ABSTRACT

READING THE SELF THROUGH THE TEXT OF THE OTHER:
THE SHARED SPACES OF MARCEL PROUST'S A LA RECHERCHE DU TEMPS PERDU

By John M. D’Amico

In *A la Recherche du temps perdu*, Marcel Proust writes that he would be mistaken in calling any of his readers “mon lecteur.” Instead, he calls each person who reads his novel to use it as an instrument to read his or her own interior text. This thesis explores Proust’s theories on reading through psychoanalytic and Foucauldian optics, asking what it might mean to read within oneself through an object that is “other.” In order to explore the function of this mediative device—Proust’s novel—that collapses the binaries of self and other, inside and out, reader and author, we will look at the senses that he uses as metaphors for reading, vision and hearing, in particular. In sum, the virtual coexistence of the author’s novel and the reader’s interior text that occurs through the act of reading creates a shared textual space in which the subjectivities of both individuals overlap in a new type of meta-textual metaphor—one that is custom-made for and by each reader.
READING THE SELF THROUGH THE TEXT OF THE OTHER:
THE SHARED SPACES OF MARCEL PROUST'S A LA RECHERCHE DU TEMPS PERDU

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Faculty of Miami University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of French and Italian
by
John Mark D'Amico
Miami University
Oxford, Ohio
2010

Advisor: ________________________________
Dr. James Creech

Reader: ________________________________
Dr. Anna Klosowska

Reader: ________________________________
Dr. Jonathan Strauss
Table of Contents

Introduction.............................................................................................................................................1

Chapter 1 Optics of Desire: Textual Mirrors..........................................................................................7

Part 1 Desiring difference in the name of the same: Proust’s Narcissism.............................................7
Part 2 Words of the self and other: Meta-Mirrors...............................................................................16

Chapter 2 Theaters of Self-Representation: Glistening Texts and Resonating Depths......................23

Part 1 Reading’s Silent Conversation: The Voice as a Third Term.....................................................23
Part 2 Voices carry: Diagnosis of the Depths ......................................................................................32

Works Cited...........................................................................................................................................44
I would like to thank the faculty of the Department of French & Italian at Miami University for their kind and inspiring support. The infectious energy of the following individuals, Claire Goldstein, Elisabeth Hodges, and Mark McKinney, was a constant reminder of the pleasures of studying art and literature. Anna Klosowska and Jonathan Strauss, the readers of this thesis, provided invaluable feedback and comments on this project in addition to their unfailing encouragement throughout my time at Miami University. Finally, I owe a very special thank you to Jim Creech for advising this project and introducing me to Marcel Proust in his seminar “Figures of the Unknown.” During the challenging moments of this project, our conversations on Proust and Foucault provided the intellectual excitement that I needed to refocus and continue to read and write about Proust.
Introduction

In the beginning of À la recherche du temps perdu, Marcel’s parents are concerned with his excess of sensitivity. Françoise tries to find a diagnosis for this problem and asks his mother: “Mais, Madame, qu’a donc monsieur à pleurer ainsi?” Marcel’s mother answers, speaking in the words of a true psychoanalyst: “Il ne sait pas lui-même, Françoise, il est énervé.” This new theorization of his behavior astounds Marcel, because he observes an epistemic break in the way his problematic sentimentality is perceived. No longer a relapse into immorality, his sensitivity is essentialized and medicalized—it is a part of his being. Marcel elucidates the significance of this event: “Ainsi, pour la première fois, ma tristesse n’était plus considérée comme une faute punissable mais comme un mal involontaire qu’on venait de reconnaître officiellement, comme un état nerveux dont je n’étais pas responsable; j’avais le soulagement de n’avoir plus à mêler de scrupules à l’amertume de mes larmes, je pouvais pleurer sans péché.”

Coming back to Proust’s Combray, after reading Michel Foucault, the sentence above seemed to recall, or more precisely to prefigure the philosopher’s discourse on the 19th century’s invention of the homosexual. Foucault describes this event in Histoire de la sexualité: Volonté de savoir: “L’homosexualité est apparue comme une des figures de la sexualité lorsqu’elle a été rabattue de la pratique de la sodomie sur une sorte d’androgynie intérieure, un hermaphrodisme de l’âme. Le sodomite était un relap, l’homosexuel est maintenant une espèce.” Marcel’s problem is not suspected homosexuality, yet, his mother’s anxiety regarding his essentialized enervation might suggest otherwise. In contradistinction to Foucault’s fear and discomfort with the crystallization of identity Marcel takes solace in his mother’s diagnosis, since his behavior is no longer a sin, but an involuntary and unchangeable component of himself. The question is no longer one of correcting his sensitivity, but of controlling it. For Marcel’s parents, unlike Foucault, the question does not revolve around an overt diagnosis of sexuality. Moreover, they need not worry. Marcel’s love throughout La Recherche, at least in name, is heterosexual. Their concern is

1 Marcel Proust, A la recherche du temps perdu (Paris: Pléiade, 1987) Vol. I. 37 (Subsequent citations from La Recherche are listed simply by volume and page number).
2 I. 37
more focused on the “homo” as opposed to the “sexual,” since it is precisely Marcel becoming more like himself that concerns them.

In *A Structural Study of Autobiography*, Jeffrey Mehlman cites a critic of *Combray* who suggests that the text evokes “too much of a muchness.”4 Similarly, the boy’s parents see too much of Marcel in Marcel and they attempt to dissuade him from continuing down a path that would indulge the narcissistic tendency to revel in self-sameness. In their effort to prevent Marcel from becoming more like himself, his parents are set on covering all mirrors. This effort on the part of the father is illustrated when he refuses to allow Marcel’s grandmother to give a few of Musset’s woeful poems, a volume of Rousseau, and Georges Sand’s scandalous *Indiana* to Marcel for his birthday. For the intrepid outdoorswoman, a veritable singer in the rain, these works seemed to contain a cure, as reading the works of geniuses could only be the breath of fresh air for which she herself is constantly longing. Whereas the father thought these supposedly dangerous readings would worsen Marcel’s condition, “[elle] ne pensait que les grands souffles de génie eussent sur l’esprit même d’un enfant une influence plus dangereuse et moins vivifiante que sur son corps le grand air et le vent du large.”5 The effects (also affect) of reading are clearly ambiguous. Nevertheless, Marcel’s parents decide what is best, and he receives other, less passionate books written by Sand, *François le Champi*, for example. Already too susceptible to sentimentality, it would be unreasonable to expose Marcel to representations of passion; it would only make him more himself.

Paradoxically, hyper-sensibility in the eyes of Marcel’s parents is for Proust the cure to a certain type of spiritual depression, which he, taking his turn as a psychoanalyst, attempts to combat through the act of reading. In *Sur la lecture* (1905), an introduction to the French translation of Ruskin’s *Sesame and Lilies*, Proust remarks that there exist “certains cas pathologiques... de dépression spirituelle, où la lecture peut devenir une sorte de discipline curative et être chargée, par des incitations répétées, de réintroduire perpétuellement un esprit paresseux dans la vie de l’esprit.”6 This condition negatively evokes that of Marcel; it is a malady that is the

---

5 I. 39.
result of a lack of sensibility on the part of the subject. Rather than finding and becoming more like oneself through contact with literary texts, the person with a case of spiritual depression is a pure reflection of the outside world. Proust describes the symptoms of those so afflicted:

Ils vivent à la surface d’un perpétuel oubli d’eux-mêmes, dans une sorte de passivité qui les rend les jouets de tous les plaisirs, les diminue à la taille de ceux qui les entourent et les agitent, et pareils à ce gentilhomme qui, partageant depuis son enfance la vie des voleurs du grand chemin, ne se souvenait plus de son nom, pour avoir depuis trop longtemps cessé de le porter.7

Proust prescribes reading to cure a lack of interest in the world, while Marcel’s parents in La Recherche are opposed to such a move, since this remedy, for them, is an instigation of his malady. In the author’s eyes, however, becoming someone else is the illness that needs to be avoided as opposed to becoming oneself. The novelist views the thief who falsely identifies with images of those around him as lost to himself; his identity is a product of pure culture and has lost all traces of individuality. Vincent Descombes in Proust: Philosophie du Roman views Proust’s insistence on becoming oneself as part of the Modernist trajectory. He empties Marcel’s desire for the same of its narcissistic shades and proposes that Marcel is on a quest to find his unique artistic voice—a place that is still within the Modernist cultural institution of literature. Like a rebellious child, which Marcel certainly is not, “l’écrivain moderne ne supporte pas la rumeur qui parle à sa place, les intentions qui sont celles de l’institution et non les siennes. Le style classique était un style collectif. Le style moderne ne pourra jamais être défini autrement que négativement, parce qu’il repose sur le principe de l’originalité individuelle.”8 Marcel fulfills his artistic calling in le Temps retrouvé and discovers himself through the creation of his work and assumes his illustrious place in the literary canon. From this perspective, the danger of becoming oneself is dramatically reduced, since this becoming is framed teleologically as the process of the artist’s individual development. Descombes’ stylistic and chronological classification of Proust’s work is historically useful, but it fails to account for the anxieties provoked by Marcel’s particular brand of individuality. Marcel’s interest in literature tout court is not problematic; it is the combination of him and certain texts that elicit the concern of parental authority.

7 Ibid 40.
In his study of *Combray*, “Proust’s Counterplot,” Jeffrey Melhman diagnoses Marcel’s uniqueness as a narcissistic rejection of difference. He suggests that the project of *La Recherche* is to find redemption through literature, but that this redemption makes “literature itself... the extraordinary circuitous means by which the ego avoids responding to any inquiry that might throw into doubt its own fictive sovereignty.” Melhman sees such literature as pathology, and Proust, though he evokes its salutary effects, flirts with the subversive side of literature as well, since his characters use literary techniques to produce false personas. In other words, some use literature to become more like themselves, while others use it to distort reality. (Melhman might suggest that these two things are mutually inclusive.) M. Legrandin, for example, speaks too much like a book with the intent of hiding his snobbism, M. de Charlus glorifies virility to hide his own femininity, and behind Françoise’s delectable masterpieces, the culinary equivalents to Michelangelo’s sculptures, lie the violent screams of “sale bête!” The face value of individual personalities and their words are in fact quite dubious, and Marcel takes pleasure in revealing the truth behind the artifices produced to disguise them. He depicts his characters as more like themselves, often despite imago.

The above examples serve to reveal the reversible textual architecture manifested throughout the entire schema of Proust’s novel, which according to Laure Murat, develops metaphorically and sometimes literally around the theme of inversion. “Dès l’origine, *À la recherche du temps perdu* a donc été conçue dans l’esprit de son auteur comme un complexe voyage à rebours, la fin prédéterminant l’évolution de portraits destinés à être retournés comme des gants.” The reversibility of terms such as health and sickness, normalcy and excessiveness, reading and living, complicates the pathologies of both spiritual depression and extreme sensitivity. Freud’s narcissism, sexual inversion, and mechanisms of essentialization (theorized by Foucault) meet in a text that takes the reader’s use of it (the work of art) as its object of study. Through Marcel’s adventures in reading, not only books, but also other people, and himself through them, he projects his image onto these various surfaces as his own light returns to him as a reflection. In sum, the sensitive reader can rediscover himself through the aid of textual mirrors. Some may call this type of reading of both others and books narcissistic, but in a surprising turn, Proust suggests

---

9 Melhman 37.
that it is something quite different. Remember his definition of spiritual depression: this malady makes the subject a reflection of others who finds stability within these deceitful and alienating images of wholeness. The subject forgets his own name, becomes a pure reflection of alterity and loses sight of what is essentially his. Reading, however, corrects vision for the work of the author is to teach the reader to look, and to look again. In *Sur la lecture*, the reader is addressed by the author: “Regarde la maison de Zélande, rose et luisante comme un coquillage. Regarde! Apprends à voir!” This excitement, sensitivity even, about the outside world, is the gift the writer must pass on: “Le suprême effort de l’écrivain comme l’artiste n’aboutit qu’à soulever partiellement pour nous le voile de laideur et d’insignifiance qui nous laisse incurieux devant l’univers.”

