggestion that literature, for Proust, is an activity doomed to be unsuccessful, as we can never recover the *temps perdu*. A quest for a grail whose recovery we know from the start to be impossible.

⁴³⁷ At this point, we would like to state that we have no intention of making an exegesis of the biblical parable, but only to use the words of the father in a different context, one that might distort its original meaning. Yet, the burden on our conscience is alleviated by the knowledge that Proust himself often resorted to this trick, as we have argued in the ninth chapter.

⁴³⁸ "Let but a single flash of reality - the glimpse of a woman from afar or from behind - enable us to project the image of Beauty before our eyes, and we imagine that we have recognized it, our hearts beat, and we will always remain half-persuaded that it was She, provided that the woman has vanished: it is only if we manage to overtake her that we realize our mistake" (II, 146). Cf. also the passage of *Le Temps Retrouvé* in which Marcel has an involuntary memory of his stay at Balbec and claims that "Always the present scene had come of victorious, and always the vanquished one had

this characteristic of human desire that is being explored in *Le Temps Retrouvé*, when after reading the pages of the *Journal des Goncourt*, Marcel quotes Victor Hugo's verse: *Et que tout cela fasse un astre dans la nuit!* (IV, 296). Through Victor Hugo's words, Marcel is here claiming that it is the night's approach which confers beauty to all things he will regard as beautiful in his last volume, since, when the night finally comes, they will become extinct. This quotation appears precisely in the moment Marcel considers the possibility that all the people he spent his life imagining to be the utmost example of banality, are after all a star shining in his long and somber night, therefore owing their light not to any intrinsic virtue of their own, but to the darkness which illuminates them.

Yet, perhaps we find this human pattern better diagnosed in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*. Therein, Proust's narrator compares the perspective he had when, in his mind, as if sleepwalking, he went back to the days of his childhood, which were by now "irreparably mislaid", those "insignificant sensations that we would be so happy to feel again", to that of "the man who knows he will not live to see another summer [and] will yearn even for the indoor buzz of flies that tells of the hot sun without or for the whine of mosquitoes that tell of the scented night" (CSB, 53). We find in this passage three points of interest for our argument. First of all, the comparison of involuntary memories to sleep, a parallel we have already alluded to in this chapter. Secondly, the fact the sensations one would be glad to relive are here described as 'insignificant', thus removing from their supposed subjective value any justification for the interest they originate in the protagonist. Finally, the fact that Proust once more recurs to the approach of death to justify the yearning one feels for things which have nothing pleasant about them, namely mosquitoes and flies, the worst aspects of a sunny summer day. Nonetheless, the flies and mosquitoes bring joy to the protagonist because they point out realities he seems to be secluded from, as the 'hot sun' and the 'scented night' are glimpsed at from a distance, by a protagonist who is kept indoors at all times. Thus, those prior days are, according to the pattern we have been describing here, perfectly suitable to becoming an Eden which, as usual, he is not able to enjoy directly but can see only through things that announce them. Just like Marcel, the protagonist of "Sommeils" is someone who remains shut down, while the party carries on outside, without him.

appeared to me the more beautiful of the two" (IV, 453). Our argument is that these two postulates are correlated, it is because the conquered place has been lost that it seems more beautiful in Marcel's eyes.

Before moving on and still on this subject, it is important to bear in mind the novel begins with a scene very similar to the epiphanies which suddenly overflow Marcel at the end of *Le Temps Retrouvé*. Yet, back then, in those first few pages of *Du Côté de Chez Swann*, Marcel is in a state of absolute terror⁴³⁹. Perhaps this is due to him now being freed from the brief thrill and exhilaration caused by these mystical moments, or perhaps simply because that thrill was enhanced by the despair he felt at the *Bal des Têtes*, a despair which inflated the glory of the past. This variation of enthusiasm is easier to understand when we find it separated by more than three thousand pages, since we also find this exact pattern within one single sentence. In the beginning of the second chapter of *Du Côté de Chez Swann*, we find a typical Proustian phrase, which will be instrumental to reinforce what we have been suggesting thus far:

To live in [*À l'habiter*], Combray was a trifle depressing, like its streets, whose houses built of the blackened stone of the country, fronted with outside steps, capped with gables which projected long shadows downwards, were so dark that as soon as the sun began to go down one had to draw back the curtains in the sitting-room windows; streets with the solemn names of saints, not a few of whom figured in the history of the early lords of Combray, (...) and these Combray streets exist in so remote a corner of my memory, painted in colors so different from those in which the world is decked for me today (...) seem to me now more unreal than the projections of my magic lantern; and at times I feel that to be able to cross the Rue Saint-Hilaire again, to engage a room in the Rue de l'Oiseau [*pouvoir louer une chambre*], in the old hostelry of the Oiseau Flesché, from whose basement windows used to rise a smell of cooking which rises still in my mind, now and then, in the same warm and intermittent gusts, would be to secure a contact with the Beyond more marvelously supernatural than it would be to make Golo's acquaintance and to chat with Geneviève de Brabant (I, 48)

