

Proust and Speech

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## ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines how Marcel Proust presents and uses different speech styles in *A la recherche du temps perdu*. The narrator of the novel analyzes how almost everyone he encounters speaks and consistently bases his decisions about how to interact with others on his evaluation of their speech mannerisms. I argue that, through the narrator's observations, Proust emphasizes the role of the socioindexicality of speech, or how the way a person speaks communicates their social identity, in mediating social relations. I begin by presenting the narrator's comments on how social status is interpreted through the way that people speak. Then I turn in the second chapter to how the narrator's understanding of what factors determine a person's speech mannerisms changes over the course of his life. The third chapter argues that the narrator has a sustained interest in how people use speech to perform different identities and shows how his investigation into the reasons these performances succeed or fail informs Proust's own technique of using different speech styles to create fictional characters in his novel. The last chapter discusses how Proust's Jewish and gay characters adapt how they speak to avoid or overcome discrimination. In each of these chapters, I show how, in *A la recherche*, the way social identity is interpreted and performed through speech causes individuals to take on different identities. I argue that, through the narrator's comments on this phenomenon, Proust demonstrates how it affects the structure of society while also studying the way it can be used to create fictional characters in a novel.

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*To my parents*

## Introduction

When I began reading *A la recherche du temps perdu*, I did not have a clear notion of what to expect from the novel. I knew that I would have to spend several hours a day over the course of a semester meandering through opulent tangential musings and that the novel had a very wealthy narrator. Since I was reading *A la recherche* for a course with Elisabeth Ladenson at Columbia University, I also knew that I would have to write a term paper on the novel at the end of the semester. I was not predisposed to like or dislike the novel, and thought of it as a curio, albeit one that I had heard was of great importance to the development of the French novel, and that I was now required to read out of academic necessity.

As I slowly worked my way through *Du côté de chez Swann*, I noticed that the narrator spends a great deal of time commenting on how the people he encounters speak. I began to underline the passages in which the narrator discusses how people speak and was quickly overwhelmed by their number and volume. It seemed curious to me that the narrator of *A la recherche* analyzes what can be determined about someone's personality or social identity from their speech at such length, often dedicating far more space to his appraisal of how people speak than to his account of what they say.

Thanks to the rediscovery of Mikhail Bakhtin's works in the 1960s, today's literary scholars are accustomed to thinking of the novel as a genre characterized by heteroglossia, or the inclusion of many different styles of language in a single text. For Bakhtin, "the novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even



diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized.”<sup>1</sup> Of course, heteroglossia is not exclusive to the novel as a genre; we can find it in countless works belonging to different genres, from Plato’s dialogues to, if we are to believe Claude Lévi-Strauss, the stories told by the Tupi-Kawahib, an indigenous people of Brazil:

C’était au début de la nuit, quand chacun profite des dernières heures du feu de campement pour se préparer au sommeil. Le chef Taperahi était déjà étendu dans son hamac; il commença à chanter d’une voix lointaine et hésitante qui semblait à peine lui appartenir. Immédiatement, deux hommes (Walera et Kamini) vinrent s’accroupir à ses pieds pendant qu’un frisson d’excitation traversait le petit groupe. Walera lança quelques appels; le chant du chef se précisa, sa voix s’affermit. Et tout à coup, je compris à quoi j’assistais: Taperahi était en train de jouer une pièce de théâtre, ou plus exactement une opérette, avec mélange de chant et de texte parlé. A lui seul, il incarnait une douzaine de personnages. Mais chacun était distingué par un ton de voix spécial: perçant, en fausset, guttural, en bourdon.<sup>2</sup>

Any work of fiction whose creator, like Taperahi in his one man show, draws on different styles of language to give substance to different characters contains an element of heteroglossia. Heteroglossia, then, can be found in all genres, periods, and cultures. It is one of the chief, and yet often underappreciated, attractions of fiction for many people who come to literature in search of contact with different styles of language, whether exotic or familiar. As Lévi-Strauss very succinctly puts it, “Qui dit homme dit langage, et

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<sup>1</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 262.

<sup>2</sup> Lévi-Strauss, 430.

qui dit langage dit société”<sup>3</sup> – language is so intimately linked to people and the societies in which they live that to invoke one is to necessarily invoke all three. Playing on the strength of these associations, many works of fiction use different styles of language to give us the impression of being in the presence of specific, distinct individuals and of entering into their social space, or the social networks and relations that structure their lives. In literature, we might seek out contact with great minds that think and feel deeply, with pirates and criminals from dangerous underworlds, with comforting figures that remind us of our hometown, or with, why not, entirely alien or fantastical species inhabiting invented universes. We want to experience, from the comfort of our couches or relaxing around a campfire at night, the great variety of life that peoples history, the world around us, and the universes of our fantasies. But when we do, it is through language and the jarring or reassuring or virtuosic ways in which the figures in our stories use it.

Heteroglossia is a common attribute of many types of literature, but for Bakhtin the novel is a genre that includes a particularly remarkable diversity of speech styles. Speech styles is a neutral, inclusive manner of referring to all the great variety of ways to speak while avoiding fraught and limiting terms such as accent or dialect. A speech style can be anything from the way an individual speaks (an idiolect) to the way a particular group speaks (a sociolect) to the more conventionally established national languages. When thinking of the major figures in Russian literature, for example Leo Tolstoy, it is not hard to comprehend Bakhtin’s point that novels often include a particularly

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<sup>3</sup> Lévi-Strauss, 467.

impressive diversity of speech styles from rural and urban, young and old, poor and wealthy populations.

Novels often also make use of narration that complements dialogue with descriptions of each character's speech mannerisms, or all of the formal features that typify how a person speaks, from intonation and timbre to lexicon and syntax. Narration can clarify or complement the information speech mannerisms convey about a person's identity for the reader. As a result, in many novels, particularly in the realist tradition, there is a beginning of a sociolinguistic impulse to describe and interpret what different speech mannerisms communicate about the speaker's identity. For Bakhtin, the use, description, and interpretation of speech styles is such a common feature in novels that it is the defining characteristic of the genre.

What stood out in *Proust's* novel was the subjective nature of the narrator's comments on others' speech mannerisms, the extent to which he analyzes each character's speech mannerisms, and his tendency to speculate about the nature of language and its relationship to identity. Instead of assuming that the reader will immediately understand and appreciate what each character's speech style tells us about their personality and social identity, Proust's narrator tells us how he himself interprets that information from how they speak. Often, he initially arrives at the wrong conclusion about, for example, his acquaintances' social background, sexual orientation, or personality and corrects himself later. This changes how we experience the characters, since we are always somewhat unsure of the extent to which the narrator's interpretations of others' identity are reliable. It also changes our relationship to language, which no longer communicates in a transparent, reliable, *stable* manner information about the

speaker's social identity and personality. Instead, through the narrator, we become more attuned to the imperfect, confusing, and often counter-intuitive manner in which language communicates identity. This confusion, in turn, forces the narrator to spend more time trying to determine what a person's speech style communicates about who they are. Because it is not immediately evident, the narrator also has to spend more time speculating on the nature of the association between language and identity. It is as if his mind responds to the presence of a pathogen, a grain of doubt, with an excessive autoimmune response that attacks the problem from all sides, causing parts of the novel to swell with analysis and speculation.

As I slowly made my way through *A la recherche*, I was rewarded for my initial impression – that the narrator was peculiarly fascinated by speech – with an immense wealth of observations on speech as it relates to class, race, sexual orientation, nationality, family, and individual personality. Over and over again, the narrator attempts to determine who people are, where they are from, and how they think from the way that they speak, often making erroneous initial judgments as he struggles to make sense of the dizzyingly complex ties between speech and identity.

When, after several months, I finally reached the last volume of the novel, my impression that the narrator has an exceptionally strong interest in how people speak was confirmed by the narrator himself, who looks back on his life and states that,

ce que racontaient les gens m'échappait, car ce qui m'intéressait, c'était non ce qu'ils voulaient dire mais la manière dont ils le disaient, en tant qu'elle était révélatrice de leur caractère ou de leurs ridicules; ou plutôt un objet qui avait

toujours été plus particulièrement le but de ma recherche parce qu'il me donnait un plaisir spécifique, le point qui était commun à un être et à un autre.<sup>4</sup>

What a stunning admission! It reveals the narrator's particular form of misanthropy, a fascination with society despite the vapidness of the people he encounters in it. But even more extraordinary is that he describes his interest in speech as something that leads him to "le but de ma recherche," the goal of his research or quest depending on how you translate the phrase. This statement links the narrator's interest in how people speak to the titular "recherche" of the novel, elevating the apparent importance of his comments on speech.

Proust is often described as having an "aesthetics of redemption"<sup>5</sup> in that his narrator seeks to find the hidden value of people, things, or experiences that at first seem unremarkable. One way of interpreting the title, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, is that it refers to this drive to find a way to recuperate experiences that were lost or wasted.

Analyzing how others speak is one very important means that the narrator develops to redeem the time lost through otherwise unpleasant or futile experiences in society. As Gilles Deleuze writes, for the narrator of *A la recherche*, "Rien ne donne plus à penser que ce qui se passe dans la tête d'un sot. Ceux qui sont comme des perroquets, dans un groupe, sont aussi des 'oiseaux prophètes': leur bavardage signale la présence d'une loi."<sup>6</sup>

The narrator's interest in how others speak allows him to extract valuable observations about language, society, and psychology from otherwise banal exchanges with people he finds distasteful. It redeems the otherwise wasted moments of his life spent out in society.

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<sup>4</sup> TR, 24.

<sup>5</sup> Freed-Thall, 161.

<sup>6</sup> Deleuze, 33.

Of course, in my term paper, I could not possibly do this topic justice given the constraints of time, the 20-page format, and my own inexperience. Despite my frustrations, I had the distinct sense that I had stumbled upon something that deserved better, a key component of the novel that had been alluded to by eminent scholars such as Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Dubois, Roland Barthes, and Julia Kristeva, but never developed into a full academic work on Proust's handling of speech. With Professor Ladenson's encouragement, I continued working on the topic and my term paper developed into a Master's thesis and eventually this dissertation.

I want to insist on this genesis of my dissertation in order to stress that I did not come to the novel with an analytical framework that I imposed on it. The strange fascination the narrator has with how people speak and what it reveals about them is a central aspect of the novel that leaps from the page, and that indeed the narrator points to himself in its last volume. It cries out for attention as one of the narrator's chief interests that one can trace from the beginning to the end of the work and gives the reader a thread to grasp onto and follow to better appreciate the structure of the sprawling, eclectic novel.

Although I did not have a clear methodology when I began reading Proust, I did perhaps have some background that predisposed me to take note of his treatment of speech in the novel. I am from southwest Virginia, grew up with many different styles of speech, and was guided towards a less regionally marked variety of English at an early age. Being attuned to different accents and how they are marked and treated is a basic, oft unacknowledged requirement for anyone seeking academic success coming out of Appalachia, or any other social space characterized by strongly marked and stigmatized speech styles. Although I do not think such a background is necessary to appreciate the

importance of the narrator's interest in speech in *A la recherche*, it likely caused me to be more sensitive to this aspect of the novel than someone who had not felt so keenly the strategic malleability of speech and its role in structuring social, economic, and geographical hierarchies.

I also grew up reading literature from the southern United States in which the treatment of different speech styles is a central formal preoccupation. One of the first (and only) things I remember from studying literature in school before college was that Mark Twain attempted to transcribe colloquial speech from the south in his novels, which angered northern publishers and caused a controversy in the literary world that helped spread his fame. Early on in my development as a reader, I was taught to pay close attention to how novels handle the gap between oral language and "standard" language, because it is an important formal consideration, but also because it implicates texts in broader social, cultural, and political conflicts.

When I had my choice, however, I read William Faulkner, not Twain. Jean-Paul Sartre, when presenting William Faulkner to a French public, compared him to Proust because of the major role that their treatment of the lived, non-linear experience of time and memory plays in defining their works. Having read Proust and then Faulkner, especially in the first French translation by Maurice Coindreau that suppressed much of the regionalism in Faulkner's language to present him in a more classical tradition, their similar temporal innovations would certainly jump to the fore. But having read Faulkner, in English, then Proust, is very different, and what stands out is their shared interest in the relationship between oral and literary styles and their highly innovative approach to the representation of speech in their works. This sort of rapprochement is perhaps less

obvious, because Faulkner is noted for his use of colloquial, regionally-marked, and stigmatized speech styles whereas Proust is celebrated for his lengthy accounts of conversations in aristocratic salons. However, if we look a bit closer, our supremely wealthy, elegant narrator also speaks a patois, thanks to his regular contact with his family's prominent and intimidating housekeeper, Françoise. And, in fact, he encounters people from all walks of life, with widely divergent speech styles that he comments on at great length. The way Proust presents and uses these different forms of speech should be considered one of the hallmarks of his oeuvre, as it is for the other major modernist writers with whom he is frequently associated: William Faulkner, James Joyce, and Thomas Mann.

My experiences with language and literature no doubt had a background effect on how I read and thought of fiction, but the treatment of speech styles was not a central, conscious preoccupation for me when I began reading *A la recherche*, and it was certainly not a topic that I expected to spend several years writing about. If I came to *A la recherche* with any ideological framework through which to read the novel that I was conscious of, it was a strong “vulgar” Marxist impulse to study the treatment of class in literary works, but not necessarily one that fixated on the role of speech and language in structuring and representing class hierarchies. My father is a salaried farmworker and my mother is a high school French teacher, but through my father's employers, my extended family, and my academic experiences I have had an unusual amount of close contact with extremely wealthy people. Inequality, labor disputes, and class conflict have occupied a central, burning place in my life and my thoughts, such that my first instinct when reading fiction is often to reflect on how stories present social distinctions and hierarchies.



What I discovered reading *A la recherche* is that the treatment of class, and of all other social hierarchies and taxonomies, was filtered through speech in particular, and the signs that communicate social identity in general.

It is difficult to characterize Proust's treatment of class in *A la recherche*, because the narrator so often struggles to discern others' relative place in the social hierarchy.

Really, he is not as interested in class so much as in social status, a more fluid, malleable attribute that relies a great deal on perception and can create a hierarchy within a single class. Social status has greater importance than class in his world, because the society he frequents is more structured by how one is seen and with whom one associates than how one makes a living.<sup>7</sup> Of course class – profession, wealth, and social background – affects how the narrator's acquaintances are perceived, but it is not the sole factor in their social success, which also depends on characteristics like eloquence, charm, and tact.