For Proust, beauty is uniquely singular, and with the help of others, of an author, for example, individual visions of beauty can be shared through art. And yet, Proust renders his presence in his texts confused and equivocal. He famously wrote in a letter to André Gide, “Vous pouvez tout raconter à condition de ne jamais dire: Je.” If beauty is subject-specific, its expression is often relayed by a voice that has been purified of the author’s trace. His vision is recounted in a voice that is divested of the social personality of the “moi,” so that there is a place for the reader to project his own “je” into the novel. In continuity with the man-named-Proust’s enunciation, Maurice Blanchot separates the author from the narrating “je” of *La Recherche*: “Bien qu’il dise ‘je’, ce n’est plus le Proust réel, ni le Proust écrivain qui ont pouvoir de parler, mais narrateur devenu ‘personnage’ du livre, lequel dans le récit écrit un récit qui est l’œuvre elle-même et produit à son tour les autres métamorphoses de lui-même que sont les différents ‘moi’ dont il raconte les expériences.”

Blanchot focuses on the erasure of Proust from the text, but in his self-effacement, Proust amplifies the potential for readers to recognize themselves in the many “je” that he brings to life. The author, though he is no longer speaking for himself, creates a context or character that says something personal and specific for the reader. When the reader finds himself continuing the story after putting the book down, the true work of reading has begun.

This thesis will put Proust’s theory of reading into action. In Chapter 1, we will look at the intersection of vision and desire as the privileged site of reading. When two objects are brought

---

11 OR 38.
12 Murat 313.
together in the same vision, often by desire, a metaphor is created that illuminates their shared qualities. This notion of metaphor can be carried over into the interaction between reader and author. The reader, by chance, recognizes himself within the author’s text (in his most intimate space of ideas and thoughts). This joyful, metaphorical contact takes the prefix “un” out of Freud’s uncanny, while preserving the sense of surprise and seductive haunting that defines this psychic phenomenon. In Chapter 2, the voice in theater reconfigures the closed dyad between reader and author. Although the voice disrupts reading, which is the royal road to self-knowledge in Proust’s *Sur la lecture*, it also reveals truths that would otherwise remain unknown. For example, in the theater of everyday life, individuals are actors who constantly use rhetorical strategies to dissimulate their true selves. Despite fantasies of the Symbolic, this language fails, for the voice reveals their intended deception. Theater proper does not correspond to Marcel’s expectations, but he finds within the textual performances of the quotidian the very material that constitutes his novel, *La Recherche*, that grand instrument created by Proust for his readers to become perspicacious readers of themselves.
Chapter 1 Optics of Desire: Textual Mirrors

Part 1
Desiring difference in the name of the same: Proust’s Narcissism

Marcel’s parents saw reading certain books as an exacerbation of his excessive sensitivity. Rousseau and Musset were bad company, as was Bergotte, Marcel’s idol, the novelist “à la barbiche.” Marcel describes his parents’ response to his first meeting with the author at Swann’s house: “La présentation à Bergotte leur apparut comme une conséquence néfaste, mais naturelle, d’une première faute, de la faiblesse qu’ils avaient eue et que mon grand-père eût appelée un ‘manque de circonspection.’” Marcel’s predisposition for certain texts and for certain “rencontres,” his lunches with the Swann family, for example, although undesirable in the eyes of his parents, seemed all too natural. His meeting with the author intensified his father’s anxiety for it confirmed his “fâcheux diagnostic” in which he saw the natural progression of an unfavorable portrait that was in opposition to his filial ideal: “Quand mon père, en effet, trouvait qu’une personne, un de mes camarades par exemple, était dans une mauvaise voie—comme moi en ce moment—si celui-là avait alors l’approbation de quelqu’un que mon père n’estimait pas, il voyait dans ce suffrage la confirmation de son fâcheux diagnostic. Le mal ne lui en apparaissait que plus grand.” Marcel’s association with Swann and Odette (the latter’s love affair with his Uncle Adolphe left his parents with an unflattering impression of the actress) and his penchant for overly sentimental texts all formed in his father’s eyes a bigger picture that seemed tragically unavoidable. Marcel’s coming into his own or becoming more like himself is something his parents wanted to avert, and yet it happens. What is the strange force working against this unsentimental education favored by his parents?

This natural disaster is desire. In the above example, the desire diagnosed by Marcel’s parents is a quest for sameness in which their son becomes more like himself through the books he reads and the people he meets. Even when he searches outwards to find new and different things, he continually returns to the same. Throughout Proust’s work, discourses on desire are hardly stable; he often jumps between the binaries of sameness and difference to the point where the

14 I. 563.
15 I. 563.
terms of the binary become entirely confused. For example, when Proust describes inversion, he subscribes to psychoanalytic notions of desire based on lack, yet when the subject is in love, he is enchanted by his own affections reflected from the love object back onto himself. In addition, certain books allow the reader to find himself, but to do so, he is often required to modify his perspective on the text, by substituting the faces of women with those of men, and vice versa. In sum, there is no easy way to get what one wants—out of lovers and books alike. In order to explore Proust’s vexed theorization of desire it will be useful to start with his favorite anomaly: the invert. By beginning with inversion, we will follow the Freudian method of looking at the component parts made visible in the so-called “perversions.” Through analyses of the mechanisms of desire revealed in Proust’s meditations on inversion, we will subsequently explore the interconnectedness of reading and desire.

Proust develops a theory of queer desire in Sodome et Gomorrhe, the volume of La Recherche that takes as its title the damned biblical cities of inverted. Until this episode in La Recherche, M. de Charlus’ inversion is a mystery. Nevertheless, there is something odd about this nobleman. Marcel has difficulties isolating what about (or more aptly “in”) M. de Charlus makes him appear to be a thief or even a madman: “J’aurais voulu deviner quel était ce secret que ne portaient pas en eux les autres hommes et qui m’avait déjà rendu si énigmatique le regard de M. de Charlus quand je l’avais vu le matin près du casino.”16 The audacious voyeur discovers M. de Charlus’ secret when he catches a glimpse of the baron cruising Jupien, the giletier. This courtship is compared to the pollination of plants, for Marcel frames the men’s mutual seduction by a discussion of the probability and chance of finding love in the great outdoors: “Qui sait si ce [bourdon] n’était pas celui attendu depuis si longtemps par l’orchidée, et qui venait lui apporter le pollen si rare sans lequel elle resterait vierge?”17 In his analysis of Marcel’s botanical and zoological observations, Leo Bersani in Homos says that despite the narrator’s belief that inversion is “une maladie inguérissable,” he places it in continuity with nature:

Not only do he [M. de Charlus] and Jupien remind the narrator of plants; he also sees in their cruising the prelude to the mating of two birds, all of which leads him to defend the analogies themselves as “natural,” given the vast community in nature of which the human

---

16 II. 120.
17 III. 8.
is only part (‘the same man, if we examine him for a few minutes, appears to turn into a man, a man-bird, a man-fish, a man-insect’).\textsuperscript{18}

This context sets the stage for the elaboration of an essentialist understanding of desire that renders once enigmatic behaviors evident. Armed with the knowledge of Charlus’ inversion, Marcel can now synthesize the shards of disparate words and actions that constituted his past interactions with M. de Charlus: “Tout ce qui avait paru jusque-là incohérent à mon esprit, devenait intelligible, se montrait évident comme une phrase, n’offrant aucun sens tant qu’elle reste décomposée en lettres disposées au hasard, exprime, si les caractères se trouvent replacés dans l’ordre qu’il faut, une pensée que l’on ne pourra plus oublier.”\textsuperscript{19} Marcel’s revelation perfectly dovetails with Foucault’s characterization of 19\textsuperscript{th} century epistemological systems’ equation of desire and identity: “Dis-moi tes désirs et je te dirai qui tu es.”\textsuperscript{20} Knowing Charlus’ desire allows Marcel to understand why the baron looked like a woman when he left Mme de Villeparisis’ apartment:

C’en était une! Il appartenait à la race de ces êtres moins contradictoires qu’ils n’en ont l’air, dont l’idéal est viril, justement parce que leur tempérament est féminin, et qui sont dans la vie pareils, en apparence seulement, aux autres hommes ; là où chacun porte, inscrite en ces yeux à travers lesquels il voit toutes choses dans l’univers, une silhouette intaillée dans la facette de la prunelle, pour eux ce n’est pas celle d’une nymphe, mais d’un éphèbe.\textsuperscript{21}

The baron and the giletier seize the opportunity to mate, because in the world of inverts a chance like this is too rare to miss: “M. de Charlus était de ces hommes qui peuvent être appelés exceptionnels, parce que, si nombreux soient-ils, la satisfaction, si facile chez d’autres, de leur besoins sexuels, dépend de la coïncidence de trop de conditions, et trop difficiles à rencontrer.”\textsuperscript{22} Marcel witnesses a true miracle; the union of these two unlikely lovers is quite a cosmic event, for inverts are normally repulsed by the sight of themselves in the eyes of those others who also belong to “la race maudite.”

\textsuperscript{19} III. 16.
\textsuperscript{21} III. 16.
\textsuperscript{22} III. 28.
The obstacles faced by Charlus in his mythic quest for love are attributed to the anatomical system that produces desire: the eye. The silhouette etched in his pupil is an ephebe and this optic mediates vision by framing reality in terms of difference. For Proust, the eyes are not transparent windows to and from the soul. Nor are they clear barriers between “what I see” and “what I am.” These fixed disks, like the slides in Marcel’s magic lantern, are superimposed onto existing objects and transform them with their colorful and sometimes frightening projections. The subject position of all persons is the opposite of what they desire and the internalization of this absence is inscribed in the eye. Inversion, however, complicates and calls attention to the structure of this schema, which, paradoxically, leaves no place for same-sex desire. Bersani explains: “If homosexuality is ‘necessary’ in La Recherche, it is not because of its author’s sexual orientation. Instead homosexuality, or more exactly an internal homo-ness, is little more than the ground of a universal heterosexual—or heteroized—relation of all human subjects to their own desires.”

The eye projects the subject’s desire onto the world and forces him to look elsewhere, not inwards, in order to satisfy it. Bersani describes in psychoanalytic terms, the implications of this system: “By eroticizing that which we are not, desire saves us from the ecstasy of monadic self-containment. But it also makes for permanent self-alienation. Narcissistic plenitude is incompatible with self-knowledge; we can know ourselves (we can know anything) only differentially.”