This rather long passage seems to condensate the structure of the entire novel. At the beginning of it, Marcel confesses that Combray was 'a trifle depressing' and there was no reason for it to generate any enthusiasm whatsoever in its inhabitants. Yet, in its second half, Marcel obliterates the bleakness of the real Combray, only because the faded colors he once found in his family's hometown were 'different from those in which the world is decked for me today'. Again, the enchantment derives not so much from the fact that those colors had in themselves any particular beauty, but from their being seldom found in his world. The disappearance of Combray's shadows will, thus, make them unreal,

⁴³⁹ To reinforce this point, cf. the mortuary vocabulary Marcel resorts to when describing the moment he went to bed deprived from his mother's kiss at Combray ("Once in my room I had to stop every loophole, to close the shutters, to dig my own grave as I turned down the bed-clothes, to wrap myself in the shroud of my nightshirt. But before burying myself [*avant de m'ensevelir*] in the iron bed which had been placed there because, on summer nights, I was too hot among the rep curtains of the four-poster, I was stirred to revolt, and attempted the desperate stratagem of a condemned prisoner" (I, 28)).

leading Marcel to believe this lost Sion was an Eden in disguise, and it must have been where the gate was located, granting ‘a contact with the Beyond’. Naturally, this contact is only imagined to take place there because it was now impossible to recover. There is one last particularity of this sentence we should pay close attention to. In the first half, Marcel claims that it was depressing to live in Combray. Yet, in the second half, the possibility of seeing the small village as a ‘marvelously supernatural’ land is connected with renting a room there, in the old hostelry. Therefore, what we can infer from this is that one can only find beauty in foreign places. Once again, resorting to biblical terminology, Marcel can never find a stable home to lay his head on, as the shelters upon which he projects bliss are only temporary accommodations. He is able to visit them merely as a tourist who overlooks its houses and streets.

The devotion Marcel confers to literature, and the mystical epiphanies we come across at the end of the novel, can be explained by yet another reason. In the past, Marcel was young enough to believe that, if everything was deprived of the enchantment he conferred upon it with his own imagination, he could still hope to find his Eden elsewhere within the world around him. However, as he grew old, he started to understand there was no suitable place in his world to satisfy his desires, thus turning his attention to what he had so far repeatedly neglected or postponed. This idea is summed up in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* when, to a rather nostalgic commentary made by a German nobleman (“‘Oh, there are no more princes nowadays’”), the narrator immediately adds a nihilistic one (“‘And of course, there never were any’” (CSB, 271), preventing the reader from believing that, contrarily to what the nobleman imagined, there was one specific moment in time when everything was in its right place. We find another instance of this in *Le Temps Retrouvé*, when Marcel realizes the Prince de Guermantes had moved from his old mansion to a magnificent new one he had built on Avenue du Bois. Instead of being astonished by the new house, Marcel becomes disappointed with the impossibility of believing this house had belonged to the Guermantes since time immemorial. What is more, Marcel adds that

intrinsically, material objects have in themselves no power, but, since it is our practice to bestow power upon them, doubtless at this moment some middle-class schoolboy was feeling, in front of the house in the Avenue du Bois, the same sentiments that I had once felt as I stood before the house where the Prince de Guermantes had lived in my youth. He, this schoolboy, was still at the age of beliefs, but I had passed beyond it,” (IV, 436)

It seems to be implied here that, after being informed the woman he had known all his life as Mme. Verdurin was now the Princesse de Guermantes, there was no way he could

be sure the prestige he conferred to the imminent characters of his youth would not be the object of scorn by a more experienced and informed person. If this middle-class school-boy could be persuaded the Guermantes had lived in this new mansion for centuries or that Mme. Verdurin was the actual Princesse de Guermantes, then there is no safe way of ascertaining if characters like the Baron de Charlus were not, after all, former Legrandins in disguise. This should be more than enough to shatter Marcel's world into pieces.