Social status is subject to interpretation and thus difficult to pin down. The narrator has to make conclusions about others' relative standing based on external signs, like dress, mannerisms, décor, and especially speech, which all function together on a distinct, sociosemiotic level of language that communicates not semantic meaning but identity. In *A la recherche*, this sociosemiotic level of language is characterized by ambiguity that draws attention to the materiality of signs and their role in mediating

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<sup>7</sup> See Curtius, p. 324. “Die Proustschen Romane sind vielleicht in unserer kapitalistischen Geschichtsära das einzige Beispiel einer großen literarischen Schöpfung, in der wirtschaftliche Existenzprobleme überhaupt nicht vorkommen. Es gibt in ihnen keine Daseinskämpfe, keine Not und keine Armut — ebensowenig wie es in ihnen ein wirtschaftliches Konquistadorentum, eine Jagd nach dem Gelde, ein Spekulieren und Geschäftemachen gibt.”

“Proust's novels are perhaps the only example in our capitalist historical era of a major literary work in which economic problems of existence do not appear at all. In them there is no struggle for existence, no misery and no poverty — and no economic conquest, chasing after money, speculation or deal-making.” [My translation.]

communication in a way that is reminiscent of modernist poets' treatment of language as a substance, a thing-in-itself with its own properties that opens up and obscures meaning. Except that, whereas modernist poets (for example Paul Valéry), draw our attention to the materiality of language by playing with it on a semantic level, Proust does so on a sociosemiotic level.

My reading of *A la recherche* was confirmed and pushed by Gilles Deleuze's *Proust et les signes* (1964) and especially Jacques Dubois's *Les romanciers du réel* (2000). Both of these scholars emphasize that the narrator of *A la recherche* struggles to learn how to interpret signs to make sense of the world around him. For Deleuze and Dubois, the narrator has to go through a lengthy "apprentissage des signes"<sup>8</sup> over the course of which his understanding of signs changes. He becomes more wary of the possibility of misinterpreting signs, more skeptical of their conventional or assumed meanings, and less confident that any firm truth can be determined through their analysis.

Dubois's *Les Romanciers du réel* was particularly helpful in that he puts Proust in a tradition of French realist novelists using the genre to make sense of and represent the complex social world around them. For Dubois, the French novel of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries increasingly centered on characters who attempt to understand and interpret society through signs. He writes,

Beaucoup de ces personnages, on le notera, ont pour vocation de relever et d'interpréter des signes. Toujours herméneutes à quelque titre. Par eux, le

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<sup>8</sup> Deleuze, 11.

monde n'est plus seulement à dénombrer, il est à décrypter. Ce qui implique sa confusion ou son opacité d'origine.<sup>9</sup>

Proust, however, goes further in emphasizing sociosemiotic confusion according to Dubois, who writes,

Proust va inaugurer une chasse aux signes révélateurs beaucoup plus radicale. Elle est celle, morbide, du jaloux qui alimente son tourment au moindre indice. Elle est celle du mondain et du snob hanté par l'obsession de discerner le rang des autres pour être mieux à même d'assurer le sien et de maintenir les distances. Mais elle est plus que tout celle du romancier qui jubile à décrypter le grand grimoire social et à voir combien le jeu contrarié des apparences et des réalités peut se révéler dévastateur.<sup>10</sup>

For Dubois, *A la recherche* is an attempt to represent society, but also to chronicle how society is experienced through the signs that mark its different categories and groupings, and whose meaning is not immediately clear, but rather must be analyzed, learned, reevaluated, and doubted. Reading his description of the narrator's frustrated obsession with signs was tremendously encouraging, as it affirmed and gave direction to my own observations on how confusing and often counter-intuitive the social markers present in speech are for the narrator.

In literary scholarship, especially that of aspiring academics, there is a strong tendency to position one's work in a negative manner, to explain, often in a combative tone, how it differs from previous work. The academic take-down is a professional necessity for people attempting to secure a position for themselves in a highly

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<sup>9</sup> Dubois, *Les Romanciers du réel*, 106.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

competitive, cut-throat field that imposes pugilist individualism. I would like to avoid such a stance because it runs counter to my own approach to scholarship but also because it would be intellectually dishonest – my dissertation owes a great deal to scholars who have already taken up the topic of, as Deleuze’s book is called, *Proust et les signes*.

In the chapters that follow, I will build on those scholars’ work on Proust’s approach to signs and identity in general to focus on Proust’s treatment of speech specifically. As I have indicated, the sociosemiotic level of speech that I am interested in functions with other signs conveying social identity such as dress, etiquette, and décor and I will occasionally zoom out to discuss how they work together. However, unlike dress, etiquette, décor, etc., which have to be translated into language by way of description for the novel, speech is reported to us more directly, as if we were reading the actual words chosen by the speaker and not the author of the text. Dialogue produces an impression of unmediated contact with another person, even with all of the problems attendant upon the transcription of speech, which necessarily entails the loss of many acoustic features such as rhythm and tone. As we will see, the narrator believes himself that speech provides an unparalleled means to establish a physical, spiritual, and social connection with other people, and he dedicates a great deal of time and effort to explaining that connection. Although speech does not function independently from the other forms of signs communicating identity, it has a more prominent role in the work and in the narrator’s comments, and thus merits special attention.

Many scholars working on Proust, especially those focusing on his style, have noted that his narrator pays careful attention to how others speak, and that Proust’s characters have very distinctive ways of speaking. Writing in 1925, Ernst Robert Curtius

observed that, for Proust, the way people speak is linked to their psychology and that each of his characters has their own language.<sup>11</sup> In his essay on Proust's style in *Stilstudien* (1928), Leo Spitzer builds on Curtius's work and argues Proust grounds speech in the psychology and identity of his characters. He argues that, "when Proust relates conversations, he thus separates nothing from its connection with the individual, he treats expression [das Wort] as the biological consequence of an entire personality."<sup>12</sup> Spitzer also points out that the narrator "deciphers" personalities and motives through analyses of the way people speak, which anticipates Dubois's argument that Proust uses the novel as a means to "d crypter le grand grimoire social."<sup>13</sup> Numerous authors have reiterated Spitzer's observations, that each character in *A la recherche* has their own way of speaking and that Proust's narrator analyzes people's conversations for hidden insights into their personality.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Curtius, 110.

<sup>12</sup> Spitzer, 423. [My translation] "Wenn Proust Reden mitteilt, so teilt er nichts ab von ihrem Zusammenhang mit der Person, er behandelt das Wort als biologische Auswirkung einer ganzen Pers nlichkeit."

<sup>13</sup> Spitzer, 441. See also Spitzer, 427: "Die banalste Wendung wird so zum Gralsh ter der Tiefengeheimnisse der Seele. Proust treibt Graphologie oder Physiognomie der Individualsprache, er geht auf die « recherche » des Seelischen, das in der Alltagssprache verstreut, verkr melt, « perdu » ist. Wie die moderne Gef hlspsychologie sich Apparate zur Feststellung der L ge konstruiert, so vergleicht Proust Ton und Rede und h rt das Dementi das ersteren unter dem « mensonge » der letzteren heraus."

"The most banal phrase thus becomes the Grail keeper of the deep secrets of the soul. Proust practices graphology or physiognomy of the individual's language, he goes on the 'recherche' of the psychological that is scattered like crumbs, 'lost' in everyday speech. In the same manner as modern emotional psychology is working towards the detection of lies, Proust compares tone and speech and discovers the dementi of the first under the 'lie' of the latter" [My translation].

<sup>14</sup> Milly, *Proust et le style*, 22. "*La Recherche* elle-m me porte de nombreuses traces de l'esprit pasticheur de Proust, dans les conversations des personnages: chacun d'eux a son langage particulier, qui trahit jusqu'  la caricature ses origines, son caract re, ses vices."

Already in 1928, however, Spitzer introduced some observations that complicate the notion that each of Proust's characters has their own individual way of speaking. In *Stilstudien*, he points out that Proust has a way of using language to create connections between individuals from very different social backgrounds. For example, he notes that when the very bourgeois Mme Verdurin calls Swann "cette sale bête," it reminds the narrator of Françoise crying "cette sale bête" when killing a chicken, which creates a conceptual link between the two characters.<sup>15</sup> Clearly then, the way Proust's characters speak is not just an individuating force: they often share speech mannerisms that create relationships between them. Second, Spitzer observes that Proust's characters divide into different identities as the narrator discovers new facets of their personalities over time,

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Tadié, *Proust*, 110. "La variété de ses phrases est au contraire très grande, d'abord parce qu'elles se modifient au gré des dialogues, chaque personnage ayant son langage, qu'il ne partage avec personne."

Holtus, 31. For Proust, "der Stil gilt nicht als schmückendes Beiwerk zu einer auf einen bloßen Sachverhalt referierenden Mitteilung, sondern als eine von der individuellen Erfassung der Wirklichkeit abhängige Gesamtschau, die von Mensch zu Mensch verschieden ist."

For Proust, "style is not considered as an ornamental accessory of communication that refers merely to facts, but rather as an overview dependent upon the individual's apprehension of reality, which differs from person to person." [My translation.]

On the theme of analyzing the way people speak for hidden insights into their personality, motives, and identity:

Henry, *Proust romancier*, 94. "Sans doute tout le monde s'emploie à mentir autour de lui [the narrator] et utilise communément la parole pour masquer ses intentions. Mais la tricherie aide à y voir clair et dénonce d'elle-même le hiatus qu'elle a institué."

Ann Gaylin's chapter on Proust in *Eavesdropping in the Novel from Austen to Proust* makes a similar point when arguing that the narrator's "epistemophilia" (desire to know, to understand) drives him to listen in on and analyze conversations for hidden insights into others' identities and behavior.

<sup>15</sup> Spitzer, 388.

such that, for example, there are multiple Swanns, two Gilbertes, two Odettes, two Legrandins, and countless Albertines. How can a character have their own way of speaking, which emanates from their specific psychology and worldview, if the individual splits into multiple distinct identities? Do each of the Albertines have their own way of speaking? Spitzer identifies critical passages in the novel that communicate the narrator's thoughts on speech and its relationship with identity, but he does not resolve the complications that arise when they are confronted with one another. We can hardly reproach him for this because the tension between these different ideas about language and identity exists within the novel.

For many decades after *Stilstudien*, works on Proust's style and novelistic techniques (for example Jean Milly's *Proust et le style* 1970, Jean-Yves Tadié's *Proust* 1983, Anne Henry's *Proust romancier* 1983) only touched on his treatment of speech in passing, within broader discussions of other aspects of the novel. Proust scholarship tends to focus on topics like his style (his syntax, use of metaphors, etc.) and his representation of society, without delving at any length into his approach to dialogue. Even Deleuze and Dubois, who discuss how the narrator conceptualizes the world around him through his interpretation of signs, do not take up the topic of heteroglossia and the narrator's comments on speech specifically. As a result, other scholars' work informed my general understanding of the themes and structure of the novel, but I had to blend their observations and extrapolate from their conclusions in order to build up my own argument about how Proust uses different speech styles.

Julia Kristeva's *Le Temps sensible: Proust et l'expérience littéraire* (1994) had a more direct impact on my understanding of the relationship between language and society

in *A la recherche*. She is often credited with playing a major role in bringing Bakhtin's ideas to the attention of scholars outside of Russia by introducing his work to a seminar taught by Roland Barthes.<sup>16</sup> Although she only references Bakhtin in a single footnote in *Le Temps sensible*, the way she presents *A la recherche* is inflected by her interest in the Russian linguist in that, for her, the way Proust's characters speak is one of the central and innovative aspects of the novel.

Kristeva notes that Proust's characters draw on different speech styles and argues that this challenges realist conventions, because "dès que le personnage déroge à son territoire, par la multiplicité des langages qu'il tient ou par les retournements diversifiés que lui inflige le tourniquet rhétorique du narrateur, il perd sa consistance sculpturale et réaliste: il n'est plus perçu comme vrai, mais comme une création verbale, abstraite, intellectuelle."<sup>17</sup> Kristeva argues that Proust's characters are not stable, authentic representatives of a milieu that speak in a way that is immediately recognizable, but rather performers using language to construct their own identity. For her, *A la recherche* is one of the first novelistic representations of the society of spectacle, because it places performance at the heart of social relations.<sup>18</sup> This tendency towards performance causes Proust's characters to lose cohesion and for the illusionism of the novel to come apart as identities are revealed to be postures.

Kristeva's argument helps us to resolve some of the tensions that came up in Spitzer's essay. Yes, each character has their own way of speaking that the narrator analyzes for information about their personality and background, but the way they speak

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<sup>16</sup> Lesic-Thomas, 1. Barthes, *Œuvres complètes III*, 478.

<sup>17</sup> Kristeva, *Le Temps sensible*, 248.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 392.



is neither stable nor homogenous. As a result, when the narrator tries to decipher who they are from the way they speak, he reaches divergent, often erroneous conclusions, and their identities begin to fragment and multiply. My dissertation brings Kristeva's observation about Proust's characters' use of different languages into Deleuze and Dubois's argument that the narrator learns to interpret others' position in society through signs: I will argue that a major factor complicating the narrator's *apprentissage des signes* is the way his acquaintances move between different speech styles.

Kristeva also raises the question of how Proust's approach to dialogue situates him with respect to realism. She argues that, by having his characters use different speech styles, Proust disrupts the realist illusionism of the novel and emphasizes the constructed nature of identity. By contrast, Dubois argues that *A la recherche* is a continuation and extension of the tradition of "les romanciers du réel," which includes the realist movement but refers to a broader group of authors trying to accurately represent society within a novel. He argues that these authors already presented society through characters who have to make sense of and navigate social relations by interpreting sometimes confusing or misleading signs of social identity. By putting more emphasis on a single narrator and his personal struggle to understand his acquaintances and their place in society, Proust draws out a tendency already present in this tradition to shift the novel's project from the accurate depiction of society to the accurate depiction of the *experience* of society.

The discrepancy here is a matter of degree (do Proust's innovations constitute a radical extension of realist conventions or the beginning of a break with them?), but it remained a central preoccupation for me as I wrote that pushed me to consider whether

the way Proust's characters use different speech styles is realistic. Does it intensify the illusionism of the novel by making Proust's characters and his narrator's experience of them more believable or does it unravel the illusionism of the novel, make us more conscious that we are reading a fictional narrative, by calling attention to the way identities are constructed, performed, and represented?