From the perspective of his feminine soul, the invert sees his world through the optic of a “straight” and “virile” shadow. This visual field is a space of pure alienation, since his desired objects—the difference he seeks to possess—if they are truly “themselves,” will never reciprocate his desire. For this reason, Proust names inverts, “la race maudite,” (in other contexts, “la race des tantes”): “... ils sont justement épris d’un homme qui n’aurait rien d’une femme, d’un homme qui ne serait pas inverti et qui, par conséquent, ne peut les aimer; de sorte que leur désir serait à jamais inassouvi ssable si l’argent ne leur livrait de vrais hommes, et si l’imagination ne finissait par leur faire prendre pour de vrais hommes les invertis à qui ils se sont prostitués.” The invert’s ideal

---

23 Homos, 142
24 Ibid. 141.
26 III. 17.
lover cannot see through his external appearance; for him, the invert’s image does not correspond to the nymph etched onto the surface of his eye. As if this were not discouraging enough, the sight of other inverts is repellant, since it is a harsh reminder of the impossibility to have the bodies he desires. Fellow inverts, moreover, “donnent le dégoût de voir ce qu’ils sont, dépeint dans un miroir qui ne les flattent plus, accuse toutes les tares qu’ils n’avaient pas voulu remarquer chez eux-mêmes et qui leur fait comprendre que ce qu’ils appelaient leur amour découle non d’un idéal de beauté qu’ils ont élu, mais d’une maladie inguérissable.”27 He is doubly cursed, unable to possess his ideal lovers or be “[un] homme qui n’aurait rien d’une femme.” Proust leaves very few options for the invert: difference is desirable yet entirely unattainable, while sameness is repulsive and tolerated only when the subject turns away from reality and imagines that his lover is a real man.

Freud presents another perspective that actually makes desire for the same possible (although, pathological). He disputes inversion’s scientific validity in his Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (1905) and mocks the perceived simplicity of such a configuration: “The theory of bisexuality has been expressed in its crudest form by a spokesman of the male inverts: ‘a feminine brain in a masculine body.’ But we are ignorant of what characterizes a feminine brain. There is neither need nor justification for replacing the psychological problem by an anatomical one.”28 In place of inversion, Freud proposes that the homosexual makes a narcissistic object-choice in which he chooses a lover in whom he sees reflected his own bisexual nature. Proust, as we now know, metaphorically situates the production of desire within the eye, not in an invisible psychic realm. Narcissism is often associated with same-sex love, but Proust proposes that all love is in fact a reflection of the self onto the other.

At once instrumental and living, an optic and an organ, the eye is curiously hybrid and exists on the cusp of the subjective and the objective world. In the eyes of the other, the subject sees himself reflected. Its surface, however, is far less stable than any other mirror and its sensual, aquatic materiality returns the viewers gaze. Marcel sees Albertine for the first time and believes he must possess the contents of her eyes in order to possess her: “Je savais que je ne posséderais pas cette jeune cycliste si je ne possédais aussi ce qu’il y avait dans ses yeux.”29 For heterosexual

27 III. 18.
29 II. 152.
couples, this task, following Proust’s theorization of the eye, seems quite simple. All Marcel has to do is be what he already is: an attractive ephebe. Albertine’s lesbianism, however, puts into question her ephebian desire: how could she seduce Marcel, but then run away with the parricidal Mlle Vinteuil? The puzzle pieces necessary for a perfect union, an ephebe and a nymph, are suddenly unavailable and Marcel no longer sees his image in her deceptive eyes.

The ambiguity of a bisexual lover’s optic aside, Proust further complicates his theory of desire by adding another dimension that exists beyond the image found on the eye’s surface. The search for love in La Recherche also evokes the question of depth. The eyes—essentialist optics deceivingly theorized as inorganic stones that serve simply as the medium to catch the inverted shimmering of the subject’s interiority—are not static surfaces onto which the subject sees himself reflected as a product of difference. Even in the most ideal worlds of straight love, these kinetic and equivocal surfaces are similar to the portentous Baroque waters described by Gérard Genette in his Figures essay, “Complexe de Narcisse.” Genette describes the aquatic tableaux onto which Narcissus projects his image and evokes the unknowable depths behind them. The integrity of the image should always be suspect for a stable image veils the troubling mysteries of “les virtualités les plus profondes de l’élément liquide [...]. C’est, précisément, la fuite verticale, la fuite en profondeur. La surface aquatique la plus innocente recouvre un abîme: transparente, elle le laisse voir, opaque, elle le suggère d’autant plus dangereux qu’elle le cache.”

Proust sees the eyes in the same way. Beyond the reflection of the self within the eyes of a lover, there is an ocean of new life waiting to be explored. “Si nous pensions que les yeux d’une telle fille ne sont qu’une brillante rondelle de mica, nous ne serions pas avides de connaître et d’unir à nous sa vie. Mais nous sentons que ce qui luit dans ce disque réfléchissant n’est pas dû uniquement à sa composition matérielle; que ce sont, inconnues de nous, les noires ombres des idées que cet être se fait.”

These shadows, the unknown world seen through the eyes of Albertine, are formed by her impressions, passions and the intimate spaces that house them. Marcel is unsatisfied with seeing himself spectrally in her eyes; being the image inscribed in her oculus is not to be equated with possession. Possession implies a deeper engagement and in navigating these depths the subject begins to drown. Like Narcissus, Marcel’s image precariously

---

31 II. 152.
rests on “une matière en fuite.” Genette beautifully evokes the underlying anxiety that is present in representations of narcissism: “Quelle que soit la stabilité de ses traits, l’image de Narcisse s’inscrit sur une matière en fuite; c’est l’étoffe même de son visage qui s’échappe et s’évanouit sans trêve, dans un glissement continu, presque imperceptible.”

Paradoxically, love does not come from possessing the depths of the lover’s eye; in fact, possession brings it to an end. His infatuation with Gilberte ends, for he had access to the interior spaces of her home, one of the components of the dark shadows beyond these shifting surfaces. Marcel was able to overcome the obstacle of Gilberte’s parents, Swann and Odette, and subsequently existed within these once inconceivable spaces. In this act of visual appropriation, however, he lost his love and realized that love is not a product of the other, but a product of the self, reflected back from the unruly surface that is the love object. From this experience, he realizes his error in believing that the answers to love can be found within the profound interiority of the other:

Quand on aime, l’amour est trop grand pour pouvoir être contenu tout entier en nous; il irradie vers la personne aimée, rencontre en elle une surface qui l’arrête, le force à revenir vers son point de départ et c’est ce choc en retour de notre propre tendresse que nous appelons les sentiments de l’autre et qui nous charme plus qu’à l’aller, parce que nous ne reconnaissons pas qu’elle vient de nous.

This insight frees the self’s emanations from the love object and her adjacent spaces: “J’imaginais à peine que cette substance étrange qui résidait en Gilberte et rayonnait en ses parents, en sa maison, me rendant indifférent à tout le reste, cette substance pourrait être libérée, émigrer dans un autre être.”

This magical substance is not intrinsic to the depths of the lover’s world. Gilberte’s uniqueness is negated, because the substance that makes everything surrounding her so precious—autour de Gilberte, as in “autour de Mme Swann”—is an emanation of the self, experienced from a new vantage point. In this way, love alienates the subject from himself, since the surfaces from which his affections bounce back transform his charms into something new. The otherness of these reflections is an illusion, however. “Ceux qui souffrent par l’amour sont, comme on dit de

31 l. 598.
34 l. 568.
certains malades, leur propre médecin. Comme il ne peut leur venir de consolation que de l'être qui cause leur douleur et que cette douleur est une émanation de lui, c'est en elle qu'ils finissent par trouver une remède.”

The lover must find within himself the cure for his malady, but this knowledge always comes too late; when he can know the cure, he is no longer in love.

Proust creates an elaborate schema in which desire is a product of the difference inscribed within the eye. Possession, however, cannot be reduced to being the difference in the other’s eye for behind the image perilous depths beckon. The call to desire what is beyond the surface is self-destructive; when the lover finally possesses the nymph, his viscous emanations that tortuously bound him to his beloved evaporate instantly. Marcel describes desire’s cruel circularity: “C’est alors à la dernière seconde que la possession du bonheur nous est enlevée, ou plutôt c’est cette possession même que par une ruse diabolique la nature charge de détruire le bonheur. Ayant échoué dans tout ce qui était du domaine des faits et de la vie, c’est une impossibilité dernière, l’impossibilité psychologique du bonheur que la nature crée.”

Although the lover seeks his own affections, they are only desirable if mediated by the reflective surface that is the love object. In this theoretical framework knowing thyself is always differential, and happiness is permanently foreclosed. This system of mythical optics and luminous emanations, as farfetched as it may appear, is not so different from psychoanalytic notions of desire. Adam Phillips, in his preface to Intimacies co-written with Leo Bersani, describes this dismal state of affairs: “Psychoanalysis tells us, in short, that our lives depend on our recognition that other people—those vital others that we love and desire—are separate from us, ‘beyond our control’ as we say, despite the fact that this very acknowledgement is itself productive of so much violence. Difference is the one thing we cannot bear.”

The psychoanalytic and also Proustian subject is trapped by desire’s structural paradox in which its fulfillment is impossible.

Phillips’ and Bersani’s collaboration is an inquiry into new relational models that break through this hopeless system that perpetually conflates desire and lack. Bersani, in his chapter “The Power of Evil and the Power of Love,” returns to Freud and the birth of psychoanalysis to develop a theory of love that creates room for the recognition of sameness that is not labeled

---

35 I. 620.
36 I. 614.
pathological. “The finding of an object” Freud famously stated in the 1905 edition of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* ‘is in fact a re-finding.’ Love, which we like to think of as a discovery, is inseparable from memory.”38 Bersani proposes a new narrative of love, one that borrows from Socrates’ *Phaedrus* in which lovers re-find one another in a moment of “reciprocal self-recognition,” since both were together at one time in heaven in service of the same god. This “impersonal narcissism,” as Bersani calls it, is a relationship in which the two lovers are amorous of their virtual selves. In other words, it is a relationship that focuses on becoming more like the god the two lovers once served: “The boy loves a soul that he both is and is becoming, the latter as a result of the lover’s pouring more and more into him the qualities of the God whose nature the lover had already seen in the boy.”39 He proposes that this model can be seen as a way to make room for difference, while recognizing the sameness that is the basis for love: “If we were able to relate to others according to this model of impersonal narcissism, what is different about others (their psychological individuality) could be thought of as merely the envelope of the more profound (if less fully realized, or completed) part of themselves which is our sameness.”40

Bersani and Phillips remind us that the modern psychoanalytic subject’s love objects are tightly linked to memory (especially of the maternal body). Similarly, certain texts call to Marcel, because through their mediation he is able to recognize parts of himself that he might have never known. Socrates’ lovers are “startled” when they see an image of what they had glimpsed in heaven.”41 Encounters with the self in the glimmer of a textual mirror are equally surprising. Proust, despite his pessimism with regards to love, does not see alienation from others as entirely unavoidable. He offers a way out of this system of human relations that exalts while simultaneously vilifying difference and debases relationships based on sameness. This new mode of knowing the other can be accessed through reading.

Part 2

Words of the self and other: Meta-Mirrors

Genette remarks in “Proust Palimpseste” that the novelist developed numerous passages in *La Recherche* from reworking ideas found in his letters, newspaper articles, and even his unfinished novel, *Jean Santeuil*. In *Narrative Discourse*, he analyzes the use of the first person in Proust. His interpretation privileges the novel’s narrator as the purveyor of truth and unique source of critical commentary. Michael Lucey notices that the stability of such a subject position does not fit with the rest of Proust’s œuvre: “It may sometimes appear that the narrator wants this to be the case, yet everything about the way observation moves from character to character as text moves from letters to *Contre Sainte-Beuve* to the *Recherche* itself suggests that the situation might be more complicated.”