And yet, by a bizarre contrary effect, at the same time he starts to realize exactly how irrelevant the world of aristocracy is (a world he spent his entire life trying to gain access to), he nonetheless confers upon it an enchantment which a cold analysis could never justify⁴⁴⁰. This is perhaps due to the erosion of the old notions of aristocracy, which after the War were becoming utterly antiquated. Thus, they were immediately converted into the object of the devotion Marcel reserved for lost things. Besides this, Marcel is just evidencing the human tendency we have already underlined. As one gets old and is therefore unable to further look for an Eden, there is a tendency to forge one somewhere in the past, since the idea that it simply doesn't exist is rather unbearable⁴⁴¹.

The First World War therefore plays a crucial role in the conclusions Marcel reaches in *Le Temps Retrouvé*, although its influence has been often neglected by Proustian critics. War owes its importance in the novel to two major factors that prepare the path for Marcel's apotheosis during the *Bal des Têtes*.

Firstly, the war brings with it a more acute consciousness of death, as mortality stops being an abstract notion reserved for a vague, distant future and becomes a rather substantial reality, one that deprives Marcel of his best friend Saint-Loup.

Secondly, war creates a new social and scenic disposition which makes all familiar places become strange in the blink of an eye. When leaving the health clinic he was placed in for several years, Marcel returns to a Paris he fails to recognize, as it was constantly being bombed by the German planes. This feeling of being a foreigner in one's hometown distances Marcel from his own life and erodes all the notions habit had created in him, thus allowing him to see things from a different perspective. By creating a gap in the usual

⁴⁴⁰ Cf., for instance, IV, 321 or IV, 339-340.

⁴⁴¹ One perfect example of this attitude is found in the military metaphor Proust recurs to in *Le Côté des Guermantes*, when Marcel sustains that "I find in the period of that name's occupation of me seven or eight different figures. The earliest were the most beautiful: gradually my daydream, forced by reality to abandon a position that was no longer tenable, established itself anew in one slightly less advanced until it was obliged to retire still further" (II, 313).

continuity of time, war had since created a new social reality around Marcel, one which would normally take several years to form⁴⁴².

The idea of a strong connection between the consciousness of death and Marcel's decision to dedicate the remaining years of his life to literature will, henceforth, be the topic of this chapter. We would therefore like to suggest Marcel turns to literature as a strategy to run away from death, a priority present throughout his entire life, as he (as well as the remaining characters) always seems very concerned with finding pleasure, as a way to avoid looking death in the eye⁴⁴³. By the time he came back from "the new sanatorium to which I withdrew [and that] was not more successful in curing me than the first one" (IV, 433), Marcel became more aware of his fragility and how near the end he truly was.

In "Proust and the Aesthetic of Suffering", Rivers suggests that Marcel trips over on the pavement of the Guermantes' mansion (thus originating the first of the many epiphanies we find in the last volume of the novel) because he had suffered an attack similar to the one his grandmother had on her walk through the Champs-Élysées⁴⁴⁴. Even if we are not prepared to go as far as Rivers in this interpretation, we believe it is impossible to exaggerate the importance of the vicinity of death in the conclusions Marcel reaches in the last volume. Marcel is sick and old, every single one of his acquaintances is either dead or aged beyond recognition, and the people he imagined to be the most elegant in Paris were substituted in their position by less elegant characters. Obliterating this equates to missing the point of the episode of *Le Bal des Têtes*.

In *Le Temps Retrouvé*, Marcel explains the reasons behind his anguish when he finally decided to become a writer: "there was a more serious reason for my distress [*angoisse*]: I had made the discovery of this destructive action of Time at the very moment when I had conceived the ambition to make visible, to intellectualize in a work of art, realities that were outside Time" (IV, 508-9). What we have been here trying to

⁴⁴² "It was, moreover, not only the headdresses with their strange cylinders towering above the ladies' faces that were new. The faces were new themselves. These ladies in new-fangled hats were young women who had come one did not quite know from where and had been the flower of fashion, some for six months, others for two years, others for four. And these differences were of as much importance for them as had been, at the time when I took my first steps in society, for two families like the Guermantes and the La Rochefoucaulds a difference of three or four centuries of proven antiquity. The lady who had known the Guermantes since 1914 looked upon the lady who had been introduced to them in 1916 as an upstart, greeted her with the air of a dowager, quizzed her with her lorgnette, and admitted with a little grimace that no one even knew for certain whether or no she was married" (IV, 304-5).

⁴⁴³ On this topic, it is worth reading the final pages of *Le Côté de Guermantes* (II, 862-884).