In the end, I tend more towards the position of Dubois. The difficulty the narrator encounters pinning down others' identities is a technique that intensifies the illusionism of the novel, because as the narrator explains, "Il n'est peut-être rien qui donne plus l'impression de la réalité de ce qui nous est extérieur, que le changement de la position, par rapport à nous, d'une personne même insignifiante, avant que nous ne l'avons connue, et après."<sup>19</sup> The heterogeneity of the characters' speech mannerisms and the difficulty the narrator has determining who they really are challenge *his* illusions about their identities, but also generate the impression that they are real, complex figures that develop and unfold over time.

At the same time, the narrator's self-reflection and self-criticism, his admissions of error and expressions of frustration, do occasionally make the project of trying to understand society and each person's place in it appear futile. He does not set out to understand how society is structured so much as how people think it is structured, how they form a conception of society, often on false premises, and how that affects their actions and relationships. This makes *A la recherche* an extraordinary investigation of the role of error, misinterpretation, and ignorance in the evolution of social relations. Of course, Balzac and Flaubert already chronicled the shock of characters' illusions with

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<sup>19</sup> O, 234.

reality, but in *A la recherche* ignorance and error persist. They affect how people treat one another, and the process of disillusionment does not reveal reality so much as create an impression of reality derived from the constant deferral of the real, because the persistence of doubt, ignorance, and error are part of the human experience of reality.

The question of the realism of Proust's use of different speech styles led me necessarily to take a stronger interest in sociolinguistics, to better situate the narrator's comments on language and identity with respect to the history of linguistics and to better understand the processes through which the novelist manipulates different styles of speech to create a fictional social space. As is already evident, I was particularly marked by the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. I will refer regularly to Bakhtin over the course of this dissertation, but I try to do so in a way that does not impose a Bakhtinian reading on *A la recherche*, as if the novel merely illustrates what Bakhtin describes as characteristic of the genre. Through theoretical discussions of the nature of language and the manner in which he portrays speech functioning, Proust often seems to echo Bakhtin's ideas about language, particularly Bakhtin's observations on how the individual does not have a single, stable way of speaking – a homogenous speech style – but rather is capable of deploying multiple speech styles. However, when there appears to be some resonance between their works, I introduce Bakhtin as a useful point of comparison, not as a theorist whose work explains *A la recherche*. Proust and Bakhtin were contemporaries and Proust could not have been aware of the work of the linguist, most of which did not become widely available even in Russian until the 1960s. On the other hand, although Bakhtin did not write any major work on Proust, he had read him by the 1940s and refers to *A la recherche* on occasion thereafter. As a result, it is not a stretch to argue that Bakhtin's

ideas about the novel are informed, in part, by Proust. It is probably more accurate to argue that Bakhtin's vision of the novel echoes Proust's than vice versa. But it is even more crucial to note that Proust expresses his own ideas about language and identity, which, even though often similar, do not entirely line up with those of Bakhtin. To give one obvious difference based off what I have already explained above, Proust puts far more emphasis on the subjective experience of learning, by trial and error, to interpret the way speech communicates identity than Bakhtin.

On occasion, I will draw on the ideas about language of other linguists, such as William Labov, but in the same way, as practical points of reference, not as arguments that explain what is happening with speech in *A la recherche*. To do otherwise would efface the innovative aspects of Proust's treatment of speech in the novel.

There is an argument to be made that Proust, by including theoretical discussions on the nature of language and its relationship with identity, is somewhat of a linguist himself. There have been several attempts to claim Proust for the social sciences, as an excellent social analyst and even as a sociologist or ethnographer.<sup>20</sup> Most importantly for this study, Michael Lucey has recently argued for us to view Proust as an "amateur sociolinguist or linguistic anthropologist."<sup>21</sup> With this tendency in the scholarship on Proust in mind, it makes sense to consider him *alongside* figures in the social sciences as a peer with his own notions about language, society, and identity.

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<sup>20</sup> These works discuss Proust's ties to sociology and argue that, through the narrator of *A la recherche*, he makes observations of a sociological nature: Bidou-Zachariasen, *Proust sociologue: De la maison aristocratique au salon bourgeois*; Zima, *Le désir du mythe: Une lecture sociologique de Marcel Proust*; Vincent Descombes, *Proust: philosophie du roman*; John Spagnoli, *The social attitude of Marcel Proust*; Alfred Cobban, "The Historical Significance of Marcel Proust;" Hughes, *Proust, Class, and Nation*; Kopp, *Marcel Proust as a Social Critic*.

<sup>21</sup> Lucey, 275.

That said, I have serious reservations about claiming Proust and his narrator for the social sciences. In his commentary on speech, the narrator adopts a somewhat scientific stance, which he references when he describes how his interest in the way people speak fits into his “recherche,” which could be interpreted as a research project. He often comments on exchanges that he overhears, or participates in marginally, as if he were an observer, perhaps an ethnographer, more interested in analyzing social relations than in engaging in them. At the same time, he explains that his interest in how people speak is pleasurable – it leads him to “un plaisir spécifique, le point qui était commun à un être et à un autre.”<sup>22</sup> If, as Lucey argues, the narrator is an “amateur sociolinguist,” the emphasis must be on the etymological sense of amateur, a person that enjoys and gets pleasure out of an activity. The narrator seems to have a genuine passion for understanding how language binds people together, but also derives a malicious pleasure from describing others’ speech. In his comments on speech, he engages in what Eve Sedgwick calls *nonce taxonomy*, or categorizing people according to informal and constantly evolving criteria in a manner that is at least as close to gossip as it is to the social sciences. One of the reasons he gives for being interested in how others speak is that it reveals their “ridicules” – his analytical stance is inseparable from a gossipy, mocking impulse, and these two aspects of his interest in speech reinforce each other.

The concomitance of an analytical and a gossipy impulse in Proust’s novel evokes intellectual struggles over the development of the social sciences in turn of the century France. During this period, sociology was a young discipline that was defining itself in relationship to social commentary. Émile Durkheim, who brought sociology into the

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<sup>22</sup> TR, 24.

French academic system and institutionalized it, wanted to take sociology in a more positivist direction, notably by differentiating it from the social commentary of Gustave Le Bon or Gabriel Tarde. He did so by establishing a more scientific methodology for analyzing society and trying to push the new discipline towards objectivity. Necessarily, this meant dismissing as inferior the sort of social analysis found in novels, even those of the naturalists, whom he explicitly rejected. Unlike the naturalists, Proust has no pretense to objectivity or scientific rigor, and his narrator implicates himself in his analysis of speech by regularly deriding the people he is studying. Today, the social sciences retain much of Durkheim's emphasis on positivism and objectivity, and an ethnographer, linguist, or sociologist would surely never dare admit that they enjoy ridiculing the people they study.

By the time Proust began publishing his novels in 1913, Durkheim was nearing the end of his life (he died in 1917) and, due to the efforts of the sociologist to promote and institutionalize his vision of the social sciences, the boundary between social commentary (in speculative or fictional works) and sociology was more clearly demarcated. However, it was by no means fully accepted, nor has it been since. Proust is a figure who exemplifies the porosity of the boundary Durkheim sought to establish between sociology and literature, since figures as eminent as Pierre Bourdieu, who called Proust an ethnographer of the salons,<sup>23</sup> have claimed him for the social sciences. However, it is not clear that Proust would have desired this honorary adoption into the social sciences any more than Durkheim would have. Vincent Descombes argues, for example, that “Proust n’aime pas la sociologie, dont il condamne l’attitude

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<sup>23</sup> Bourdieu, *La noblesse d'état*, 284.

Platonicienne.”<sup>24</sup> Certainly, Proust was not concerned with developing a consistent methodology for his observations on society or investigation of speech.

Although Durkheim’s rival, Tarde, did not have the same lasting impact on the discipline of sociology, he and his works were very popular in the Parisian high society that Proust frequented and he is regularly cited as one of Proust’s major intellectual influences. His approach to social commentary was closer to that of Proust: Tarde emphasizes form and presentation over methodology and coherence, he presents his texts as journeys of discovery with reversals (much like the narrator’s *apprentissage*), and he emphasizes the primacy of individual psychology in driving social phenomena. Tarde even wrote a novel himself. Despite these many similarities, there is some debate as to whether Proust’s conception of society is closer to that of Tarde or Durkheim, given his narrator’s obsession with analysis and evidence, as well as his fascination with character types and the way that social environments like family and milieu shape individuals’ worldviews.<sup>25</sup>

In *Between Literature and Science: the Rise of Sociology*, Wolf Lepenies describes how the boundary between literature and the sciences became more fixed during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he argues, the literary qualities of scientific works played an important role in their success. Most notably, the Comte de Buffon’s tremendously popular *Histoire naturelle*, published in 1749, was celebrated more for its stylistic brilliance than its scientific rigor. According to Lepenies, Buffon had an impact on the novel, and on Proust in particular, via Honoré de Balzac:

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<sup>24</sup> Descombes, 173.

<sup>25</sup> See for example Dubois, “Proust sociologue amusant: Entre Tarde et Durkheim.”

Balzac wanted to do for society what Buffon had done for zoology: he wanted to analyse the social species of which French society consisted [...]. The reader of Buffon can recognize elements of the *Histoire Naturelle* in Balzac's novels down to the smallest details; and when one considers the extent to which Balzac influenced Proust it becomes clear that, *via* the *Comédie Humaine*, Buffon also found his way to Combray and the Faubourg Saint-Germain.<sup>26</sup>

If Proust has some of the qualities of a social scientist, it is through this alternative, marginalized tradition that Lepenies traces back to Buffon, which strives to be comprehensive and rigorous, but still puts literary considerations like style and presentation before method and consistency.

One reason for the continued association of Proust's social commentary with sociology despite his inconsistencies and speculative tone is the outsider stance of the social analyst. Durkheim and Proust both had Jewish parents from Alsace-Lorraine (Durkheim was born in Lorraine and Proust's mother was from Alsace) in a time of rising anti-Semitism. Historically, the large population of Jews that lived in eastern France or had ties to that area were subjected to discrimination and periodic violence. Their status was further complicated during the period of history in which *A la recherche* takes place because Alsace-Lorraine was controlled by Germany as a result of the Franco-Prussian War and considered potentially disloyal to France. Anti-Semitism and uneasiness over the status of people from Alsace-Lorraine were further conflated during the Dreyfus Affair, because Alfred Dreyfus, the French officer accused of treason at the center of the controversy, was from an Alsatian Jewish family.

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<sup>26</sup> Lepenies, 4.



Both Durkheim and Proust lived, wrote, and developed their observations on society during a period when many people in France actively sought to marginalize Jews, especially those with ties to Alsace-Lorraine, and to other them as potentially foreign and untrustworthy. Proust was himself Catholic, but he could not escape the association with Jewishness projected on him by his acquaintances, and even his friends. Durkheim and Proust did not adopt the outsider stance of the social observer – it was a reality of their historical position. This is part of the paradox of their work: they sought and gained recognition within French society and became central figures in the development of French intellectual life, but they did so from a precarious social position in a complex social and intellectual climate of both acceptance and exclusion.

Sedgwick associates the nonce taxonomy she argues Proust engages in throughout *A la recherche* with marginalized people – servants, women, racial and sexual minorities – trying to make sense of a complex, shifting set of social and power relations from which they are largely excluded, and that could quickly become dangerous for them. The social sciences have been described as originating from a similar social position. Lévi-Strauss, another major figure in the history of the French social sciences whose family was Jewish and originally from Alsace, and who suffered through a much more dramatic rise in anti-Semitism when he was stripped of his citizenship and had to leave France during the Second World War, wrote that, if one studies the background of a typical ethnographer,

Il y a de grandes chances pour qu'on puisse retrouver dans son passé des facteurs objectifs qui le montrent peu ou pas adapté à la société où il est né. En assumant son rôle, il a cherché soit un mode pratique de concilier son

appartenance à un groupe et la réserve qu'il éprouve à son égard, soit, tout simplement, la manière de mettre à profit un état initial de détachement qui lui confère un avantage pour se rapprocher de sociétés différentes, à mi-chemin desquelles il se trouve déjà.<sup>27</sup>

Proust's narrator, like Lévi-Strauss's ethnographer, is already somewhat detached from the social circles he frequents. Although, unlike Proust, he does not have a Jewish mother, nor is he gay (or as he says, "inverti"), he has an emotional, intellectual, and physical sensitivity that sets him apart from most of the people he encounters, whom he finds brutish or vapid. And his interest in speech is one strategy he develops to, as Lévi-Strauss put it, "mettre à profit un état initial de détachement" by taking advantage of banal or unpleasant conversations to investigate the nature of language and how it shapes and is shaped by the individual's social status, family, sexuality, and psychology.

Associating Proust with the social sciences moves us forward because it helps us to begin to describe his narrator's attitude and social position in the novel. I am indebted to scholars who have associated Proust with the social sciences, because their observations reaffirmed my own impression that Proust is an extraordinary and original social analyst as I researched and wrote this dissertation. One of the goals of this study is obviously to call attention to the rich social and linguistic commentary contained within *A la recherche*, and it is useful and reassuring to be able to point to so many others who have also been drawn to this aspect of the novel. But I do so with two major caveats. First, as stated, the social sciences developed in France by way of contrast with the sort of social commentary Proust engages in through his novel. Although major theorists like

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<sup>27</sup> Lévi-Strauss, 458.

Pierre Bourdieu and Roland Barthes have praised the perspicacity of Proust's social commentary, he is not systematic or methodical in his analyses. Proust's commentary is sophisticated, compelling, and rigorous, but he analyzes language and society through his narrator in a manner that is unapologetically subjective, casual, and often self-contradicting. My second major caveat, which follows from the first and is patently obvious but must nonetheless be repeated again and again, is that Proust was a novelist. He was not a sociologist, ethnographer, or sociolinguist, even if he shares some of their interests and his narrator often adopts the stance of the observer or analyst. These disciplines were either still in gestation or did not exist in his lifetime, and it is perilous to claim Proust for them retrospectively, especially at the expense of his status as a writer of fiction. Furthermore, Proust was a novelist who wrote much more, and much more positively about other novelists like Balzac than about theorists like Durkheim and Tarde. One risk of associating Proust with the social sciences and neglecting the obvious, that he is first and foremost a novelist, is that we might miss the connections between social analysis and literature in his work, or, to put it another way, we might overlook the specific ways that he engages in social analysis through the novel, and that his social analysis informs his approach to the novel.