Proust was in a permanent state of revision; he was constantly re-reading and re-writing his work, while dispersing pieces of himself into his myriad characters. Even when he was not revising specific passages, he wrote new ones through the older texts that formed the basis for his increasingly elaborate palimpsest. Marcel asked himself if the reader could see the same images he did behind his words, suggesting that every reading is a sort of imaginary palimpsest: “Au moment où ils lisent ces mots-là, qu’est-ce qu’ils voient?”

If we take a look at *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, we will see that before (or behind) the cruising scene between M. de Charlus and Jupien, there existed an earlier version entitled “La race maudite.” In *Sodome et Gomorrhe* Marcel observes the two men and though he is instinctively repulsed by this spectacle, he finds intellectual pleasure in seeing an event that displays nature’s rarest flora. “Méduse! Orchidée! Quand je me suivais mon instinct, la méduse me répugnait à Balbec; mais si je savais la regarder, comme Michelet, du point de vue de l’histoire naturelle et de l’esthétique, je voyais une délicieuse girandole d’azur.” Marcel’s study of inverts is a campy textual girandole in which he sees himself as an objective natural scientist who finds beautiful—for research purposes only—the bizarre intricacies of nature. There exists, however, as we discussed earlier, depths beyond dangerously unstable surface images. It is no different in this case, for in a

---

43 CSB 88.
44 III. 28.
previous sketch of this text, Marcel’s relationship to M. de Quercy, M. de Charlus’ precursor, is far less objectifying. Marcel, instead of discovering the secret of M. de Quercy’s inversion in life, finds it in art. The sculptor’s representation of the count’s femininity allows Marcel to read within himself and fill gaps within his understanding of the count. Marcel’s reading—this term, used loosely now, will soon illustrate Proust’s theory on the reflective power of reading texts—of M. de Quercy is neither a product of Marcel’s idea of the count (eliminating his specificity and replacing it with his own representation) or a scientific classification in which any sameness between the observer and the observed is completely obliterated.

The revelation of M. de Quercy’s inversion is told within a different framework in “La race maudite.” Marcel, rather than seeing M. de Charlus and Jupien strut- ting their stuff, stands in front of M. de Quercy’s funerary monument and contemplates his post-mortem representation. Marcel views the statue and says to himself, “Pauvre M. de Quercy, qui aime tant la virilité, s’il savait l’air que je trouve à l’être las et souriant que j’ai devant moi. On dirait que c’est une femme!” This exclamation is similar to the episode in Sodome et Gomorrhe in which he sees the baron leaving the home of la Marquise: “Ce à quoi il me faisait penser tout d’un coup, tant il en avait passagèrement les traits, l’expression, le sourire, c’était à une femme.”45 In the former example, however, the statement of surprise is more than an observation, because the words that he says within himself immediately have an effect that reawaken something within the other. There is a certain fluidity that challenges the boundaries of where the real revelation lies. Marcel describes this strange experience in which his own words transform the count: “Mais au moment même où je prononçais ces mots en moi-même, il me sembla qu’une révolution magique s’opérait en M. de Quercy. Il n’avait pas bougé mais, tout d’un coup, il s’éclairait d’une lumière intérieure, où tout ce qui m’avait chez lui choqué, troublé, semblé contradictoire, se résolvait en harmonie, depuis que je venais de dire ces mots: on dirait une femme.”46 Marcel projects his revelation onto the figure of M. de Quercy, when, in fact, these words fill lacunae in his former interpretations of the count. Nothing has changed for the count, but Marcel’s vision of him is corrected by this illuminating reading. This example of reading is significant, because it makes revelations of the self into transformations of the other.

45 III. 6.
46 CSB 249.
This episode reveals the intimate contact between self and other produced in reading. In contrast to Bersani’s and Phillips’ impersonal narcissism, which proposes that lovers have already met in heaven and fall in love with a return to a former state of being, reading allows the subject to catch a glimpse of himself in another universe. Through reading, Proust reclaims vision, since it can open worlds beyond the confines of the self, saving him from the alienating disks in the eye. “Par l’art seulement nous pouvons sortir de nous, savoir ce que voit un autre de cet univers qui n’est pas le même que le nôtre et dont les paysages restent aussi inconnus que ceux qu’il peut y avoir dans la lune. Grâce à l’art, au lieu de voir un seul monde, le nôtre, nous le voyons se multiplier.”47 Reading supplants homogenous vision, worlds seen only through the lens of an ephebe or nymph, by multiplying the worlds in which the reader exists.

Reading also forces the subject to look within his own world to discover what has remained invisible for so long because of a lack of vision: “[Cet art] exprime pour les autres et nous fait voir à nous-mêmes notre propre vie, cette vie qui ne peut pas s’observer, dont les apparences qu’on observe ont besoin d’être traduites et souvent lues à rebours et péniblement déchiffrées.”48 To have an accurate vision of the self, the subject needs to step out of the position of passive observer and become a translator who knows how to read inversely. The artist helps to correct vision by providing texts that prompt the reader to look differently and through new optics. These artistic visions in which the reader finds himself reflected are far more eternal than the dubious images of the self that one finds within the eyes of an unpredictable lover.

Proust in le Temps retrouvé says that he would be mistaken in describing any of his readers as “mon lecteur,” since the true text being read is the text of the self. Rather than writing a book on ideas, which for Proust is comparable to leaving the price tags on gifts, he lets his work become a site of reflection, a surface onto which the reader’s subjectivity is magnified: “Chaque lecteur est quand il lit le propre lecteur de soi-même. L’ouvrage de l’écrivain n’est qu’une espèce d’instrument optique qu’il offre au lecteur afin de lui permettre de discerner ce que sans ce livre il n’eût peut-être pas vu en soi-même.”49 Proust’s novel, quite metaphorically, becomes a mirror to see oneself better, allowing the subject to overcome the blind spots within his visual field that

47 IV. 474.
48 IV. 475.
49 IV. 489.
prevent him from answering the question “who am I?” Since gender identity, according to Proust’s theory of inverted vision, is the opposite of what one desires, knowing how one sees is essential to self-knowledge. These textual mirrors mediate sight and thus refocus the attention onto the way the subject sees and call attention to the joy of discovering shared essences between the text and the reader, and therefore correcting a vision of the world predicated solely on difference.

Proust develops a program for reading that allows the reader to custom-fit La Recherche to his own purposes. He extends this liberty to the reader so that “un Charlus” who reads a novel about heterosexual love can appreciate the value of the essences embedded within the text. He explains: “L’écrivain ne doit pas s’offenser que l’inverti donne à ses héroïnes un visage masculin. Cette particularité un peu aberrante permet seule à l’inverti de donner ensuite à ce qu’il lit toute sa généralité.” Proust prefigures the debate addressed by Elisabeth Ladenson’s Proust’s Lesbianism in which she explores the transposition theory, a method often used to elucidate the author’s relationship to “les jeunes filles en fleurs.” This theory, espoused most famously by André Gide and Jean Cocteau, displaces the female characters and in their place superimposes the face of a masculine ideal. Ladenson states: “This form of ‘inversion’ is a function of reader response, taking place not in the text itself but in its biographically determined reception.” Although Ladenson criticizes Gide and Cocteau for their ephebian projections, she makes a similar move. She differentiates lesbianism from la race maudite—those damned to desire difference—by suggesting that only “les filles du mauvais genre” discovered the secret to desire based on sameness.

Proust, however, would be satisfied with these various transpositions, because a change in face does not obfuscate the value of the work. In fact, it verifies and enhances it—for the specific reader. These actions are all attempts to make the Proustian text and the reader’s interior text coincide. In order to enable this textual overlap, adjustments like the ones made above are often necessary: “Mais d’autres particularités (comme l’inversion) peuvent faire que le lecteur a besoin de lire d’une certaine façon pour bien lire; l’auteur n’a pas à s’en offenser, mais au contraire à

---

50 IV. 489.
Proust views reading as a possible site of fusion between the author’s book and the reader’s interior text. He suggests that when the reader does not see the vision of the artist, the reason may be caused by a “différence entre les deux textes.” In some cases, the reader may lack the necessary interpretative skills to read a book in such a way that allows his interior text to be illuminated through the words chosen by the author. Proust provides an example of astute self-reading by suggesting: “Si M. de Charlus n’avait pas donné à l’‘infidèle’ sur qui Musset pleure dans la Nuit d’octobre ou dans le Souvenir le visage de Morel, il n’aurait ni pleuré, ni compris, puisque c’était par cette seule voie, étroite et détournée, qu’il avait accès aux vérités de l’amour.” For this reason, the author permits his text to be read through diverse lenses, which allows the desire of both the reader and author to touch within the meta-textual space of the reader’s custom-made metaphor.

Proust sees metaphor as the superimposition of images. For him, this is style itself. The artist’s eye captures the shared essence of two disparate things and unites them in metaphor and the overlapping of images within the same word functions as a palimpsest. Genette describes Proust’s project and the important place of metaphor: “Selon Proust, le style est ‘une question non de technique, mais de vision’ et la métaphore est l’expression privilégiée d’une ‘vision’ et celle qui dépasse les apparences pour accéder à l’‘essence’ des choses.” Proust develops his artistic vision by seeing double, since behind the principal image there always exists another. This second image seeps through the first, rendering its reality as what it is, objectively, far less definitive. In the same way, Proust’s text also has a double function; truth as experienced both by the author and reader is revealed as such by a double verification. The mental act of reading creates a place in which two of the same truths meet and become united: “La reconnaissance en soi-même, par le lecteur, de ce que dit le livre, est la preuve de la vérité de celui-ci, et vice versa, au moins dans une

---

52 IV. 490.
53 IV. 490.
54 IV. 489.
certaine mesure, la différence entre les deux textes pouvant être souvent imputée non à l’auteur mais au lecteur.”

The process of reading within oneself through the text of another happens when the reader recognizes himself in the words of the author. Gaston Bachelard, in *la Poétique de l’espace* describes this “reconnaissance” and self-discovery as an encounter with a poetic image: “Cette image que la lecture du poème nous offre, la voici qui devient vraiment nôtre. Elle prend racine en nous-mêmes. Nous l’avons réçue, mais nous naissions à l’impression que nous aurions pu la créer, que nous aurions dû la créer.” In this way, the text on the page is not only itself, but also, in the moments when certain words speak truth, becomes the text of the reader—something he could have or even should have written.

Genette in “Proust Palimpseste” discusses the importance of superimposed images in Proust’s writing. In developing his essay, he elaborates an aesthetic of the palimpsest to describe Proust’s style. He does not, however, account for another palimpsest, the superimposition of the “moi” of the author and reader. In between the text of the author and the subjectivity of the reader lies an intermediate space in which both coalesce and spill into each other. In the act of reading, the reader speaks words that are not his own, but in saying them within himself, he incorporates them, making them the same as the author’s. The result of this encounter is the impression left behind when certain words are illuminated by the truth found in them, for both the author and the reader. This interior illumination is similar to the physical experience of underlining words in a text that have left an impression. Bachelard explains: “Si je dis sincèrement l’image, voici que j’éprouve le besoin de souligner. Souligner, n’est-ce pas graver en écrivant?”