⁴⁴⁴ Rivers (1987), 439.

establish is that, throughout *À La Recherche*, the reader is given the distinct impression this is no unlucky coincidence. It is precisely because Marcel is running out of time, because he is suffering from the destructive action of Time, that he seeks 'to intellectualize in a work of art realities that were outside Time'. It is because time is running out that he turns to a timeless place, where death wouldn't be able to reach him. When Marcel sustains that "my personality of today may be compared to an abandoned quarry, which supposes everything it contains to be uniform and monotonous, but from which memory, selecting here and there, can, like some sculptor of genius, extract innumerable different statues" (IV, 464), we can't help but wonder, by all the previously stated reasons, if the beauty Marcel confers to the memories he compares to Ancient Greek statues was not a result of the uniformity and monotony of his present.

The correlation Proust establishes between his attempted escape from death and the joy caused by the discovery of this timeless reality, captured by epiphanies and condensed through literature, couldn't be more explicitly stated. In the last volume of *À La Recherche*, Marcel often dwells on this subject. Thus, it is common to find Marcel wondering, just as when he entered the courtyard of the Guermantes, "why had the images of Combray and of Venice, at these two different moments, given me a joy which was like a certainty and which sufficed, without any other proof, to make death a matter of indifference to me" (IV, 446)⁴⁴⁵. In the book he devoted to Proust, Samuel Beckett explains this rather clearly when stating that "the Proustian solution consists, in so far as it has been examined, in the negation of Time and Death, the negation of Death because the negation of Time. Death is dead because Time is dead" (Beckett, 56).

In the opening pages of *La Prisonnière*, Marcel suggests his ill-health has led him to become more attached to memories of his youth. He explains that

⁴⁴⁵ Just to provide another example of this correlation, cf. the moment when Marcel is exploring the philosophical meaning of these epiphanies and states that they permitted him to simultaneously taste a moment of the past and a present sensation, which made the past impose itself on the present "and I was made to doubt whether I was in the one or the other. The truth surely was that the being within me which had enjoyed these impressions had enjoyed them because they had in them something that was common to a day long past and to the present, because in some way they were extra-temporal, and this being made its appearance only when, through one of these identifications of the present with the past, it was likely to find itself in the one and only medium in which it could exist and enjoy the essence of things, that is to say: outside time. This explained why it was that my anxiety on the subject of my death had ceased at the moment when I had unconsciously recognized the taste of the little madeleine, since the being which at that moment I had been was an extra-temporal being and therefore unalarmed by the vicissitudes of the future" (IV, 450). Cf. also the text on Chateaubriand included in *Essais et Articles*, where Proust once more describes literature as a shelter which keeps death away ("at the moment when he declares himself annihilated, he makes his escape and enters upon a life where there is no such thing as dying" (E&A,348)).

It often happens that the pleasure which everyone takes in turning over the keepsakes that his memory has collected is keenest in those whom the tyranny of physical illness and the daily hope of its cure prevent, on the one hand, from going out to seek in nature scenes that resemble those memories and, on the other hand, leave so convinced that they will shortly be able to do so that they can remain gazing at them in a state of desire and appetite and not regard them merely as memories or pictures (III, 536)

This passage shows us that near the end of his life Marcel didn't by any means 'overcome his desires', as Girard suggested. He was still in a state of desire, but now had to transfer them to another realm, since he wasn't able to imagine when he would once again seek the satisfaction of those desires as he used to. Thus, he didn't become an ethereal being but merely realized he had to search for pleasure elsewhere, not only because he was old and sick but mainly because the girls he used to chase were now old widows⁴⁴⁶. Marcel's quest, as we have been arguing, is therefore a quest for permanence and pleasure, but most of all a quest for control. Realizing how he and everyone around him had aged, Marcel decided to turn himself to a realm which could provide him the permanence, pleasure and control he always unsuccessfully sought for: the realm of literature. Thus, in the final pages of *Le Temps Retrouvé* we don't find any rebuttal of his prior life, as such would be the discovery of a deeply hidden meaning of art or the essence of time. Instead we find only Marcel, scared of death, trying to look in new places for what he had searched for his entire life. He is not in search of lost time but rather the opposite, he is in search of a timeless place which can provide him with a shelter best suited to keep him from death.

⁴⁴⁶ Cf., for instance, the moment when Swann confesses to Marcel that "now that I'm a little too weary to live with other people, those old feelings, so personal and individual, that I had in the past, seem to me—it's the mania of all collectors—very precious. I open my heart to myself like a sort of showcase, and examine one by one all those love affairs of which the rest of the world can have known nothing. And of this collection, to which I'm now even more attached than to my others, I say to myself, rather as Mazarin said of his books, but in fact without the least distress, that it will be very tiresome to have to leave it all" (II, 703). We should not, however, imagine that because Marcel turned to literature, he became a chaste pagan monk, as we can find numerous textual suggestions that he continued to seek young girls as he used to (cf., for instance, IV, 566-7).

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