Proust and his narrator want to write and their interest in society and in speech is motivated by and filtered through their desire to understand the status of fiction. In the narrator's discussions of speech, he is frequently preoccupied by the difficulty of determining who people are from the way that they speak. Are they rich or poor? Are they attracted to men or women? Are they faithful or unfaithful friends or lovers? These questions feed into a central preoccupation with how people can use speech to hide or

transform who they are, as well as the limits of such efforts. For Proust and his narrator, speech is at its core a phenomenon that is inseparable from fiction. It allows people to, whether intentionally or unintentionally, take on multiple identities, to engage in social theater by playing different characters. His observations on speech, as we will see, return again and again to the question of what causes different identities to fragment and multiply, at times explicitly in relation to discussions of how a novelist's attempts to manipulate this phenomenon, by using speech styles to give substance to characters, can make a novel succeed or fall flat. After all, the relationship between language and identity is not just an intellectual concern for linguists and sociologists. It is also an immediate practical concern for someone writing a novel with characters from different social backgrounds, attempting to give their readers the impression of entering into a believable social space.

There is a technical, literary dimension to the commentary on how people speak in *A la recherche*: the narrator investigates what it is about speech that allows people, whether social climbers or someone hiding their Jewish family background or sexual identity, to appear to be someone else, because the novelist must also engage in the same procedure of manipulating language to evoke new identities, i.e. the characters in their novels. Proust's narrator enters into complex, stimulating discussions of how language and identity shape one another. But we should not lose sight of the fact that Proust engages in these discussions as a novelist, as someone who wants to understand society and language because he wants to create fictional characters, to pull off the illusion of being someone else, which necessarily entails manipulating speech styles. Through Proust, the novel becomes a form that is self-conscious of its use of speech styles. I will

analyze his narrator's comments on speech not just for what they reveal about Proust's understanding of language and society, but also as a practical investigation of the mechanisms by which an author can use different speech styles to evoke different identities.

My dissertation develops this argument about Proust's interest in speech and fiction by presenting the narrator's comments on language and social identity and by showing how those observations inform Proust's own use of speech styles.

In Chapter 1, I present the narrator's comments on how different speech styles are perceived and discuss how the perception of social status in turn shapes individuals' social identity in the novel. According to the narrator, differing interpretations of social status cause individual's identities to refract depending on the milieu in which they find themselves, which can cause their social identity to change dramatically over time as one vision of who they are becomes more or less dominant across society.

In Chapter 2, I follow the narrator's changing explanations of what factors determine how a person speaks. At different points in the novel, he describes the influence of caste or family background, intellect, literature, and social experiences outside of one's own caste on individuals' speech. He emphasizes each of these explanations of what determines linguistic behavior at different points in his life. *A la recherche* has a notoriously complex temporality, because the narrator regularly moves between scenes from different periods in his life to anticipate how events developed, to build drama, and often to illustrate the limits of his perspective and how later experiences changed his interpretation of events. In Chapter 2, I reestablish how the narrator's understanding of speech changes over the course of his early life.

In Chapter 3, I build on the observations in my first two chapters to present Proust's comments on why linguistic impostures fail or succeed. By linguistic imposture, I mean the conscious effort to manipulate the ambiguity in the relationship between language and identity to pretend to be someone else. I take up instances in *A la recherche* when characters try to sound like someone else or to transform their own identity through speech and discuss what they reveal about Proust's own technique for using different speech styles to create the fictional identities of his characters.

In my final chapter, I discuss the narrator's comments on how Swann, Bloch, and Charlus adapt how they speak to avoid or overcome prejudice towards Jewish and queer people and establish a position for themselves in the salons that structure Parisian high society. I examine how they find themselves marginalized and excluded despite their efforts in order to determine the limitations on transforming one's social identity by changing how one speaks in *A la recherche*.

## Chapter 1

### Speech and the Perception of Social Status

#### I

##### *Swann's Voice*

When Swann is introduced in the first volume of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, he advances towards the narrator's family from the other side of their garden. At first they pretend not to know who their visitor is even though they know it must be Swann, since he is one of the only people who visits them in Combray. The pageantry of uncertainty creates some mild drama in their predictable routine, an exaggerated sense of anticipation that builds as Swann crosses their garden in the dark until the narrator's grandfather finally exclaims, "Je reconnais la voix de Swann,"<sup>28</sup> resolving the mystery.

Swann makes a theatrical entrance, speaking from offstage before coming into view, that is an early indication of the narrator's interest in how speech evokes identity. It is a very simple, seemingly unremarkable scene, but it initiates a series of reflections on how the way people speak is tied to their identity that thread through the entire novel and help bind it together.

At the end of the novel, the narrator acknowledges this preoccupation with the formal aspects of others' speech, writing that, "ce que racontaient les gens m'échappait, car ce qui m'intéressait, c'était non ce qu'ils voulaient dire mais la manière dont ils le disaient."<sup>29</sup> Indeed, one of the hallmarks of his narration is that he tends to neglect the content of conversations and instead analyzes their speech mannerisms in an effort to

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<sup>28</sup> CS, 14.

<sup>29</sup> TR, 24.

situate them, both in terms of their individual identity and character and in terms of the human types or categories to which they belong.

The narrator often makes broad judgments about how others express themselves, remarking that their conversation is charming, eloquent, witty, simple, oblique, pretentious, etc. These evaluations of the formal aspects of others' speech regularly dominate his accounts of the verbal exchanges he participates in or observes, and occasionally they even stand in place of them. For example, instead of telling us what a chauffeur he lunched with said, he explains that the chauffeur expressed himself in an admirably simple and direct manner that made him pleasant company.<sup>30</sup> As in this example, his broad evaluation of others' speech mannerisms typically carries within it an evaluation of their intelligence and personality – if they speak well, they are smart, interesting and worth spending time with, but if they speak poorly, they are vain, tedious, and merit only disdain.

The narrator also makes remarkably specific observations about the particularities of others' speech mannerisms. He describes the pitch or nasality of others' voices; he points out the specificities of their intonation, lexicon and syntax; he even comments on minutiae such as how others make liaisons, which words they mistakenly think are masculine or feminine, or the slight idiosyncrasies of their pronunciation. Each of these small observations reveals something to him, whether it is how that person thinks, the nature of their relations with other people, or the broader social forces structuring their lives.

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<sup>30</sup> SG, 415.



To provide just one example of the narrator's hyperawareness of others' speech mannerisms to illustrate this point, I would like to consider a passage towards the end of the novel that is very banal, but which I have chosen precisely for that reason: it is unremarkable because there are so many others like it. In *Le Temps retrouvé*, the narrator notes that the director of the hotel his family patronizes in Balbec pronounces the word "envergure" as "enverjure,"<sup>31</sup> which indicates to him that:

- 1) Françoise, the most important and prominent servant of the narrator's family, has fallen under the influence of the hotel director, because she begins saying "enverjure" as well;
- 2) the hotel director in particular and "les gens du peuple" in general are learning new words like "envergure" that they do not know how to pronounce from reading news reports on the First World War;
- 3) Françoise and the hotel director are stubbornly proud of their humble class background and resentful of the narrator's air of authority and superiority, because they make a point of saying "enverjure" even after he tells them the correct pronunciation is "envergure."

All of this commentary on the hotel director, his relations with others, and broad social trends traversing France pours from the narrator because he notices an odd pronunciation of a single letter! Many of the passages in which he analyzes and critiques the social world around him begin, like this, as comments on how the people he encounters speak – he describes society through his interpretation of signs that mark differences and similarities between people.

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<sup>31</sup> TR, 149.

When the narrator describes the hotel director's personality and social relations, he presents them as facts that manifest themselves in his speech mannerisms. At other times in the narrative, however, he explains that it is easy to overlook or misinterpret the ways speech communicates their identity. In fact, he begins his commentary on others' speech with his family's relationship with Swann and a cautionary tale of how easily our preconceptions about a person can color our evaluation of their speech.

When Swann first enters the saga, he is on the other side of the garden gate of the narrator's family. They know the person approaching them is Swann even though they cannot see him, because they recognize his voice. For the narrator, the acoustic characteristics of a person's speech such as pitch and intonation – which together form their voice – are speech mannerisms: they are linguistic features acquired by habit that can be learned and altered. For example, he notes that both Albertine and Bloch change their voices by adopting a more nasal tone, Albertine only temporarily and Bloch on a more permanent basis when he transforms himself into Jacques du Rozier in *Le Temps retrouvé*. For the narrator, then, voice is somewhat malleable and can be manipulated to help disguise or transform who we are. Speech mannerisms can be used this way because they are so closely, and usually reflexively, linked to identity, in a way that is evident when the narrator's grandfather confirms that the family's visitor is Swann once he recognizes his voice.

However, Swann is not who the narrator's grandfather or the rest of his family think he is. They assume that Swann's position in society is the same as that of his bourgeois parents, or maybe a little lower since he lives in a less fashionable part of Paris. Mocking their rigid understanding of social status, the narrator explains that, "si l'on

avait voulu à toute force appliquer à Swann un coefficient social qui lui fût personnel, entre les autres fils d'agents de situation égale à celle de ses parents, ce coefficient eût été pour lui un peu inférieur.”<sup>32</sup> In French, a coefficient can refer to a person's rank within a numbered hierarchy. The narrator uses the term here to poke fun at his family's punctilious understanding of social status as a stable hierarchy in which each person can be assigned a fixed rank based on certain objective criteria, such as the quality of their furniture, where they live, and, most importantly, who their parents were.

The narrator's parents, grandparents, and aunt think Swann is just another bourgeois man, but he has another life about which they know nothing – he frequents the most exclusive salons of Paris and has many close friends from the upper echelons of the aristocracy. In the salons, social status is apportioned differently, according to factors such as intelligence and charm, which make it possible for a bourgeois man like Swann to be considered a more prized relation than an aristocrat.

The narrator and his family recognize Swann's voice as he approaches them from the other side of their garden but who do they really hear? The Swann they think they know, who is not particularly impressive and does not have aristocratic friends. Their sense of knowing and recognizing Swann leads them to project their own inaccurate assumptions about his social status onto him and his voice instead of actually listening to his speech and what it tells them about him. In all their conversations with Swann, they do not notice anything in his speech that indicates that he has achieved some upward social mobility, much less that he frequents princes and princesses. This is surprising when we reflect back on this passage after having read the novel, because the narrator

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<sup>32</sup> CG, 16.

compliments Swann's verbal elegance on many occasions as he gets to know him better. By the last volume of *A la recherche*, Swann is even the paragon of eloquence, the person against whom the narrator measures the linguistic refinement of others. In *Le Temps retrouvé*, for example, the narrator asks,

quel est l'homme de génie qui n'a pas adopté les irritantes façons de parler des artistes de sa bande, avant d'arriver, comme c'était venu pour Elstir et comme cela arrive rarement, à un bon goût supérieur ? Les lettres de Balzac, par exemple, ne sont-elles pas semées de tours vulgaires que Swann eût souffert mille morts d'employer?<sup>33</sup>

The narrator presents Swann as a model of linguistic refinement, the embodiment of superior taste, and notes that the way he speaks, often obliquely through metaphors, charms important social figures like the duchesse de Guermantes, and contributes to his success in high society.

It is striking then that the narrator's family does not notice Swann's verbal acumen, much less wonder what it might indicate about his social status. Instead, they find his conversation rather plain and dull and think he is a typical bourgeois like his parents. How is this possible? Commenting on his family's error, the narrator concludes that our preconceptions about others "se mêlent si bien de nuancer la sonorité de la voix comme si celle-ci n'était qu'une transparente enveloppe, que chaque fois que [...] nous entendons cette voix, ce sont ces notions que nous retrouvons, que nous écoutons."<sup>34</sup> For the narrator, preconceptions about other people can become so closely intertwined with their speech that, listening to them, we only hear the person we think we know – their

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<sup>33</sup> TR, 26.

<sup>34</sup> CS, 19.

voice itself is a “transparent envelope” (what a strange image!) that does not mediate or communicate identity, that is not even visible in itself and merely serves as a package into which we slip all the things we think we know about the speaker. As a result, when we recognize another person’s voice, what we are doing is recognizing the identity that we have created for that person and associated with their voice.

In contrast to his family, the narrator becomes wary of projecting a false identity onto another person, which causes him to make more observations about how others speak. Whereas the narrator’s family reflexively associates Swann’s voice with a preconception of who Swann is, the narrator describes others’ speech mannerisms in detail and interprets what they communicate about the speaker’s personality and social identity. He cites supporting evidence when describing others’ identities and shows the reader how he interprets that evidence.

The narrator’s parents and older relatives do not doubt their conception of Swann’s identity and thus do not seek to confirm it; the narrator regularly, obsessively, wonders if others are who they seem to be or who he thinks they are. His doubts are nourished by many revelations over the course of his life that overturn his assumptions about others’ identities, starting with the realization that Swann has far more impressive social relations than he and his family thought. The narrator’s interest in speech mannerisms grows out of these doubts: in his efforts to pinpoint others’ identities, especially the parts of their lives that might be hidden from him, he puts every aspect of their speech under a microscope in order to examine it for any indication that his impression of them might be wrong or incomplete. As opposed to his parents and extended family, who recognize Swann’s voice but barely pay attention to the specific

way in which he speaks and what it communicates about his social identity, the narrator describes and analyzes small features in others' speech as signs of their identity in an effort to verify or disprove his notion of who they are.

The narrator also provides the reader with his own interpretations of what others' speech tells us about who they are; he shows us how he reaches his conclusions about others' identities. His description of the hotel director's pronunciation of "envergure" is an example of this: he does not just describe the hotel director's personality, he describes how the hotel director speaks and then explains what that shows about who he is. In that scene, he presents his conclusions with a degree of certainty, but the narrator also regularly admits that he is just making informed guesses when trying to place others based on their speech mannerisms. This injects some uncertainty into the identity of the characters in the novel, many of whom are revealed to us in stages as the narrator learns new information about them that transforms his conception of them. But by expressing his hesitations, admitting his errors, and describing the evidence on which he bases his conclusions, the narrator also makes the process of describing others' identities more transparent.