We are left with the image of the reader underlining the author’s text. Metaphorically it is quite a useful act, it represents the moment when the reader finds and fixes his reflection in the style of the author. Proust describes this reflective power of style as the “vernis des maîtres,” in which great artists empty themselves of their social ego in order to create a reflective surface. He lauds Flaubert for succeeding in this effort: “Dans le style de Flaubert, par exemple, toutes les parties de la réalité sont converties en une même substance, aux vastes surfaces, d’un miroitement

---

56 IV. 490.
monotone. Aucune impureté n’est restée. Les surfaces sont devenues réfléchissantes.” In La Recherche his first meeting with the bad company of Bergotte inspires similar musings on what constitutes artistic brilliance:

Ceux qui produisent des œuvres géniales ne sont pas ceux qui vivent dans le milieu le plus délicat, qui ont la conversation la plus brillante, la culture la plus étendue, mais ceux qui ont eu le pouvoir, cessant brusquement de vivre pour eux-mêmes, de rendre leur personnalité pareille à un miroir, de telle sorte que leur vie si médiocre d’ailleurs qu’elle pouvait être mondainement et même, dans un certain sens, intellectuellement parlant, s’y reflète, la génie consistant dans le pouvoir réfléchissant et non dans la qualité intrinsèque du spectacle reflété.  

This reflective potential is the source of literature’s force, whereas the eyes of the other are a precarious place to project one’s reflection for behind the image are perilous depths. In the style of a great author, however, the reader can find his own image, and discover another world that has always already existed within him.

---

59 CSB 201.
60 I. 545.
Chapter 2 Theaters of Self-Representation: Glistening Texts and Resonating Depths

Part 1
Reading’s Silent Conversation: The Voice as a Third Term

Charlus’ and Jupien’s meeting is a rare moment in which the cosmos looked kindly on the “race maudite.” This episode in *La Recherche*, though it contextualizes a discourse on the invert’s curse, shows two of them who, against all odds, come together:

Ce Roméo et cette Juliette peuvent croire à bon droit que leur amour n’est pas le caprice d’un instant, mais une véritable prédestination préparée par les harmonies de leur tempérament, non pas seulement leur tempérament propre, mais par celui de leur ascendants, par leur plus lointaine hérédité, si bien que l’être qui se conjoint à eux leur appartient avant la naissance, les a attirés par une force comparable à celle qui dirige les mondes où nous avons passé nos vies antérieures.”61

Heterosexual possession, as we discussed earlier, is plagued by the “psychological impossibility of happiness,” but inverted—though their stories are in the end not much different than those of their straight counterparts—earn their title for there are even greater obstacles to satisfaction. This scene is noteworthy for it suggests that even those damned to suffer from insatiable desire—if the right stars are aligned—can find momentary bliss. This is no chance meeting; their temperament, history, and shared “being,” all play a part in bringing them together. Like Bersani’s impersonal narcissists, these Socratic lovers first met in heaven where they worshipped the same god. Biological optics and psychological obstacles are momentarily ignored, their communication pays off, and two distinct worlds unite.

Gilles Deleuze in *Proust et les Signes* evokes Proust’s cosmic metaphors, but his use of this vocabulary has a different effect than the previous analysis. For Deleuze, *La Recherche* is a constellation of essences that exist within the same textual space. These worlds, however, never come into contact and are only related to one another by time, which transverses without uniting them. "Ces points de vue sur le monde, véritables essences, ne forment pas à leur tour une unité ni une totalité: on dirait plutôt qu’un univers correspond à chacun, ne communiquant pas avec les autres, affirmant sa différence irréductible aussi profonde que celles des mondes

61 III. 29.
Deleuze’s argument does not account for the many ways in which universes do communicate in the novel. We can infer from the cruising scene just mentioned and Marcel’s obsession with the worlds behind his lovers’ eyes that the narrator views each individual as his own universe. Certainly, the intergalactic communications between these distinct worlds is often wrought with frustration. It is not, however, as Deleuze would have it, impossible. In this chapter, reading texts and Marcel’s reading in a more loose sense of “textual” performances (discursive acts, which desperately want to be taken literally) are shown to be two distinct ways in which the psychological depths of other individuals, those unfamiliar universes, can be explored. The difference between these two forms of communication is the voice. In the former it is silent, and in the latter it is heard. This apparent observation will prove to have significant effects on the very idea of what it means in *La Recherche* to read in oneself through the other.

Proust’s conception of reading, discussed in the Part II of the previous chapter, is the privileged way in which the subject sees himself reflected in the other’s universe. In this silent dialogue between the reader and author, the reader discovers himself in textual mirrors. The “vernis des maîtres” prepares the textual surfaces in which the reader can find himself reflected in the author’s words. This reflection is not a projection of the reader onto the text; within this space of not-so-narcissistic contemplation, two beings are united in an unconventional friendship. In contrast to relationships with other people, the reader rediscovers friendship in its purest form for the connection is based entirely on the reader’s desire to interact with the text. This friendship is guilt-free for the reader can leave a boring book in the corner without the remorse of damaging its fragile ego. Moreover, Proust does not equate reading with conversation; on this point, he disagrees with Ruskin who subscribes to the following Cartesian perspective: “la lecture de tous les bon livres est comme une conversation avec les plus honnêtes gens des siècles passés qui en ont été les auteurs.”

Reading, he insists, is a mode of communication that takes place in silence.

In conversation, friends and lovers constantly speak for themselves, occupying the place of both speaker and interlocutor: “Nous nous imaginons toujours quand nous parlons, que ce sont nos oreilles, notre esprit qui écoutent.” Marcel remarks that phrases elegantly crafted for the

---

63 OR 24.
64 L. 601.
beloved are really meant for the lover: “On dit les choses qu’on éprouve le besoin de dire et que l’autre ne comprendra pas, on ne parle que pour soi-même.”\textsuperscript{65} Beyond this noisy miscommunication is the lucid silence of reading. This is indeed a very peculiar silence; the reader speaks for the author. He carries the author’s voice, and in doing so, he comes to know himself through these unfamiliar words, which penetrate his spirit. The reader speaks in the author’s place while simultaneously listening to his enunciations, without which, he may never discover his own interior depths. Proust elaborates: “L’atmosphère de cette pure amitié est le silence, plus pure que la parole. Car nous parlons pour les autres, mais nous nous taisons pour nous-même.”\textsuperscript{66} The reader confronts the author’s thought and is able to savor the joy of his discovery without disengaging the idea in favor of the man behind it. Reading, “[un] miracle fécond d’une communication au sein de la solitude,”\textsuperscript{67} turns the subject into a silent performer of the author’s text. His own voice faded into the background, the reader assumes that of the author and finds himself within the “surfaces...refléchissantes”\textsuperscript{68} of textual mirrors.

In Proust’s schema, silence and vision work together, for the fusion of the reader and the author is restricted to textual encounters purified of the spoken voice. Accordingly, Marcel’s moments passed in silent dialogue with his favorite author are incompatible with the man sitting next to him at the table. In person, Bergotte’s voice almost makes his old friend unrecognizable: “Malgré tant de correspondances que je perçus dans la suite entre l’écrivain et l’homme, je n’avais pas cru au premier moment, chez Mme Swann, que ce fût Bergotte, que ce fût l’auteur de tant de livres divins qui se trouvât devant moi.”\textsuperscript{69} Marcel listens to Bergotte as though he were a living text, but the clarity of his ideas is obscured by the shadows of the voice.

Il avait en effet un organe bizarre; rien n’altère autant les qualités matérielles de la voix que de contenir la pensée... la sienne [sa diction] me semblait entièrement différente de sa manière d’écrire, et même les choses qu’il disait de celles qui remplissent ces ouvrages. Mais la voix sort d’un masque sous lequel elle ne suffit pas à faire reconnaître d’abord un visage que nous avons vu à découvert dans le style.\textsuperscript{70}

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid. 603.  
\textsuperscript{66} OR 54.  
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid. 30.  
\textsuperscript{68} CSB 201  
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid. 127.  
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid. 120.
In spoken language, as the above example illustrates, the voice muddles lucid thought and is a faulty medium for its transmission. For this reason, Proust valorizes silence: “le silence ne porte pas, comme la parole, la trace de nos défauts, des nos grimaces. Il est pur, il est vraiment une atmosphère.”71 The erasure of the author’s person, his egoic and social self, frees the idea from any mundane residue. The crystalline silence of written language is the space in which transparent thought is best expressed:

Le langage même du livre est pur (si le livre mérite ce nom), rendu transparent par la pensée de l’auteur qui en a retiré tout ce qui n’était pas elle-même jusqu’à le rendre son image fidèle; chaque phrase, au fond, ressemblant aux autres, car toutes sont dites par l’inflexion unique d’une personnalité; de là une sorte de continuité, que les rapports de la vie et ce qu’ils mêlent à la pensée d’éléments qui lui sont étrangers excluent et qui permet très vite de suivre la ligne même de la pensée de l’auteur, les traits de sa physionomie qui se reflètent dans ce calme miroir.72

In short, the author unveils his vision through his own erasure. Transparent language is nothing other than thought itself. In a book, the reader does not find the author’s (the man’s) image, yet Proust strangely evokes “l’inflexion unique d’une personnalité.” This personality is the author’s asocial “moi,” which through sustained contemplation and self-effacement can gain access to the “vernis des maîtres,” those secrets shared with the geniuses of the past to activate language’s reflective properties. Not to be confused with the “moi” that roams the streets, this personality only appears in silence through reading and writing. Proust formulates the above argument in Contre Sainte-Beuve and it becomes the cornerstone of the aesthetic theories he reveals in La Recherche. The following mantra can be perceived throughout the entire novel: “Un livre est le produit d’un autre moi que celui que nous manifestons dans nos habitudes, dans la société, dans nos vices. Ce moi-là, si nous voulons essayer de le comprendre, c’est au fond de nous-mêmes, en essayant de le récréer en nous, que nous pouvons y parvenir.”73 Proust returns to this ethereal moi in le Temps retrouvé and further develops its particularity:

L’être qui alors goûtait en moi cette impression la goûtait en ce qu’elle avait de commun dans un jour ancien et maintenant, dans ce qu’elle avait d’extra-temporel, un être qui n’apparaissait que quand, par une de ces identités entre le présent et le passé, il pouvait se

71 OR 54.
72 Ibid. 54.
73 CSB 127.
trouver dans le seul milieu où il peut vivre, jouir de l’essence des choses, c’est-à-dire en dehors du temps.\textsuperscript{74}

Marcel acquires this insight at the end of the novel for various sensations, the clinking of the spoons, the taste of the madeleine, and the roughness of the cloth, collapse the present into the past, rendering their distance in time irrelevant. Proust textually replicates such joyous moments by allowing his reader to be a reader of himself, finding the common experience of essences in the interior texts of both the reader and author. In such moments, the distance between the reader and author felicitously disappears, since the beauty described resonates within the depths of the reader. Proust, speaking from experience, describes a reader’s reaction to a beautiful metaphor, which dissolves the differences between two things by the style of an artist whose unique vision highlights their common essence. “Et après avoir lu des pages où les pensées les plus hautes et les plus beaux sentiments sont exprimés, et avoir dit ‘ce n’est pas mal,’ si tout d’un coup, sans que nous comprenions d’ailleurs pourquoi, dans un mot assez indifférent en apparence, un grain de cette essence nous est donné à respirer, nous savons que c’est cela qui est bien beau.”\textsuperscript{75}

In order to read in himself, the reader silences his voice and becomes the author’s mute “porte-parole.” Textual mirrors, “ces miroirs de la vérité,”\textsuperscript{76} are the metaphorical spaces in which the author’s novel and the reader’s interior text virtually coexist. This superimposition of texts—the silently spoken, literary text and the text of the self that speaks through the words of the author—becomes undone, however, when an external and audible voice disrupts this subjective layering by adding the voice of another person, as in theater. The theater is a space in which the textual encounter becomes fractured; the reader no longer communicates in silence with the author, since an actor performs the text. The experience of theater, both of the actors on stage and the spectators in the audience, becomes a new metaphorical structure for a different kind of reading, one that ruptures the dyad of reader and author.