In the social space of *A la recherche*, confusion about who people are and how they fit into society is endemic. The narrator's parents and extended family are far from the only characters in the novel who incorrectly evaluate others' social status. Unlike his family, the narrator pays attention to how people speak and tries to determine their social identity from specific observations about their speech mannerisms, but he still often struggles to accurately interpret the socioindexical value of speech mannerisms, or what they communicate about a person's social identity. A major factor contributing to this

confusion is that speech does not immediately and consistently communicate social status in the social space of *A la recherche*. There are two sides to this phenomenon. On the side of reception, Proust's characters arrive at differing interpretations of what others' speech mannerisms communicate about their social status. On the side of production, Proust's characters use different speech styles in their conversation, which sends conflicting signals about who they are. Both sides of the communication of social status reveal identity to be composite and volatile by generating wildly divergent impressions of who a single person is.

To break up and examine the narrator's comments on this complex phenomenon of how speech communicates or miscommunicates social identity, I will first discuss his observations on how information about social status in a person's speech mannerisms is received and interpreted. Then, in the next two chapters I will turn to his comments on why people use different speech styles. Over the course of the novel, the narrator expands the scope of his comments on speech to include other topics, such as the relationship between language and sexual and racial identity, which I will take up in the last chapter. Through his discussion of each of these topics, he engages in a broader series of reflections on how language indicates different aspects of identity and is used to demarcate and cross social boundaries. But he begins with Swann and the question of how speech communicates (or fails to communicate) social status. In order to move deeper into these reflections on speech, analyze them, and show how they shape and inform the narrative, I will, like the narrator, turn first to the topic of how social status is interpreted from speech mannerisms.

## II

### *Speech and the Refraction of Identity*

In the social space of *A la recherche*, there is not uniform agreement on which speech mannerisms carry and communicate higher social status. For example, the hotel director and Françoise reject the correct pronunciation of the word “envergure,” the ostensibly more prestigious pronunciation, because they have their own ideas about the social hierarchy and resent what they see as the narrator’s efforts to assert his superiority by correcting them. The narrator lives in a society in which there is neither agreement on how language communicates social status nor even agreement on which part of society gets to determine which speech mannerisms are “correct.” There is not even always agreement on which position in the social hierarchy is most prestigious! In this context of conflicting conceptions of society and of the role of language in stratifying social hierarchies, it is more important to him to understand how people determine social status than to identify prestige variants that not all parts of society might recognize or interpret in the same manner.

William Labov, the founder of modern sociolinguistics, argues that “social attitudes towards language are extremely uniform throughout a speech community.”<sup>35</sup> Labov justifies his claim with a review of Wallace Lambert’s research attempting to measure how people react to different speech styles using a matched guise test, or a test in which the study participants listen to recordings of different people speaking and evaluate them according to different criteria, such as whether they would be suitable candidates for a given job. Labov also bases his claim on his own studies of how people

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<sup>35</sup> Labov, 248.



produce speech, which show broad agreement on which speech mannerisms are considered more or less prestigious. He concludes that, within a linguistic community, people of all social backgrounds use certain prestige variants (speech mannerisms that carry prestige), more frequently in more formal settings. This means that, although people from different social backgrounds might not produce the prestige variant with the same consistency or even be able to identify it as a speech mannerism that conveys a higher social status, their linguistic behavior demonstrates a uniform, unconscious agreement about which speech mannerisms are the prestige variants. Combining the results of these studies on the reception and production of speech, he concludes that, “the correlate of regular stratification of a sociolinguistic variable in behavior is uniform agreement in subjective reactions towards that variable.”<sup>36</sup>

Proust’s narrator, however, lives in a social space in which there are multiple groups with different ways of evaluating speech and prestige – they do not have the same subjective reactions to a sociolinguistic variable. All but a few of the characters in the novel speak French as their first language, but within this large linguistic category of Francophones, there are obviously many different styles of speech that rub up against one another, overlap, and occasionally come into conflict. A prestige variant recognized by one group of speakers, such as the narrator’s pronunciation of “envergure,” might not be recognized by another. Do these different groups of Francophones belong to the same linguistic community, one that is riven with divisions and disagreements, or do they belong to different linguistic communities? To answer this question, we would have to establish a definition of linguistic community, which is necessarily a fraught and

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<sup>36</sup> Labov, 249.

contentious task as it entails drawing lines of inclusion and exclusion. Without imposing a single understanding of what it means to belong to a linguistic community, the narrator of *A la recherche* describes how different individuals, representing different milieus, evaluate speech and what it indicates about the speaker's social identity. These different methods of evaluating the socioindexical function of speech fit into different understandings of society and how it is organized that interact and conflict with one another – each milieu in the novel has a different conception of how speech communicates prestige that is informed by its own particular vision of how society is organized.

For example: the narrator's family barely pays attention to speech and thinks social status is largely inherited; Françoise and the hotel director view speech as a site of social conflict, where efforts of one group to assert dominance over another by imposing certain variants must be stubbornly resisted; and, the socialites that frequent the salons value a particular way of speaking that displays refinement as a sign of social status. These different groups do not have differing ideas about which speech variants are the most prestigious so much as entirely different conceptions of language, how it relates to social status, and how society is (or should be) structured. As a result, when members of these different groups interact, they often misunderstand each others' strategies of distinction and arrive at radically different interpretations of a single individual's social status.

For the narrator, differing notions of how to determine social status cause identity to fragment as it is communicated through speech. In his comments on Swann, the narrator takes a strongly perspectivist stance that “notre identité sociale est la création de

la pensée d'autrui."<sup>37</sup> How we are perceived, how our social status is interpreted by others, determines our social identity. As a result, it is not so much that the narrator's family is wrong in their estimation of Swann's "coefficient social" as that another Swann exists in the minds of the Parisian elite:

Sans doute le Swann que connurent à la même époque tant de clubmen était bien différent de celui que créait ma grande-tante, quand le soir, dans le petit jardin de Combray, après qu'avaient retenti les deux coups hésitants de la clochette, elle injectait et vivifiait de tout ce qu'elle savait sur la famille Swann, l'obscur et incertain personnage qui se détachait, suivi de ma grand-mère, sur un fond de ténèbres, et qu'on reconnaissait à la voix.<sup>38</sup>

Swann multiplies into two distinct people, because he is viewed differently in different milieus – who he is changes according to whom he is with. And these different evaluations of who he is are driven by different methods of determining social status that manifest themselves as different attitudes towards his speech: the narrator's family are largely indifferent to how Swann expresses himself and imbue his voice with all the information they know about his family and upbringing, but the socialites in the salons admire his linguistic refinement and, in so doing, confer a social status upon him that is out of keeping with his birth and usually reserved for only the most artistically, intellectually, or politically successful members of the bourgeoisie.

When the narrator's family learns that Swann has a brilliant social life, their estimation of him abruptly changes, but the Swann the narrator knew as a child and the Swann of the salons are so different that they cannot be reconciled and Swann splits into

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<sup>37</sup> CS, 19.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 18.

two distinct figures in the narrator's memory. He explains that the bourgeois Swann he thought he knew,

était devenu un être complet et vivant, et que j'ai l'impression de quitter une personne pour aller vers une autre qui en est distincte, quand, dans ma mémoire, du Swann que j'ai connu plus tard avec exactitude je passe à ce premier Swann — à ce premier Swann dans lequel je retrouve les erreurs charmantes de ma jeunesse.<sup>39</sup>

The Swann that the narrator's family creates and the Swann that frequents elegant salons do not have symmetrical value: clearly the narrator's family's notion of their friend is incomplete and the narrator gets to know Swann "avec exactitude" later in life, but the second Swann does not erase the first so much as supplant it and relegate it to the realm of memory.

In this passage, the narrator describes his mistaken impression of Swann's social status as reminding him of "les erreurs charmantes de ma jeunesse." Occasionally the narrator is disturbed or frustrated by the realization that one of his acquaintances has a hidden life about which he knew nothing, most notably when he begins to suspect that his lover, Albertine, has female lovers as well. But in most cases, the narrator describes the experience of these revelations as exciting and amusing. When he discovers that Mme de Villeparisis, whom he also first encountered in Combray, comes from a far more prestigious aristocratic family than he had thought, the narrator explains that his estimation of her,

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<sup>39</sup> CS, 19.

subissait brusquement une de ces hausses fantastiques, parallèles aux dépréciations non moins imprévues d'autres objets que nous possédons, lesquelles — les unes comme les autres — introduisent dans notre adolescence et dans les parties de notre vie où persiste un peu de notre adolescence, des changements aussi nombreux que les métamorphoses d'Ovide.<sup>40</sup>

When the social status of a character changes so rapidly, it gives the narrator some experience of the sort of radical transformations that occur in myths or fairy tales. He views these revelations through his literary experiences as fantastical events he associates with the wonder of youth, not as frustrating or embarrassing encounters with his own ignorance.

For the narrator, differing interpretations of social status allow individuals to occupy multiple social positions, which he conveys to the reader in a collision of perspectives akin to cubist portraiture. Even when a new “correct” estimation of social status displaces an older one, the obsolete impression of the person lingers on as a memory, causing identities to multiply and accumulate. The effect is disorienting, but also amusing and nostalgic; Swann's identity fragments into something that is more complicated and multifaceted, but that also playfully incorporates the naïve perspective of the narrator's youth.

Swann's identity refracts and then fragments because “notre identité sociale est la création de la pensée d'autrui” but each person does not arrive at the same conclusions about who we are, so we can have multiple social identities depending on whom one asks. Later in the novel, the narrator develops the idea that we take on different identities, actually become different people, according to the milieu in which we find ourselves. He

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<sup>40</sup> O, 322.

explains that, “Un même être, pris à des moments successifs de sa vie, baigne à différents degrés de l’échelle sociale dans des milieux qui ne sont pas forcément de plus en plus élevés.”<sup>41</sup> When he uses the word “milieu,” we might read this in the more typical sense of a social milieu, but it also has the connotation of a physical medium, which, like water or air, alters the nature of things that pass through it and how they are perceived.

According to the narrator, no one is socially stationary, and even the slightest movement causes social identity to refract and multiply according to the physics of each milieu:

“Chaque personne en visite chez une autre devenait différente.”<sup>42</sup>

The narrator is himself conscious of the fact that others view him differently depending on their social position. When he goes to the theater, he finds himself staring at the duchesse de Guermantes, mesmerized like everyone else by her elegance, when he notices that she is actually looking at him. He writes, “en vertu des *lois de la réfraction* vint sans doute se peindre dans le courant impassible des deux yeux bleus la forme confuse du protozoaire dépourvu d’existence individuelle que j’étais.”<sup>43</sup> The narrator is aware that the prestigious social position from which the duchesse looks down (literally and figuratively) at him determines who he is to her, and that he must appear insignificant from her perspective.

It is the same “laws of refraction” that cause the narrator’s family to interpret Swann’s voice as the voice of a bourgeois man who has more or less the same “coefficient social” as his parents. In his first foray into sociolinguistics, Mikhail Bakhtin argues that,

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<sup>41</sup> O, 85.

<sup>42</sup> SG, 146.

<sup>43</sup> CG, 51. My emphasis.

L'être reflété dans le signe, ne fait pas que s'y refléter, il s'y *réfracte* également.

Qu'est-ce qui détermine cette réfraction de l'être dans le signe idéologique ?

L'affrontement d'intérêts sociaux contradictoires dans les limites d'une seule et même communauté sémiotique, c'est-à-dire la *lutte des classes*.<sup>44</sup>

Although Proust was not aware of Bakhtin's work and would not have used the vocabulary of Marxism, his presentation of the relationship between language and social status resembles that of Bakhtin in this passage quite closely. For both, language does not have a strict, indexical relationship with social status such that speech mannerisms reliably communicate the speaker's social status in the same way to everyone. Instead, each person's social position (and the worldview that goes with it) causes them to interpret the sociolinguistic information communicated through speech mannerisms differently, with the result that social identity refracts and multiplies.

Of course, the characters in the novel do not base their estimations of others' social status wholly (or even partially in the case of the narrator's bourgeois family) on their evaluation of speech mannerisms. Comportment, dress, social relations, birth and many other factors all affect how an individual's social status is interpreted within the novel. However, the different milieus' methods of evaluating social status manifest themselves in different attitudes towards speech such that the refraction of social identity within a social milieu is particularly apparent in how individuals' speech mannerisms are evaluated within that milieu.

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<sup>44</sup> Bakhtine and Volochinov, 43.

### III

#### *The Perception of Speech and the Reorganization of Society*

For the narrator of *A la recherche*, each milieu interprets what speech mannerisms communicate about social identity differently based on their own implicit theory of language and the organization of society. The individual refracts and splits, because they are different things to different people. These differing interpretations of social identity affect in turn how people behave towards one another and actually reorganize society in a way that can recreate the social hierarchy *as it is perceived*.

The ability to speak well is one of the traits most strongly associated with upward social mobility in the novel, largely because it is prized by the Guermantes. Their salon is the most important site of social promotion in the novel, because its makeup is not exclusively determined by caste. The narrator explains,

Si le coefficient nécessaire d'intelligence et de charme allait en s'abaissant au fur et à mesure que s'élevait le rang de la personne qui désirait être invitée chez la duchesse de Guermantes, jusqu'à approcher de zéro quand il s'agissait des principales têtes couronnées, en revanche plus on descendait au-dessous de ce niveau royal, plus le coefficient s'élevait.<sup>45</sup>

Although birth clearly continues to play a role in determining who gains admission to the Guermantes's salon, it is one of the only milieus explored by the narrator where intelligence can lead to social mobility and success.

The specific type of intelligence that is most valued in the salons is linguistic. The duchesse de Guermantes is the supreme arbiter of taste for much of the novel and,

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<sup>45</sup> CG, 438.



according to the narrator, “Ce que la duchesse plaçait au-dessus de tout, ce n’était pas l’intelligence, c’était — forme supérieure selon elle, plus rare, plus exquise, de l’intelligence élevée jusqu’à une variété verbale de talent — l’esprit.”<sup>46</sup> “Esprit” here means a combination of wit, tact, and eloquence. It is a “verbal talent,” and specifically the ability to manipulate linguistic forms to find the right way of expressing a thought in a specific situation. The capacity to enrich a conversation through displays of wit and eloquence is one of the main criteria for gaining admittance to the Guermantes’ salon, and the basis on which bourgeois men like Swann are able to join a predominantly aristocratic milieu.

There are two major caveats to this relative openness to newcomers, however. First, the Guermantes typically only value intelligence (and by extension “esprit”) in men. The quality the Guermantes seek out in women is charm, which is even more elusive and difficult to define than intelligence. Unsurprisingly, the Guermantes admit even fewer women to their salon who are not high-born aristocrats than men. The second caveat to the Guermantes’s inclusion of intelligent men to their salon is that, according to the narrator, they have a talent for subtly confusing intelligence with social potential. He explains that the duchesse,

quand elle disait d’une femme : il paraît qu’elle est « charmante », ou d’un homme qu’il était tout ce qu’il y a de plus intelligent, elle ne croyait pas avoir d’autres raisons de consentir à les recevoir que ce charme ou cette intelligence, le génie des Guermantes n’intervenant pas à cette dernière minute : plus profond, situé à l’entrée obscure de la région où les Guermantes jugeaient, ce génie

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<sup>46</sup> CG, 447.

vigilant empêchait les Guermantes de trouver l'homme intelligent ou de trouver la femme charmante s'ils n'avaient pas de valeur mondaine, actuelle ou future.<sup>47</sup>

In the Guermantes' salon, intelligence can lead to social success, but in order for the duchesse to recognize someone's intelligence, they must have the potential to be socially successful. It is not clear whether, when evaluating others, she is primarily judging their intelligence (which, again, for her is primarily manifested as a verbal talent, "esprit") or their social potential, because the two are so closely fused with one another in her mind. What she expresses as an intellectual judgment carries within it an implied social judgment, which creates some ambiguity as to whether her intellectual judgment is motivated by her social judgment or vice versa.

The duchesse is in a peculiar position. So many people look up to and respect her that, when she expresses admiration for someone, others echo her judgment because they have become accustomed to accepting her authority on such matters. She does not just confuse intelligence with "valeur mondaine," she actively gives people "valeur mondaine" by deeming them intelligent enough to attend her social events.

Swann's social mobility provides an example of how "le génie des Guermantes" functions. According to the narrator, Swann's eloquence manifests itself as a very subtle, refined simplicity. He avoids speaking in a way that might seem pretentious and often expresses his thoughts obliquely through metaphors that not everyone catches. As a result, not everyone appreciates his verbal talent. In Combray, the narrator's family does not note anything impressive in the way that Swann speaks and finds his conversation rather dull – his eloquence does not exist for them and they do not think he has any particular

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<sup>47</sup> CG, 437.

“valeur mondaine.” The duchesse de Guermantes, on the other hand, understands Swann’s allusions and metaphors and considers them charming, and regularly invites him to her salon. There, many of the Guermantes’ acquaintances still cannot appreciate Swann’s linguistic refinement. The narrator remarks that, “il avait gardé des habitudes galantes de langage, de dire des choses délicates que beaucoup de gens du monde ne comprenaient pas.”<sup>48</sup> However, the duchesse does understand and admire Swann and others respect her judgment. By recognizing the sophistication of Swann’s conversation, she helps to create the conditions for him to be socially successful.

The narrator also admires Swann’s way of speaking and presents the duchesse’s judgment of Swann’s eloquence as correct. However, that linguistic talent would not be part of Swann’s social identity were it not for the few people, like the narrator, who recognize it. The Guermantes show the full extent to which “notre identité sociale est la création de la pensée d’autrui”<sup>49</sup> by bringing Swann into a different milieu and actively contributing to a change in his social identity that brings it into alignment with how they perceive him.

The narrator is skeptical of how the duchesse only proclaims individuals to be intelligent if they have some social potential, but he also largely evaluates others’ intelligence based on their ability to speak well, and the people whose speech mannerisms he admires are similarly either already socially successful like the aristocrats in the Guermantes’ salon or achieve upward social mobility over the course of the novel. Most notably, Jupien, whose speech mannerisms impress both the narrator and his grandmother early in the novel, is first introduced as a tailor but becomes “un employé

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<sup>48</sup> CS, 335.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 19.

dans un ministère”<sup>50</sup> and eventually the baron de Charlus’s personal secretary. His niece even goes on to marry into an aristocratic family.

The counterpart to the social success of the characters in *A la recherche* perceived as intelligent because they speak well is the social stagnation of the characters whose speech mannerisms convey ignorance. For example, the narrator criticizes the duc de Guermantes’s speech mannerisms as being boorish and bourgeois, and the duc goes on to lose two elections to become president of the prestigious Jockey Club, a significant social humiliation for him. The narrator also mocks the speech mannerisms of figures like the hotel director, Françoise, and the elevator operator in Balbec and repeatedly points out how their efforts to sound more distinguished are undercut by their many linguistic errors. To give but one example of their clumsiness, both Françoise and the elevator operator say “je suis été” instead of “j’ai été” within a few pages of one another.<sup>51</sup> Their linguistic ineptitude is a social ineptitude, an inability to understand what others want to hear and speak accordingly that coincides with their professional and social stagnation.

Annoyed with Françoise one day, the narrator tells her, “vous avez mille qualités, mais vous en êtes au même point que le jour où vous êtes arrivée à Paris, aussi bien pour vous connaître en choses de toilette que pour bien prononcer les mots et ne pas faire de cuirs.”<sup>52</sup> For him, her frequent linguistic errors demonstrate that she has failed to adapt to the norms of Parisian society in the same way as her outmoded dress. Her speech mannerisms, like her fashion choices, convey a lack of awareness of social norms. They

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<sup>50</sup> CG, 14.

<sup>51</sup> SG, 183 and 189.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 135,

demonstrate that she has either no desire or no ability, in “le théâtre du monde,”<sup>53</sup> to give the audience what they want, which prevents her from improving her station in society.

In *A la recherche*, characters perceived as eloquent experience upward social mobility and characters perceived as linguistically clumsy fail to maintain or improve their social status. Characters like the duc de Guermantes and Jupien who, according to the narrator, speak more or less eloquently than someone of their station usually does undergo a social transformation that realigns their social status with the perception of their intelligence as it is manifested in their speech mannerisms. Speaking well and being socially successful are not coterminous – there are characters who speak well who do not have high social status and people with high social status who do not speak well. But speaking well and being socially successful have an elastic bond that pulls people who speak in a way that is interpreted as above or below their station slowly towards a social status that is more in line with how their speech mannerisms are perceived. These transformations retroactively validate the narrator’s observations on how his acquaintances speak by showing that others concurred with his judgment and slowly, perhaps unconsciously, reorganized society according to how they perceived it.

#### IV

##### *Error and Linguistic Change*

After telling Françoise “vous en êtes au même point que le jour où vous êtes arrivée à Paris, aussi bien pour vous connaître en choses de toilette que pour bien

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<sup>53</sup> SG, 255.

prononcer les mots et ne pas faire de cuirs,”<sup>54</sup> the narrator immediately expresses regret (to the reader, not to her) and explains,

...ce reproche était particulièrement stupide, car ces mots français que nous sommes si fiers de prononcer exactement ne sont eux-mêmes que des « cuirs » faits par des bouches gauloises qui prononçaient de travers le latin ou le saxon, notre langue n’étant que la prononciation défectueuse de quelques autres. Le génie linguistique à l’état vivant, l’avenir et le passé du français, voilà ce qui eût dû m’intéresser dans les fautes de François. L’« estoppeuse » pour la « stoppeuse » n’était-il pas aussi curieux que ces animaux survivants des époques lointaines, comme la baleine ou la girafe, et qui nous montrent les états que la vie animale a traversés ?<sup>55</sup>

This comment echoes some of the key claims of prominent French linguists in turn of the century France. To a contemporary reader, it might seem like the narrator is making a glib reference to the obvious fact that French grew out of Latin, but if we look more closely at the passage, the narrator says something more radical, namely that French *is* Latin (and other languages) spoken badly. This specific formulation echoes Gaston Paris’s very influential lecture, “Les parlers de France,” delivered in 1888 to “La Réunion des sociétés savants.” In it, Paris reiterates some of the conclusions of his research, the most important of which is that,

Nous parlons latin, ai-je dit. Il ne faut plus en effet répéter, comme on le fait trop souvent, que les langues romanes ‘viennent’ du latin, qu’elles sont les ‘filles’ dont la langue latine est la ‘mère’. Il n’y a pas

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<sup>54</sup> SG, 135,

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 135.

de langues mères et de langues filles. Le langage, sous l'empire d'impulsions encore mal connues, les unes d'ordre physiologique, les autres d'ordre psychologique, va sans cesse en se modifiant.<sup>56</sup>

For Paris, it is impossible to say exactly when the Latin spoken in what is now France ceased to be Latin and became French, because there was a slow gradation of different styles of speech from Latin to French. Languages evolve slowly through many variations, and labels like French and Latin are misleading because they obscure the many transient stages between them. With this in mind, Paris makes the very polemical claim that French is still actually just a variant of Latin.

Paris's simple argument has tremendous political and social implications. First, as he says in the lecture, from his perspective, French is “une langue étrangère,”<sup>57</sup> not a native language developed on French soil by the Gaulois that borrowed from other languages, but rather a language adopted from a foreign civilization and its administration. Second, it implies that contemporary French is not a stable language, but rather a transitional variant in a long process of linguistic evolution that will continue. Paris's argument delegitimises the claims to linguistic authority of schoolteachers, editors, journalists, compilers of dictionaries, writers, and others who have a professional interest in presenting the “correct” variant of French that they speak as stable and superior.

Paris was an academic who had a tremendous impact on the study of language in France; his ideas were hotly debated and percolated through French society. He studied in Germany with the comparativist Friedrich Diez and brought his innovative approach to France, where it would gradually become dominant within linguistics departments thanks

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<sup>56</sup> Paris, 165.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 166.

largely to Paris's efforts as professor in the Collège de France and later as a member of the Académie française. Proust had a strong interest in philology and linguistics, disciplines personified in the novel by Brichot, a professor at the Sorbonne with an impressive knowledge of etymologies, and he would have been exposed to Paris's conclusions, whether directly or indirectly, by even a cursory examination of the field.

In fact, the narrator goes a bit further than Gaston Paris by arguing not just that French is Latin, but that it is Latin spoken *poorly*. This point, that French evolved out of other languages by way of errors, echoes more closely the influential work of Gaston Paris's student, Arsène Darmesteter, who became a professor at the Sorbonne and an important scholar in his own right. In *La vie des mots*, Darmesteter argues that,

Le suffrage universel n'a pas toujours existé en politique; il a existé de tout temps en matière de langue; là le peuple est tout-puissant, et il est infallible, parce que ses erreurs, tôt ou tard, font loi. Le langage, en effet, est une création naturelle et non une construction rationnelle et logique. Les hommes, pour se communiquer leurs idées, recourent d'instinct à un ensemble, à un système de signes naturels qui se modifient sans cesse, dans le temps et dans l'espace, sous l'action de lois physiologiques et de lois psychologiques ; mais du moment que la plus grande partie des hommes se comprennent à l'aide de ce système, celui-ci a rendu les services qu'on est en droit de lui demander. Voilà pourquoi même les erreurs de logique, les anomalies, du moment qu'elles sont acceptées de tous, cessent d'être anomalies, et deviennent formes légitimes de la pensée.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Darmesteter, 117.



The similarity between the narrator's understanding of language and Darmesteter's is remarkable. The narrator shares Darmesteter's interest in errors as revelatory of broader social and linguistic trends and is aware that, in language, "correct" forms often give way to more prevalent "incorrect" forms, which makes his criticism of Françoise seem pedantic, conservative, and misinformed. In Darwin's theory of evolution, which the narrator seems to reference in his comment about how "l'estoppeuse" is like those animals that have survived from distant times and thus reveal the different stages life has passed through, the survival of certain variants results from arbitrary factors – there is no sense of progress or decline within evolution. Similarly in the new comparativist linguistics, there are only variants that are more or less dominant, but being dominant in a particular context does not mean a variant is better or more correct, or even that it will necessarily outlive other, more rare variants.

When the narrator stops to reflect, he realizes that Françoise's speech is not riddled with errors so much as variations that are not currently considered correct but that might have been in the past or may be in the future. He admits that Françoise might intuitively have a better sense of the trajectory of the French language than he does and presents her as the personification of the broad popular force driving linguistic change that is ultimately, as Darmesteter puts it, "infaillible."

I cite Paris and Darmesteter to show that the narrator is articulating ideas about language that had been in circulation for several decades by the time *A la recherche* was published. Of course, the fact that they were in circulation does not mean those ideas were uncontroversial. They remain controversial today and come up regularly in discussions about how to teach French in schools and who gets to decide what is

considered correct French. Although Proust's narrator initially criticizes Françoise for her bad French, he corrects himself and takes a position on the evolution of the French language which aligns him with the proponents of a more democratic, decentralized understanding of what constitutes correct speech that still has not received broader public and institutional acceptance outside of the discipline of linguistics. The narrator also, like Paris, maintains that French is not an authentic national language but rather a mispronunciation of foreign languages, a claim that seems almost designed to provoke a strong reaction from linguistic chauvinists.

What is exceptional about Proust's treatment of language, however, is that he extends the conclusion that language can evolve by way of error to the socioindexical function of language, or how language indicates social identity. As observed by the narrator, there is as much variation in the socioindexical function of language as in any other aspect of language. And, like semantic and phonetic variants considered to be errors, socioindexical mistakes (for example, interpreting or using a speech mannerism as if it conveys prestige when it does not) can spread and gain broader acceptance.

As an example of how the narrator observes errors in the socioindexical level of language, consider the following passage, in which the narrator recounts an exchange between two of the duchesse de Guermantes's aristocratic acquaintances:

« J'avoue que Taquin le Superbe me plaît infiniment comme rédaction »,  
concluait la princesse. En réalité, le mot de « rédaction » ne convenait nullement pour ce calembour, mais la princesse d'Épinay, qui avait la prétention d'avoir assimilé l'esprit des Guermantes, avait pris à Oriane [la duchesse de Guermantes] les expressions « rédigé, rédaction » et les employait sans

beaucoup de discernement. Or la princesse de Parme, qui n'aimait pas beaucoup Mme d'Épinay qu'elle trouvait laide, savait avare et croyait méchante, sur la foi des Courvoisier, reconnut ce mot de 'rédaction' qu'elle avait entendu prononcer par Mme de Guermantes et qu'elle n'eût pas su appliquer toute seule. Elle eut l'impression que c'était, en effet, la « rédaction » qui faisait le charme de Taquin le Superbe, et, sans oublier tout à fait son antipathie pour la dame laide et avare, elle ne put pas se défendre d'un tel sentiment d'admiration pour une femme qui possédait à ce point l'esprit des Guermantes, qu'elle voulut inviter la princesse d'Épinay à l'Opéra.<sup>59</sup>

In this passage, the narrator positions himself as a linguistic authority who understands the word “rédaction” and how it can be used. In his comments on Françoise’s linguistic errors, the narrator displays an understanding of language that is close to that of Paris and Darmesteter – he understands that linguistic variants considered as errors can become the new norm and expresses some regret for having mocked Françoise for her unusual speech mannerisms. However, his attitude towards deviations from linguistic conventions is not consistent. As in the scene with the two princesses, the narrator also regularly makes normative claims about proper linguistic usage and portrays deviations from linguistic conventions as signs of ignorance and pretention. He regularly invites us to laugh at the expense of characters who speak in a manner that betrays a poor understanding of linguistic norms. As Edward J. Hughes puts it, Proust’s understanding of language

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<sup>59</sup> CG, 451.