Marcel’s parents viewed his interest in theater (like his relationships to certain books) as a battleground in their struggle to control his hyper-sensibility. In Combray, they draw the line at theater; he is forbidden to go, for this medium dreadfully blurs the boundaries between reality and

\textsuperscript{74} IV. 450.  
\textsuperscript{75} CSB 105.  
\textsuperscript{76} I. 95.
representation. In *Never Say I*, Michael Lucey discusses the various contexts in Proust’s oeuvre from *La Recherche* to *Contre Sainte-Beuve* in which queer speech is possible. Theater, though it is a welcome place for those with mauvaises mœurs—Odette is one such woman—is not exactly a space in which Marcel discusses queerness. But, its effacement of boundaries, those between reality and fiction, place it in continuity with Lucey’s description of what he perceives in the novelist’s mind to be a “queer cognitive disorder.” Lucey gives several examples of moments in which literature spills into reality; one such instance is when M. de Charlus sees Albertine as another version of Balzac’s Princess de Cadignan. He further transgresses such boundaries when he claims that his cousin owns one of the princess’s favorite gardens. Lucey comments the baron’s mistake: “Proust plays for the comic effect of what is increasingly seeming to be a queer cognitive disorder—the confusion of orders of reality and representation.”77 If this is a queer cognitive disorder, the young Marcel certainly has a bad case of it. His sickliness, hyper-sensibility, and tendency to confuse fantasy and reality suggest a “queer-like” performance, which would seemingly make theater an unhealthy but natural addition to his list of hobbies (reading Bergotte included).

Theatrical adaptations bring to life the words on the page. For Marcel, there is hardly a need to go the theater to experience such a spectacle; in his imagination, words themselves are inherently theatrical. His over-sensitivity attunes him to their signifying power so that even a few comments made by his father regarding the Venetian climate precipitate the physical symptoms of a cold. His vivid imagination confronts the two syllables of the mythical place name Venice and this tripartite contact transforms the air of his room: “Je le remplaçai par des parties égales d’air vénitien, cette atmosphère marine, indicible et particulière comme celle des rêves, que mon imagination avait enfermée dans le nom de Venise.”78 He develops a fever and consequently the doctor recommends that Marcel avoid “toute cause d’agitation” for at least one year.79 Marcel magnifies the signifying potential of words; they shift from representation to the very essence of the place. Marcel’s parents logically conclude that it would be unwise to allow him to go the theater, given the dangers that already appear from imagining presence. Bergotte sums up Marcel’s

77 Lucey 206.
78 I. 386.
79 I. 386.
In *Du côté de chez Swann*, Marcel’s first impression of the theater is mediated by the advertisements for various plays found throughout Paris: “Rien n’était plus désintéressé et plus heureux que les rêves offerts à mon imagination par chaque pièce annoncée et qui étaient conditionnés à la fois par les images inséparables des mots qui en composaient le titre et aussi de la couleur des affiches encore humides et boursoufflés de colle sur lesquelles il se détachait.”

Marcel’s imagination, like the posters he comes across in the streets, takes flight. The constellation of words, text, colors and images give the impression that theater is a multimedia event in which the spectator is overwhelmed by mass waves of aesthetic stimulation. Marcel eventually receives permission to see La Berma play her signature role in *Phèdre*, thanks to M. Norpois. His father’s idol, the smooth-talking diplomat, convinces Marcel’s worried parents to allow their son to see the cultural goddess. They overturn the doctor’s prescription and permit Marcel to attend a spectacle in which life and art fuse into one. Finally at the theater—no longer picturing it through the mediation of the advertisements—the curtain rises, but Marcel is unable to distinguish between the play and reality: “Comme je dressais l’oreille avant que commençât la pièce, deux hommes entrèrent par la scène, bien en colère, puisqu’il parlait assez fort pour que dans cette salle... on distinguait toutes leur paroles... mais dans le même instant, étonné de voir que le public entendait sans protester... je compris que ces insolents était les acteurs et que la pièce... venait de commencer.” The disappointment sets in the very moment he realizes that the play has begun. Theater falls short of Marcel’s expectations; the young esthete leaves disillusioned, but, fortunately, he still has his health.

Marcel’s disappointment is a result, not of the fusion of reality and fantasy, but of the confusion of two modes of representation: reading and theater. In *Combray*, Marcel admits that his view of theater was inaccurate: “... je me représentais d’une façon si peu exacte les plaisirs qu’on y goûtais que je n’étais pas éloigné de croire que chaque spectateur regardait comme dans un stéréoscope un décor qui n’était que pour lui, quoique semblable au millier d’autres que

---

80 I. 560.
81 I. 72.
82 I. 439.
regardait, chacun pour soi, le reste des spectateurs.” Marcel’s false perception of theater theorizes the experience in terms of vision. Seen through this optical device, the spectator has access to images made especially for him. The images for each viewer are “semblables” to those seen by the other spectators; this margin of difference leaves room for the imagination of the spectator to do its own work. Similarly, each reader, though he reads the same words as another person, sees different images behind the text, reading within himself.

Marcel uses techniques that put faith in reading to find the meaning in all artistic media. He admits: “Je l’écoutais comme j’aurais lu Phèdre ou comme si Phèdre avait dit en ce moment les choses que j’y entendais, sans que le talent de la Berma avait rien ajouté.” Marcel’s let down is a result of La Berma becoming Phèdre, since she was supposed to change the role, in the same way that an author remakes a classic story through the inflection of his style. For Proust, style is the transformation of reality by and through the author’s thought. Following this logic, the incarnation, rather than representation, of Phèdre lacks artistic force. Style is the very mark of the author’s thought imprinted on reality and through it he reveals his true self, his “unique personality”: “Entre la manière que l’un ou l’autre avait de débiter, de nuancer une tirade, les différences les plus minimes me semblaient avoir une importance incalculable.” According to this model, both La Berma and Sarah Bernhardt could say the exact same line, but each actress would perform an entirely different play, simply by virtue of her unique style. In order to perceive and appreciate these deliciously subtle differences, Marcel hoped to engage in a close and closed reading, in which passages are transformed by the voice of the actress, an attribute that he directly equates with the written style of a novelist.

These differences in speech and nuanced intonations supposedly bear the style that Marcel is unable to grasp, since he attempts to savor, as he can in reading, each word. Every word must be assessed for its specific value, since it corresponds to an image that is directly behind it. At the theater, however, a new temporality of reading disrupts the possibility of such a detailed meditation on the depth behind words:

---

83 I. 72.
84 I. 440.
85 I. 73 [my italics].
Je tachais à force d’agilité mentale, en ayant avant un vers mon attention tout installée et mise au point, de ne pas distraire en préparatifs une parcelle de la durée de chaque mot, de chaque geste, et, grâce à l’intensité de mon attention, d’arriver à descendre en eux aussi profondément que j’aurais fait si j’avais eu de longues heures à moi. Mais que cette durée était brève. À peine un son était-il reçu dans mon oreille qu’il était remplacé par un autre.86

Marcel’s interpretative techniques fail at the theater. He focuses on textual depth in order to find the meaning immanent in each word. His understanding of theater, however, is too literal; he takes the actress at her word, something he never does when deciphering the performances of other characters in La Recherche.

86 I. 441.
At the theater, Marcel revisits a text he already read and confuses the experience of going to the theater with reading a book. His effort to interpret the voice as he would the written style of a novelist fails and he is let down. Nevertheless, theaters of self-representation interest Proust from the very beginning of *La Recherche*. In contrast to our previous analysis of theater in which a literary text was performed, Marcel’s interpretations of theaters of self-representation are not interrupted by the voice. On the contrary, by listening to the voices of those who surround him, Marcel is able to see beyond their performances, encountering the truth these actors wish to hide. Marcel does not take his fellow characters at their word, for, as Murat explains, “Plus un personnage affiche l’indifférence, la virilité, l’honnêteté, la bravoure, plus il se dénonce comme passionnément attaché, féminin, dissimulateur, lâche. Très vite, le narrateur apprendra à se méfier des ces ‘paroles qui doivent en quelque sorte être lues à l’envers puisque leur lettre signifie le contraire de la vérité.’”87 For example, in *A l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, M. de Charlus criticizes the young men of his time saying, “Ce sont de vraies femmes.” Two volumes later, in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, the narrator discovers the baron’s inversion and it is Marcel who says the same thing about him: “M. de Charlus avait l’air d’une femme: c’en était une!”88

Genette in “Proust et le langage indirect” describes the voice as “un instrument rebelle et infidèle,”89 which resonates from the subject’s interior depths and often leads to the failure of Symbolic language. The speaker’s intended signification is betrayed by the voice; consequently, listening to it is Marcel’s principal method for reading against the grain of the words themselves. Genette calls attention to the gap between language and its expression: “Dans l’énoncé révélateur, l’organe de la révélation—de la vérité—c’est cette connotation, ce langage indirect qui passe, comme le remarque Proust, non par ce que dit le locuteur, mais par sa façon de le dire.”90 His way of speaking, his unintentional style, carries into language the part of the self that the subject would prefer to remain hidden. In the previous chapter, we studied style as the transformation of

87 Murat, 318.
88 III. 26.
90 Ibid. 250.
language by the force of the author’s thought. In chapter 2, the voice reveals truth not because it creates textual mirrors through a reflective style, but because it destabilizes textual or discursive curtains. Throughout *La Recherche*, Proust’s characters consciously and unconsciously create protective envelopes with discourses that must be read inversely to be decrypted. In contrast to textual mirrors, which offer fresh contact with a rediscovered self, discursive curtains attempt to do precisely the opposite: obscure a vision of the self that, against the subject’s wishes, contains truth.