“remains often hierarchical and prescriptive, even if concessions are also made to the descriptive approach advanced by the new discipline of linguistics.”<sup>60</sup>

The narrator has a particular respect for Françoise and the way she speaks that manifests itself as some hesitation about how to react to her unusual speech mannerisms, but he does not extend the same consideration to other characters in the novel, particularly when he considers their speech mannerisms pretentious. Although the narrator does not explain it himself, there is an implicit assumption in these passages that Françoise’s mistakes are unintentional and thus somehow authentic, variants produced naturally by the forces controlling the evolution of the French language, but the princesse d’Épinay’s mistake is artificial, because it is part of an attempt to appear distinguished, and thus risible.

As I mentioned in my introduction, the narrator tells us in *Le Temps retrouvé* that how people speak interests him both because it reveals their “ridicules” and because it is “le point qui était commun à un être et à un autre.”<sup>61</sup> The narrator’s account of the two princesses’ exchange shows how his investigation of others’ speech reveals to him both how they are ridiculous and how language creates associations between people: by analyzing the princesses’ conversation, he shows us how ignorant and vain they are while simultaneously depicting how two people can develop a shared notion of a speech mannerism that is at odds with prevailing linguistic norms.

The princesses belong to the Guermantes’ milieu, in which verbal talent, intelligence, and social status are closely intertwined. They exemplify how aristocrats with particularly impressive titles do not have to display the same intellectual capabilities

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<sup>60</sup> Hughes, 187.

<sup>61</sup> TR, 24.

to gain admittance to the Guermantes' salon as people from less august families, and thus that intelligence is not the only factor the Guermantes and their acquaintances consider when evaluating others' social status. However, the princesses come from similar family backgrounds and still attempt to engage in displays of intellectual refinement to improve their own social status, especially relative to people with similar titles.

Because the duchesse de Guermantes is widely admired as an intellectual and social authority in their milieu, the ability to imitate her judgments and style carries prestige in this context. Mme d'Épinay has heard the duchesse use the word "rédaction" and brought it into her own vocabulary, but incorrectly. She uses "rédaction" as a word that conveys prestige because it is associated with the duchesse – to try and create a linguistic "point commun" between herself and the salon's host, but since she uses it incorrectly, instead of indicating a close intellectual and social bond with the duchesse, Mme d'Épinay reveals how far she falls short of the duchesse's refinement. For the narrator, instead of conferring prestige on her, the way she uses the word "rédaction" makes her look foolish and pretentious.

However, there is a discrepancy in how he perceives the socioindexical value of Mme d'Épinay's use of the word "rédaction" and how it is received by the princesse de Parme. The fact that Mme d'Épinay does not use the word "rédaction" in the accepted manner does not affect the princesse de Parme's image of her negatively, because the princesse de Parme does not know how to correctly use the word either and only hears it as a word from a higher register affiliated with the "esprit des Guermantes." Mme d'Épinay's clumsy use of the word "rédaction" is all that is needed to impress her interlocutor, even though the princesse de Parme is predisposed to have a viciously

negative opinion of her. The socioindexical value of the princesse d'Épinay's speech mannerisms refracts in the princesse de Parme's mind, making the princesse d'Épinay seem more intelligent and worthy of admiration than she does to the narrator.

The princesse de Parme's mistake causes Mme d'Épinay's use of the word "rédaction" to gain broader acceptance: at the end of the exchange, two people think this use of the word is correct and conveys prestige. The princesse de Parme's mistake also has a social effect in that it changes how she wants to behave towards the princesse d'Épinay (she wants to invite her to the opera). Because the mistake concerns the socioindexical value of the word – she interprets the princesse d'Épinay's use of the word "rédaction" as conveying prestige when it does not – it affects both her conception of language and of the princesse d'Épinay's social identity at the same time.

The narrator argues that "notre identité sociale est la création de la pensée d'autrui" and that who we are changes depending on whom we are with and what they think of us, but this does not mean that he considers each perspective of a person's social identity as equally valid. He occasionally presents his own conception of another person as authoritative and ridicules people who do not share it: the princesse de Parme is presented as at least as stupid as the princesse d'Épinay for mistakenly reaching the conclusion that her interlocutor merits admiration. The narrator makes a normative claim about how the word "rédaction" should be used that carries with it a strongly implied normative claim about how the socioindexical value of its misuse should be interpreted.

The narrator often presents his own understanding of society as correct and ridicules people with a different understanding of language and society, but he is also aware that language and society are affected by everyone's perception and explains

others' perspectives. Indeed, his efforts to consider others' perspectives make his own appear more comprehensive and authoritative – he understands how the princesse de Parme interprets the princesse d'Épinay's use of the word “rédaction,” but she does not understand how he does. This makes his own perspective appear more informed and considered.

The narrator positions himself as a linguistic authority, but in the process of mocking others' use and interpretation of speech mannerisms, he demonstrates that others do not interpret the socioindexical value of speech mannerisms in the same manner as him and shows how their different interpretations affect linguistic usage and social relations. While pointing out how ridiculous the two princesses are, the narrator demonstrates how errors concerning the socioindexical value of a speech mannerism can spread and have an actual impact on social relations and on language.

## V

### *Pleasure and the Dramatic Reversal of Social Identity*

According to Deleuze, the social world of *A la recherche* is characterized by three attributes: he writes, “vide, bêtise, oubli, c'est la trinité du groupe mondain.”<sup>62</sup> As a result, it is important for the narrator to observe ignorant and pretentious people to understand how their foolishness and vanity affect the society around them. Over the course of the novel, the narrator chronicles a generalized social drift as people's ignorance, error, and forgetfulness contribute to the reorganization of society: as new people enter the salons,

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<sup>62</sup> Deleuze, 101.

and as older *habitués*' memories fade, individuals' social background and trajectories become obscured and they take on new social identities.

The three attributes that Deleuze argues characterize *mondanité* in *A la recherche* – “vide, bêtise, oubli” – are very similar to the forces that the narrator, echoing the views of turn of the century comparativist linguists, argues drive the evolution of language in his comments on Françoise's pronunciation of “estoppeuse:” people make mistakes that are gradually forgotten such that “ces mots français que nous sommes si fiers de prononcer exactement ne sont eux-mêmes que des « cuirs » faits par des bouches gauloises.”<sup>63</sup> It is not just that society evolves *like* language as its structures are gradually deformed by people's flawed and incomplete conception of them, but rather that the role of language in mediating social identity in *A la recherche* is so critical that society evolves *with* language, according to the same rules and patterns: what speech mannerisms communicate about a person's social identity is misinterpreted, which affects both how the speaker is viewed and the socioindexical value of the speech mannerisms they use at the same time.

The narrator also has the same attitude towards changes in the organization of society as he does to the evolution of language. Especially in *Le Temps retrouvé*, he presents himself as an authority who understands each individual's social trajectory and social status, but he is also mildly bemused by others' less informed or erroneous conception of his acquaintances. He mocks people's misconceptions while describing how they contribute to the reorganization of society.

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<sup>63</sup> Deleuze, 135.



From the outset of the novel, with the narrator's explanation of Swann's social life, there is enough confusion and ignorance surrounding questions of identity and social status to cause dramatically different estimations of individuals' relative positions in society. By the end of the novel the narrator has observed many times that his own assumptions about others' social status were wrong and has witnessed many of his acquaintances go through dramatic reversals of fortune. When he makes his last forays into the salons, the distinction between truth and error in matters of social status has become almost trivial, a mere curiosity for the narrator, because his discoveries have so frequently turned out to be incomplete or misleading – or have been simply rendered irrelevant by the slow evolution of a society that does not know or care about the intricacies of each person's social trajectory.

The forgetting involved in the reorganization of society is also similar to the forgetting that occurs in the evolution of language as described by the narrator in his comments on Françoise's unusual speech mannerisms in that obsolete forms are displaced, but never fully erased. They continue to resurface on occasion in strange formulations, like when Françoise says "estoppeuse" instead of "stoppeuse," and what is considered correct is more a matter of shifting convention than of inalterable truth.

Barthes identifies the dramatic reversals of characters' social status as one of the chief innovations of Proust. In "Une idée de Recherche," he claims that Proust "décrit avec exactitude la grammaire de la promotion, de la mobilité des classes"<sup>64</sup> and argues that, in his novel, "la mondanité peut se définir par une forme: le renversement."<sup>65</sup> Barthes mentions another example of a reversal of assumptions about a person's social

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<sup>64</sup> Barthes, "Une idée de recherche," 37.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

status in the novel that I have not yet mentioned: the narrator sees a woman on the train to Balbec and assumes that she is “une tenancière de bordel;” the narrator sees her again in the train on another occasion, but this time he is with his friends, who inform him that she is actually the princesse Sherbatoff, “la perle du salon Verdurin.”

Although the narrator learns from his friends that his initial estimation of her social status was way off, his first impression of the princesse is never completely effaced. From this example, Barthes argues that Proust depicts a new social syntax according to which individuals can occupy multiple social positions. He writes,

A la syntaxe classique, qui nous dirait que la princesse Sherbatoff *n'est qu'*une tenancière de maison publique, Proust substitue une syntaxe concomitante: la princesse *est aussi* une maîtresse de bordel; nouvelle syntaxe qu'il faudrait appeler métaphorique, parce que la métaphore, contrairement à ce que la rhétorique a longtemps pensé, est un travail de langage privé de toute vectorisation: elle ne va d'un terme à un autre que circulairement.<sup>66</sup>

Barthes's argument, that Proust's characters accumulate different identities over the course of the novel because the different interpretations of their social status are never fully effaced, is perhaps even more applicable to the narrator's comments on his family's misconceptions about Swann, who comes to occupy two distinct positions in the narrator's memory. These different interpretations of social status persist in the same way as linguistic variants, residing somewhere deep within memory and occasionally surging forth into the present as a reminder of past states.

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<sup>66</sup> Barthes, 38.

In *A la recherche*, social status disintegrates into an agglomeration of often conflicting practices of interpretation, each with a degree of validity and real import, but incomplete when considered in isolation. In this context, the narrator explains to us what he considers the correct estimation of individuals' social status and how it changes, but almost as an academic pursuit, like etymology, that might reveal to us how its object evolves but has little impact on that evolution. Ignorance and forgetting obscure questions of legitimacy, truth, and authenticity to such an extent that language and social status can evolve, together, by way of error.

Of course, not all linguistic variants and interpretations of social identity gain broader acceptance, even if they all have some validity and reveal to us something about how language and society function and evolve. Françoise keeps saying "estoppeuse," but her variant of the word does not catch on during the novel. Similarly, the Swann created by the narrator's family exists in the Combray of his memory, but more people know the worldly Swann that frequents salons and converses with princes. In the metaphorical social syntax described by Barthes, one of the identities always has dominance. The other cannot be fully suppressed and might resurface on occasion, but it can only take hold in the present if it somehow gains broader social acceptance.

For the most part, the narrator enjoys how the confusion around social status splits individual's identities. As I explained above, the narrator looks back fondly on the errors of his youth and describes the reversal of his notions of others' identities as allowing him to experience the world as an almost magical place in which the radical transformations of identity that occur in myths are possible. Barthes also argues that the narrator enjoys the upending of his assumptions about others' identities:

Le renversement des apparences — ne disons plus de l'apparence en vérité — procure toujours au Narrateur un étonnement délicieux : essence de surprise — on y reviendra —, et non essence de vérité, véritable jubilation, si entière, si pure, si triomphante, comme le prouve la réussite de l'énonciation, que ce mode d'inversion ne peut visiblement relever que d'une érotique (du discours), comme si le tracé du renversement est le moment même où Proust jouit d'écrire.<sup>67</sup>

For Barthes, the narrator takes pleasure in dramatic revelations and transformations that upend social hierarchies and create permanent associations between different social positions. In other modernist texts in which sociosemiotic confusion plays an important role, for example Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, the misinterpretation of a person's social status is often presented as part of a broader, dangerous social disorder that threatens the protagonists' own place in society and generates disorientation and anxiety. For Proust's narrator, however, there is no sense that he considers his own social position as threatened, or the experience of disorientation resulting from the difficulty of evaluating others' social status as unpleasant.

In fact, he even enjoys it when others misinterpret his own social status. In *Le Côté de Guermantes*, someone is excited to speak with him because they think he met their cousin, Mme de Chaussegros, in Scotland and became her close friend. The narrator does not know a Mme de Chaussegros, nor has he ever been to Scotland, but he finds the confusion amusing and explains that he enjoys these “erreurs multiplicatrices et aimables,” because, “pour ceux qui ne jouent pas la comédie, l'ennui de vivre toujours dans le même

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<sup>67</sup> Barthes, “Une idée de recherche,” 36.

personnage est dissipé un instant, comme si l'on montait sur les planches, quand une autre personne se fait de vous une idée fausse.”<sup>68</sup> He goes on to note that others’ misinterpretations of our social identity can be mildly unpleasant when unflattering, but by and large, he describes these “erreurs multiplicatrices” as exciting, a distraction from the monotony of being stuck in one’s own skin – he compares the pleasure he gets from being mistaken for someone else to the pleasure of acting and performing a different identity in theater, which responds to a deep-rooted desire to become someone else.

The narrator’s interest in understanding social status, especially the misinterpretation of social status, is driven by his interest in literature: in these moments of confusion, he experiences the potential of fiction, the thrill of taking on multiple identities, and the extent to which illusion can pass for and even become reality.