The dual presence of textual mirrors and discursive curtains in *La Recherche* underlines Proust’s equivocal relationship to literary mechanisms that reveal truth. In one instance, it is revealed by means of the voice, but in another it is obstructed by it. In a book, the author’s thoughts are transcribed in the lucidity of written language, yet the text of Proust’s novel is constituted by spoken dialogue and Marcel’s analyses of these textual performances. For Proust, both reading and writing happen in silence for it is through a silent inter/intra-subjective dialogue that the two texts, the interior text of the reader and the external text of the author, can momentarily overlap. The bulk of *La Recherche*, however, is constituted by moments in which Marcel reads others, and, only subsequently, do these very readings, which bring him away from his writing, form the work of art. These worldly readings are often glossed over by critics, Maurice Blanchot, for example, in favor of those exquisite and celebrated moments of the novel in which Marcel, through the identification of a shared essence between two distinct things (often a sensation), escapes the grasp of time and experiences “un peu de temps à l’état pur”91:

Vivre l’abolition du temps, vivre ce mouvement, rapide comme l’ “éclair,” par lequel deux instants, infiniment séparés, viennent (peu à peu quoique aussitôt) à la rencontre de l’un et de l’autre, s’unissent comme deux présences qui, par la métamorphose du désir, s’identifieraient, c’est parcourir toute la réalité du temps, en la parcourant éprouver le temps comme espace et lieu vide, c’est-à-dire libre des événements qui toujours ordinairement le remplissent.92

The apex of the *La Recherche* is reached in this heavenly instant in which death is no longer a concern: the order of time has been escaped. The experience of time free from anything mundane (“libre des événements qui toujours le remplissent”) coincides with Proust’s aesthetic theories on the disappearance of the author from his work. Vincent Descombes, however, states

---

91 IV. 451
92 Blanchot 23.
Proust’s ideas as a literary theorist often diverge from those he adheres to as a novelist. In some respects, this remark is quite true, for Proust, though he ostensibly erases himself from his work, shows how when one person reads another, he is never entirely safe from being read in the same way. For example, Charlus calls the young men of his time women, Marcel, in turn, says the same thing about the count when he discovers his inversion and the reader with knowledge of Proust’s biography might also make a similar remark regarding the author’s homosexuality. The never-ending linkage of one character to the next, both diegetic and extra-diegetic, reveals the complex chains of continuous readings made possible by Proust’s textual instrument, *La Recherche*. This subchapter will look at the repetition of such readings, seeing the novel as a shared textual space in which the author and reader can virtually meet, where one character reading informs the next. These sonic rooms created by the echoes of the reader’s interiority in the author’s text are the true stages of *La Recherche*, wherein both the reader and author are poetically present to one another.

Roland Barthes’ announcement of the “Death of the author,” continues to reverberate throughout the halls of literary criticism. His assertion dovetails nicely with Proust’s theory of writing in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* and *La Recherche* wherein the author is erased from his work to make room for the reader’s interpretation. Barthes’ inquiry in “Proust et les noms” is therefore quite unexpected: he attempts to find a correlative moment in Proust’s life to Marcel’s reminiscences, the “actes fédérateurs,” which provide the map for his novel. Barthes, true to his Structuralist roots, however, tempers such a reading by his explicit wariness of approaching *La Recherche* from a biographical perspective:

> On ne cherche pas ici à expliquer l’œuvre de Proust par sa vie; on traite seulement d’actes intérieurs au discours lui-même (en conséquence, poétiques et non biographiques), que ce discours soit celui du narrateur ou celui de Marcel Proust. Or l’homologie qui, de toute évidence, règle les deux discours, appelle un dénouement symétrique: il faut qu’à la fondation de l’écriture par la réminiscence (chez le narrateur) corresponde (chez Proust) quelque découverte semblable, propre à fonder définitivement, dans sa continuité prochaine, toute l’écriture de la *Recherche*.93

Barthes is deliciously equivocal; he valorizes the connection between life and art, yet instantly repudiates it. Instead, he focuses on the poetic, not biographical, homologies between Proust and Marcel. It is as though the creative process is completely separate from the life of the artist.

---

Barthes theoretical preoccupations aside, he is not certainly mistaken in reading Proust in such a way. In fact, he reproduces a paradox that persists throughout Proust’s oeuvre: the tension between lived experience and the writing of his novel. Murat calls attention to a pertinent quarrel between Proust and André Gide regarding the role of the personal in aesthetics, the latter calling the former a “grand maître en dissimulation”: “Ce que Gide reprochait à Proust, c’est pour l’essentiel ce qu’il reprochait à Wilde: la dissimulation, le camouflage, l’hypocrisie, le goût des convenances. L’auteur de la Recherche et celui de Dorian Gray, accusés de se cacher derrière des masques, lui auraient d’ailleurs fait la même recommandation empressée: ne dites jamais je.”

Never saying I, for Proust, was a precondition for his text to be read, because it erased the man behind it, making room for his readers.

Barthes poses an array of fascinating questions that eventually lead to the same response: “Quel est donc l’accident, non point biographique, mais créateur, qui rassemble une œuvre déjà conçue, essayée, mais non point écrite? Quel et le ciment nouveau qui va donner la grande unité syntagmatique à tant d’unités discontinues, éparses? Qu’est-ce qui permet à Proust d’énoncer son œuvre.”

He finds that the equivalent to Marcel’s reminiscences in proper names. Barthes demonstrates the logic behind his observation:

The rest of “Proust et les noms” avoids such an explicit link between La Recherche and Proust’s life. Barthes is sure to stay within the realm of the poetics of the signifier. The proper name, however, is not a signifier arbitrarily grafted onto a signified as posited by Ferdinand de Saussure. The relationship is motivated. Barthes evokes Cratylus’ theory of language to elucidate the diegetic narrator and Proust’s interest in proper names. From a cratylean optic, language is free from the alienating bar that separates signifier from signified and flirts with collapsing the distinction

---

94 Murat, 313.
95 Barthes, 120.
between them. The disruption of boundaries, between art and life, signifier and signified, manifests itself in Marcel’s topographical reveries.

Like Cratylus, the young Marcel believes that the essence of the place is enclosed in the name. Although such musings may seem naïve to a linguist in the Saussurean tradition, Barthes wonders “s’il est vraiment possible d’être écrivain sans croire, d’une certaine manière, au rapport naturel des noms et des essences.” The Structuralist critic analyzes Marcel’s linguistic obsessions and illustrates the way the sound of a proper name puts into motion the mechanisms of the imagination. By suggesting that Proust’s novel develops around a few place names, he reveals the imaginative force inherent to signs in La Recherche and weaves an elegant nexus that links vision, desire, and the voice:

Le nom propre est... un signe, et non, bien entendu, un simple indice qui désignerait, sans signifier, comme le veut la conception courante de Pierce à Russel. Comme signe, le Nom propre s’offre à une exploration, à un déchiffrement: il est à la fois ‘un milieu’ (au sens biologique du terme), dans lequel il faut se plonger, baignant indéfiniment dans toutes les rêveries qu’il porte, et un objet précieux, comprimé, embaumé, qu’il faut ouvrir comme une fleur.

Barthes’ description of place names in La Recherche recalls our discussion of Proust’s theorization of the eyes. Like place names, the eyes are “milieux” in which the subject becomes lost and “objets précieux” that possess depths beyond their miniature appearance. Whereas the eyes separate the subject between inside and out, here and there, the cratylean signifier undermines such distinctions; the essence of the place is there, but it is also here, in the word that ostensibly signifies its absence. The place is both inside and outside of the word and, for Marcel, the written word takes on a whole new life and silent text becomes both audible and sensual through the poetic reverberations it provokes. This poetic vision replaces ocular vision, and gives way to a new kind of presence. Bachelard, the phenomenologist of the imagination, like Proust, views the poetic image as having its own vocal quality, for its “retentissement” calls to other images: “Par l’éclat de l’image, le passé lointain résonne d’échos et l’on ne voit guère à quelle profondeur ces échos vont se répercuter et s’éteindre.”

---

96 Barthes, 130.
97 Barthes, 122 [my italics].
98 Bachelard 2.
In the case of place names, their sound ignites a litany of metaphorical visions that are metonymically linked, unveiling a boundless world that exceeds the signifier. Genette highlights the contiguity of poetic reverie in “Métonymie chez Proust” and shows the logic behind Barthes proposition that *La Recherche* was born out of a few place names: “C’est la métaphore qui retrouve le Temps Perdu, mais c’est la métonymie qui le ranime, et le remet en marche.” In other words, metaphor links two distinct moments in time through a common sensation, but metonymy opens the space beyond the metaphor to exploration. Thematic, olfactory, and spatial configurations generated in the poetic center of Combray—situated next to *le Côté de Chez Swan* and *le Côté des Guermantes*—continually reverberate throughout the novel as Marcel navigates new territory.

From the narrator’s childhood home the rest of the novel contiguously develops. This poetic center is the soul of *La Recherche*. Bachelard’s conception of the home as a metaphor for the soul supports such a claim while also serving as a theoretical optic to magnify those elusive spaces in which one reads oneself in the words of the other. “Il y a un sens à prendre la maison comme un instrument d’analyse de l’âme humaine. Non seulement nos souvenirs, mais nos oubliés sont ‘logés.’ Notre inconscient est ‘logé.’ Notre âme est une demeure.”

In other words, metaphor links two distinct moments in time through a common sensation, but metonymy opens the space beyond the metaphor to exploration. Thematic, olfactory, and spatial configurations generated in the poetic center of Combray—situated next to *le Côté de Chez Swan* and *le Côté des Guermantes*—continually reverberate throughout the novel as Marcel navigates new territory. The soul is a luminous center that has a life of its own and projects signs that return the spectator’s gaze. Bachelard’s poetic image, “La lampe qui brille à la fenêtre,” further develops the home metaphor establishing an imaginary relationship between the depths of soul and the outside viewer. “Il faudrait mettre cette image sous la dépendance d’un des plus grands théorèmes de l’imagination du monde de la lumière: Tout ce qui brille voit. Rimbaud dit en trois syllables ce théorème cosmique: ‘Nacre voit.’” Proust was also seduced by such imagery, representing interiority through physical spaces that eventually become permeable. These spatial structures, bedrooms, for example, no longer close things in, for the echoes evoked by repetition not only links one place to the next, but also one character to the next.

In the following analysis, which will also serve as a conclusion, we will explore Proust’s externalization of interiority and the way reading the theater of others’ actions implicates the

---

100 Bachelard 19.
narrator in their performances. In much post-modern discourse, however, talk of interiority and the soul is suspect. The subsequent discussion of Proust’s theory of reading is informed by two divergent theoretical perspectives, psychoanalysis and anti-identity politics, represented respectively by Jeffrey Melhman and Michel Foucault. Combray is a localizable poetic center, the novel’s soul, and easily lends *La Recherche* to psychoanalytic interpretation. Marcel’s father, like Melhman, views the boy’s behavior as being a symptom of a graver malady. In this instance, Marcel’s association with Bergotte and the Swann family leads to the father’s exclamation: “Nécessairement, c’est tout un ensemble.” Similarly, Melhman diagnoses Marcel’s rejection of difference by interpreting the unity of the novel as symptomatic of the narrator’s narcissistic aesthetic. He does not take Marcel’s theory of redemption through art à la lettre and, like the narrator, he attempts to see through textual performances. Melhman writes, “Vicious circle, asphyxiating enclosure, illusory claims to wholeness, and ludicrously autocratic center all cast into jeopardy the redemptive pretensions of the supreme Gestalt.”

Mehlman’s psychoanalytic interpretation of Combray provides an example of the discourses Foucault describes in *Histoire de la Sexualité: Volonté de Savoir* in which non-normative desires become the key to deciphering the underlying structure or unconscious of a text or person. Marcel’s reading of others, however, provides a counterpoint to the work of both theorists. By psychoanalyzing his fellow characters, he reveals the reflexivity of his diagnoses for the words he uses to describe them evoke textual performances of other characters as well, the narrator—and reader—included.

The home is the privileged space of “la douce vie” and attracts the relentless eye of critical attention. Melhman’s psychoanalytic interpretation of *Combray* undoubtedly confirms this statement. For him, the nodal point of the universe enveloped in the name Combray is the bedroom of Tante Léonie—the space in which normative masculine desire is literally her worst nightmare. Marcel unintentionally overhears this secret, which, according to Melhman, is the complex that drives all desires in Combray: “Dieu soit loué! Nous n’avons comme tracas que la fille de cuisine que s’accouche. Voilà-t-il pas que je rêvais que mon pauvre Octave était ressuscité et qu’il voulait me faire faire une promenade tous les jours!” In addition to keeping her secret safe from others by never sleeping, Léonie has the pretension of omniscience (despite the fact that the

---

103 I. 108.
self-proclaimed invalid never leaves her room): “On connaissait tellement bien tout le monde à Combray, bêtes et gens, que si ma tante avait vu par hasard un chien ‘qu’elle ne connaissait point,’ elle ne cessait d’y penser et de consacrer à ce fait incompréhensible ses talents d’induction et ses heures de liberté.”

She is literally the center of the universe, the sun-queen, and like Louis XIV, her slightest movements are commented by Françoise with the same ardor displayed by Saint-Simon in his documentation of “‘la mécanique’ de la vie à Versailles.” As Melhman would suggest, she is the sadistic, overdosed diva of Combray: “At the center of Combray, we soon discover, there is an altar (“maître-autel”) dedicated to neither high art nor divinity: the night table on which Tante Léonie keeps her numerous medicaments.”

This queen of the day/night is the star of Combray, the city that never sleeps. La Berma’s theater pales in comparison to Léonie’s memorable performances in which she collapses life into art, turning her paranoid obsessions into full-fledged productions:

Françoise entendit peut-être parfois de la chambre voisine de mordants sarcasmes qui s’adressaient à elle et dont l’invention n’eût pas soulagé suffisamment ma tante s’ils étaient restés à l’état purement immatériel, et si en les murmurant à mi-voix elle ne leur eût donné plus de réalité. Quelquefois, ce ‘spectacle dans un lit’ ne suffisait même pas à ma tante, elle voulait faire jouer ses pièces.

Melhman’s brilliant yet malicious reading of Combray captures underlying structures that are repeated throughout the novel; the play “Tante Léonie: a ‘spectacle dans un lit,’” is performed analeptically and proleptically by different characters and each add their own twist, or style, to the same theatrical structure. He interprets these contagious performances as symptomatic of the very repetition that creates the novel, finding the young Marcel in the representation of his old aunt: “The reader has a strange sense of déjà vu when first reading of Léonie, at whose house Marcel’s family stayed. This invalid, who never leaves her bedroom, who attaches to the least of her sensations an extraordinary importance, for whom never sleeping a wink is the principal claim to distinction—surely we have come across her before.”

If the reader sees parallels between Marcel and Léonie, there is another person who could also be called family and is a “spectacle dans un lit.”

104 I. 57.
105 I. 117.
106 Melhman 27.
107 I. 115
108 Melhman 28.
Marcel peers into an unveiled œil-de-bœuf, gazes into the abyss and finds a man “enchainé sur un lit comme Prométhée sur son rocher, recevant les coups d’un martinet en effet planté de clous… déjà tout en sang, et couvert d’ecchymoses qui prouvaient que le supplice n’avait pas lieu pour la première fois…” The man at the center of this spectacle is none other than M. de Charlus. In “Chambre 43,” Marcel sees Charlus’ turned inside out and his darkest fantasies performed.

Intimate spaces link Léonie’s bedroom (Marcel’s bedroom as well) to Charlus’ brothel, but with a few changes to the mise-en-scène: the master is a slave and Louis XIV is Prometheus tortured by Olympian gods for his hubris.

Marcel, the innocent spectator, speaks to Jupien and insinuates that he has seen the “essence” and economic motor of this maison de passe: “Cette maison est tout autre chose, plus qu’une maison de fous, puisque la folie des aliénés qui y habitent est mise en scène, reconstituée, visible.” This is another universe, one that literally grows out of Charlus’ pocket as he finances the construction of a theater in which his madness is not only externalized, but also performed and repeated. Before entering Jupien’s brothel, Marcel runs into Charlus in the streets of Paris and mistakes him for an anonymous invert. His once hidden identity is completely exteriorized and his “queerness” is not contained by his body, rather it consumes it: “On peut dire que pour lui l’évolution de son mal ou la révolution de son vice était à ce point extrême où la petite personnalité primitive de l’individu, ses qualités ancestrales, sont entièrement interceptées par le passage en face d’elles du défaut ou du mal générique dont ils sont accompagnés.” Marcel is shocked by the simultaneous presence and absence of the man he once knew under the title of M. le baron de Charlus. His family name or place name was emptied of the depths Charlus so ardently valorized. The portrait of a man whose rich lineage was depicted by Boucher, Velasquez and Raphael is flat; his identity as a member of “la race maudite” consumes him. In this instance, Foucault’s distrust of discourses that equate sexuality with identity prophetically rings true, yet Proust saves inversion from being a pure object of scientific study in a move that is similar to Foucault’s theorization of madness.
Charlus’ inversion, the inner secret that ostensibly reveals the key to knowing who he is ("dis-moi tes désirs et je te dirai qui tu es") distances him from his true self. Likewise, madness, Foucault writes, is, "la possibilité toujours intérieure d’être entièrement rejeté à l’extérieur de soi-même, et de ne plus exister au moins pendant un temps que dans une absence totale d’intériorité."¹¹³ Science’s prophylactic barrier of regulated and systematized knowledge attempts to reduce madness into something understandable and containable in order to mitigate the vertiginous seduction that man sees in his identification with this inverted other. Foucault notes the contradictory sentiments of passion and neutrality intertwined in 19th century epistemological systems charged with cataloging the madman.

... On le [le fou] regarde avec, tout à la fois, plus de neutralité et plus de passion. Plus de neutralité, puisqu’en lui on va découvrir les vérités profondes de l’homme, ces formes en sommeil en qui naît ce qu’il est. Et plus de passion aussi, puisqu’on ne pourra pas le reconnaître sans se reconnaître, sans entendre monter en soi les mêmes voix et les mêmes forces, les mêmes étranges lumières.¹¹⁴

Behind the ostensibly mechanic and scientific theorization of madness lie troubling shadows of identification that feed the impulse to control the other’s problematic interiority. By creating theoretical curtains constructed from documents and case reports the analyst surrounds himself with intentionally deceptive discourses intended to be read literally. These symbolic fantasies break down because a language based purely on difference cannot withstand “les mêmes voix et les mêmes forces, les mêmes étranges lumières” which emanate from the other’s depths and disrupt the boundary between the signifier (the person who theorizes) and the signified (the person theorized).

The relationship between self and other is far more poetic than a system that obsessively insists on upholding this distinction. Theoretically, Bachelard and Foucault (like Proust and Foucault) are an unlikely match. Bachelard’s metaphor of the “lampe à la fenêtre,” materializes the attraction inherent in communication from soul to soul, human to human, or universe to universe, which Foucault only associates with madness or interiority externalized. Foucault famously said that madness is the absence of thought. As a result, all the attempts to theorize it are elaborate fantasies to place something knowable within this absence. Bachelard, however, metaphorically places within this absence a lamp that always remains covered. The “lumière”

¹¹⁴ Ibid. 640.
housed within the body ignites reverie for it filters into the outside world and calls the viewer to 
look within to find his own poetic illuminations that also emanate outward. Proust takes it a step 
further and places at this center a text, one that can be read in the form a book or through 
interpreting theaters of self-representation.

Though Proust initially views inversion as an externalization of a secret that takes over the 
body, he does not see madness as “l’asbence de l’oeuvre,” for it is through Charlus’ masochistic 
théater that Marcel is able to read him. Palamède’s tendency to rage, his fiery remarks, and his 
unpredictable violence become externalized and projected onto another, his “délicieux bourreau” 
who executes the baron’s fantasies. The bedroom, once again, becomes metonymically the space 
of the mind where the subject’s idées fixes find their manifestation. Marcel witnesses this 
particular fantasy of Charlus and gives him back what he thought had been lost by the evolution of 
his inversion: “Au fond de tout cela [the spectacle of the baron’s masochism] il y avait chez M. de 
Charlus tout son rêve de virilité, attesté au besoin par des actes brutaux, et toute l’enluminure 
intérieure, invisible pour nous, mais dont il projetait ainsi quelques reflets, de croix de justice, de 
tortures féodales, qui décorait son imagination moyenâgeuse.”115 In the intimate space that 
envelopes the body and becomes a reflection of the mind, Marcel perceives the logic that has 
always been unique to M. de Charlus. Fittingly, the baron’s “livre intérieur” is an “enluminure,” 
an art form that is made of precious materials, veal skin, gold leaf, and various fine pigments. 
Charlus’ illuminated manuscript becomes visible through the theatrical performance of his malady 
and Marcel recounts his vision. Interpreting theater, in this instance, is the best way for Proust to 
gain access to this medieval document, since Charlus is unable to write a novel that would 
otherwise reveal it. “Quel malheur que M. de Charlus ne soit pas romancier ou poète ! ... Mais M. 
de Charlus n’était en art qu’un dilettante, qui ne songeait pas à écrire et n’était pas doué pour 
cela.”116 Nevertheless, Marcel catches shimmering glimpses of the text’s delicate trim, precisely 
because of the grotesque and macabre vision of which he is a voyeur. Marcel explains how this 
vision is just as poetic as any other:

En somme son désir d’être enchainé, d’être frappé, trahissant, dans sa laideur, un rêve aussi 
poétique que, chez d’autres, le désir d’aller à Venise ou d’entretenir des danseuses. Et M. 
de Charlus tenait tellement à ce que ce rêve lui donnait l’illusion de la réalité, que Jupien

115 IV 419.
116 IV 410.
This theater becomes a site in which Marcel reads himself through M. de Charlus in a moment of sincere empathy. The narrator resists the facile condemnation of Charlus because his voyeurism puts him in a subject position that can be easily inverted; in fact, he does just that, since his dreams of Venice are now read through the baron’s dreams of medieval torture.

In sum, *La Recherche* is a vast web of interconnected readings that flow in and out of the diegetic. Proust’s instrument, however, never works the same way, for each reader who opens Proust’s book reads his own interior text through the mediation of the novel. The poetic presence of the reader exists in the meta-textual spaces of the novel, formed by the echoes of the reader’s interiority in the author’s text. Marcel is a shrewd reader of other characters, but his remarks are never entirely restricted to the objects he describes for his diagnoses bounce back towards him, revealing their reflexivity. For this reason, Maurice Blanchot describes Proust’s novel as spherical: “...Une telle œuvre devait... se rapprocher... de l’essence de la sphère; et en effet tout son livre, son langage, ce style de courbes lentes, de fluide lourdeur, de densité transparente, toujours en mouvement, merveilleusement fait pour exprimer le rythme infiniment varié de la gyration volumineuse, figure le mystère et l’épaisseur de la sphere.”118 The reader flows in and out of the various levels of Proust’s palimpsest and is drawn towards the elements that allow him to read within himself. The desire of each reader illuminates his interior text as he reads this invisible text through *La Recherche*, listening to the once silent voices that become audible through the aid of this textual instrument.

117 Ibid. 419.
118 Blanchot 36.
Works Cited


---. “Proust et le langage indirect.” Figures II. Paris: Éditions du Seuil,