Proust’s characters, including the protagonist himself, are often presented with situations in which social confusion makes it possible for them to be someone else, to temporarily take on a fictional identity. Some of Proust’s characters, as we will see in later chapters, engage in concerted efforts to maintain these fictions, with differing degrees of success. But, as is evident in the case of Swann, other characters do nothing to encourage these fictional identities. As the narrator presents it, even when we are “at rest,” making no effort to control how others perceive us, identity contains an element of fiction, since what bores him is not so much being himself as playing the same character: he suffers from “l’ennui de vivre toujours dans le même *personnage*” (my emphasis). Perhaps we are more used to and more comfortable with some roles and less competent at playing others, but, for him, identity always contains an element of performance. As a

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<sup>68</sup> CG, 482.

result, misinterpretations of social identity take on a reality of their own that often rivals who people actually are (i.e. who they think they are or are habitually assumed to be), blurring the distinction between fiction and reality, error and truth.

To study identity and how it refracts in social situations, then, is also to study how fictional identities are created in everyday life through the performance and interpretation of identity. The narrator's interest, sustained throughout the novel, in how individuals "pass" as someone else, whether intentionally or not, is the point where his rich observations on the organization and evolution of society feed into an ongoing investigation into how fictions are created and maintained. It is in his comments on how people pass as someone else, especially someone with a different "coefficient social," that he analyzes the mechanics of how a person (such as a social climber, actor, or novelist) can take on fictional identities.

For the narrator, speech is the primary site where identity refracts and fictional identities coalesce. Individuals' social identities refract because the signs through which they communicate it are interpreted in different manners. In this chapter, I have focused on how social status is interpreted from speech mannerisms, but the narrator is also fascinated by how people speak in ways that change how they are perceived, whether consciously like actors and social climbers or unconsciously by casually incorporating vocabulary or expressions associated with people from other social backgrounds into their conversation. In *A la recherche*, individuals' use of different speech styles complicates the interpretation of their social status and contributes to the generalized sociosemiotic confusion in the narrator's society. In the next two chapters, I will turn from the question of how social status is interpreted from speech mannerisms to the

narrator's comments on why others use speech mannerisms associated with different milieus in order to consider how Proust's characters' identities refract and fragment from the other side of the phenomenon, the production of speech, and then to consider how Proust manipulates this process himself in the creation of fictional characters.

## Chapter 2

### The Social Kaleidoscope and the Kinetoscope of Speech

#### I

##### *The Kaleidoscope and the Kinetoscope*

In the first pages of *A la recherche*, the narrator describes his experience of waking up in the middle of the night and being unable to figure out where he is. His confusion lasts only a few moments, because he quickly recognizes the room and furniture around him, but his description of this fleeting sensation shows us how his mind responds to disorientation. He references two devices, the kaleidoscope and the kinetoscope, that are emblematic of two different ways that he reacts to this sensation. In the broader experience of his life, the narrator struggles to situate himself within a social space, not a physical one – his world is not the Earth so much as “le monde,” or the elite society of Paris. And as he observes and tries to make sense of the shifting relations between the people he knows, he oscillates between the two ways of experiencing disorientation that he introduces in the first pages of the novel through his references to the kaleidoscope and kinetoscope.

The kaleidoscope is an optical device shaped like a short telescope, invented by Sir David Brewster in 1815, that uses mirrors and small colored objects like beads to produce shifting patterns that the user can observe through a small glass lens on one of its ends. Typically, it is used as a curiosity whose mesmerizing forms are to be enjoyed aesthetically. The narrator of *A la recherche* refers to the kaleidoscope to describe his initial disorientation upon waking up in the dark. He writes,



Je me rendormais, et parfois je n'avais plus que de courts réveils d'un instant, le temps d'entendre les craquements organiques des boiseries, d'ouvrir les yeux pour fixer le kaléidoscope de l'obscurité, de goûter grâce à une lueur momentanée de conscience le sommeil où étaient plongés les meubles, la chambre, le tout dont je n'étais qu'une petite partie et à l'insensibilité duquel je retournais vite m'unir.<sup>69</sup>

In these brief moments of consciousness the narrator hears the building around him, sees the room and the half-hidden objects in it and is briefly conscious of his own existence within the universe. The “kaleidoscope of obscurity” creates an image of forms that seem to shift as consciousness struggles against the limitations of perception in the dark.

Through his reference to the kaleidoscope, the narrator suggests that the experience is mesmerizing – initially he engages with the world sensually and aesthetically as a landscape of shifting forms.

The narrator goes on to describe his consciousness as he struggles to orient himself within space through an analogy with the kinoscope, an early cinematic device invented in the late 1880s in France by Louis Le Prince and in the United States by Thomas Edison and William Dickson. The kinoscope passes still-shot photographs across a viewing lens in quick succession to create the impression of a moving image. It can only be used by one person at a time, because the viewer has to look into the box-shaped device to see the moving image. The narrator explains that,

souvent, ma brève incertitude du lieu où je me trouvais ne distinguait pas mieux les unes des autres les diverses suppositions dont elle était faite, que nous

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<sup>69</sup> CS, 4.

n'isolons, en voyant un cheval courir, les positions successives que nous montre le kinétoscope.<sup>70</sup>

The complexity of this passage stems in large part from the use of an entire phrase (“ma brève incertitude du lieu où je me trouvais”) as the subject of a clause. That sense of disorientation is made up of “suppositions” concerning his whereabouts that his waking consciousness proposes in rapid succession. Each of these suppositions is analogous to a still-shot image in a film in that he does not experience them individually but rather in a series – he cannot distinguish each stage in his train of thought any better than we can make out the individual photographs that make up a movie. He is not aware of each supposition about his surroundings, but rather of an overall sensation of confusion as he moves through hypotheses about his whereabouts that, because they are unverified, produce a tentative notion of space but not of location.

The narrator's reference to the kinetoscope in this passage could be an allusion to Henri Bergson's use of the cinematograph as an analogy for a particular type of consciousness in *L'Évolution créatrice*, first published in 1907. The cinematograph is a more complex cinematic device invented by the Lumière brothers in 1895 that uses the same basic principle as the kinetoscope, a rapid succession of still-shot photographs that create the illusion of a moving image. However, the cinematograph projected an image onto a screen, meaning more than one person could watch it at a time, and it could also be reconfigured to record the films it played. Bergson writes,

Au lieu de nous attacher au devenir intérieur des choses, nous nous plaçons en dehors d'elles pour recomposer leur devenir artificiellement. Nous prenons des

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<sup>70</sup> CS, 7.

vues quasi instantanées sur la réalité qui passe, et, comme elles sont caractéristiques de cette réalité, il nous suffit de les enfilez le long d'un devenir abstrait, uniforme, invisible, situé au fond de l'appareil de la connaissance, pour imiter ce qu'il y a de caractéristique dans ce devenir lui-même. Perception, intellection, langage procèdent en général ainsi. Qu'il s'agisse de penser le devenir, ou de l'exprimer, ou même de le percevoir, nous ne faisons guère autre chose qu'actionner une espèce de cinématographe intérieur. On résumerait donc tout ce qui précède en disant que le mécanisme de notre connaissance usuelle est de nature cinématographique.<sup>71</sup>

For Bergson, everything exists in movement and to understand something we must situate it within a process of development, of becoming. In this passage, he describes a mode of consciousness that, instead of perceiving things from within their own processes of development, considers them from an external position. This form of consciousness, which he associates with intellect and, most importantly for us, language, identifies the distinctive features of a thing in its process of becoming and assembles them, artificially, into a narrative that has an illusory relationship to reality analogous to that of the photograph or film to the reality it represents. The cinematographic consciousness creates a sense of reality that is not necessarily inaccurate, but that is separate from the reality it represents in that it exists within consciousness as a simplified, flattened out image of a more complex phenomenon.

Julia Kristeva notes that in his manuscripts, Proust first wrote "cinématographe" and then replaced it with "kinéscope" in the passage describing the narrator's

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<sup>71</sup> Bergson, 331.

disorientation upon waking.<sup>72</sup> Although this strengthens the case that Proust is echoing Bergson's comparison of a type of consciousness to cinematography, it also indicates a choice to refer to the kinoscope specifically and not the cinematograph, and thus that the difference between the two devices is significant. The most notable difference between the two is that the cinematograph could record films whereas the kinoscope could not. The kinoscope had a corresponding device, the kinoscope, that created the films it used. For Bergson, the cinematographic consciousness captures images of reality that, strung together, create a mental representation of reality as it develops. Proust's use of the kinoscope, on the other hand, emphasizes the act of viewing a film over that of making one – it is not clear how or whether the narrator's consciousness is capturing some image of reality. The narrator proceeds by way of suppositions, of tentative hypotheses about his location that may be wrong and thus whose relationship to the external world is still unclear.

The kaleidoscope and the kinoscope symbolize very different ways of engaging with the world. Jonathan Crary explains that Charles Baudelaire also used the kaleidoscope as a metaphor for a specific mode of perception in "Le Peintre de la vie moderne." Crary writes that, "For Baudelaire the kaleidoscope coincided with modernity itself; to become 'a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness' was the goal of the 'lover of universal life'" and adds that, "with all the luminous possibilities suggested by Baudelaire and later Proust, the kaleidoscope seems radically unlike the rigid and disciplinary structure of the phenakistiscope, with its sequential repetition of regulated

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<sup>72</sup> Kristeva, 485.

representations.”<sup>73</sup> The phenakistiscope is the predecessor of the kinoscope and cinematograph. It uses a rapid succession of illustrations (not photographs) to create the illusion of a moving image. This technological development from one device to the other is itself indicative of the difference between the kaleidoscope and the kinoscope: the kaleidoscope is associated with the aesthetic appreciation of infinite variations, an experience divorced from the logic of perfectibility and progress, whereas the kinoscope is inserted within a series of technical improvements and modifications towards the goal of a more perfect, more convincing representation of reality. The consciousness that the narrator describes with his analogy to the kinoscope is engaged in a similar process of testing out hypotheses and experimenting to try and create a more accurate representation of reality. It moves forward towards the goal of forming a better notion of space, and is eventually successful when he finally recognizes the room around him. There is no such temporal or mental movement forward when he first wakes and opens his eyes “pour fixer le kaléidoscope de l’obscurité:” the verb “fixer” can mean to stare, but also to fix (as in to fix a painting to a wall, or to fix the surface of a pastel drawing so that it does not smear), and indicates a more passive mode of perception that gravitates towards stasis.

The narrator of *A la recherche* uses the kaleidoscope as a metaphor to describe how forms appear to shift and change as he struggles with the limits of his perception. These transient forms are disorienting, but in a potentially amusing or aesthetically interesting manner that he watches, or rather stares at.

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<sup>73</sup> Crary, 113.

He uses the kinetoscope as an analogy for how an analytical mode of consciousness produces a sense of disorientation as it moves through a series of speculative observations in its efforts to establish a sense of reality, and of the observer's position within it.

## II

### *Social Disorientation*

Proust's beautiful description of a glimmer of consciousness struggling to situate itself within the universe opens the novel and introduces the narrator's perspective by allowing us to orient ourselves within his experience as he slowly figures out where he is himself. This scene has an expository purpose in that it allows the reader to wake up into a fictional space with the narrator and introduces several of his chief preoccupations in the novel – the nature of perception, memory, and recognition. But this scene also represents, in an almost allegorical manner, the broader experience of life as a fleeting period of disorientation and reorientation between two long periods of "insensibility." In these brief waking moments, the narrator is reborn into his life and goes through the entire process of situating himself, just to fade back into sleep and nothingness. It is this process of self-orientation that engages perception, memory, and recognition and initiates the narrator's comments on how they function.

In the broader experience of his life, however, the narrator struggles to situate himself within a social space, not a physical one. Whereas his spatial disorientation upon waking up in the middle of the night dissipates rapidly, his social disorientation lasts for much of his youth and resurges periodically in his adult life as the social world around

him changes. He references the kaleidoscope several times over the course of the novel, but as an analogy to explain the constant reorganization of society. For example, he explains in *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* that, “pareille aux kaléidoscopes qui tournent de temps en temps, la société place successivement de façon différente des éléments qu'on avait crus immuables et compose une autre figure.”<sup>74</sup> The kaleidoscope serves in these passages, as it does in his description of waking up in the middle of the night, as a visual analogy for the disorienting, mesmerizing rearrangement of forms. Because the kaleidoscope is a device that shows us shifting forms that are meant to be enjoyed aesthetically, not mapped out and analyzed, in referencing it he conveys that he watches the reorganization of society as a spectacle and that the project of orienting oneself within social space, of mapping out society, is potentially futile due to the transience of each of its states.

The narrator, however, always returns to the project of trying to analyze and make sense of the social world around him. The characters in *A la recherche* do not have static social identities; they are engaged in a process of becoming: they move through society, occupying different positions within it over the course of their lives and taking on different social identities. The narrator meets them intermittently and guesses at where they seem to be situated within “le monde” and how their trajectory is evolving. It is the cumulative series of these “suppositions” about each person’s position within society that generates a notion of who they are. Their identities are revealed bit by bit in a manner that is often misleading, such that he remains unaware of major aspects of their lives until a chance event allows him to see them in a new light. Further complicating

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<sup>74</sup> O, 87.

matters, their relations with others and position within society change over time. As he attempts to discern others' social status, the narrator is like an astronomer trying to determine the trajectory, speed, and makeup of a comet from partial views taken over several decades as its orbit and composition change: from transient impressions, he constructs a notion of the object of his analysis that he thinks is accurate, until some new evidence causes him to question everything he thought he knew about it.<sup>75</sup>

The kinetoscope does not reappear by name after the opening pages of the novel, but the mode of analytical perception with which it is associated does. Kristeva argues that, for the narrator, “comme le kinéscope, la mémoire est une chambre à part, peut-être déterminante, en tout cas génératrice d’« une brève incertitude du lieu ».”<sup>76</sup> In his social interactions, the narrator adapts the new information he learns about others into his conception of who they are, creating a kinetoscopic mental representation of their identity as it evolves. By observing many people, he develops a notion of larger social forces and the broader reconfiguration of society as individuals change positions and the makeup and relative prestige of each milieu transforms. However, his mental representation of society is “une chambre à part,” a mental space that is distinct from the reality in which he finds himself. As when he wakes up in the middle of the night, the process of bringing his perception of the present into alignment with his memory creates uncertainty and disorientation. However, whereas his room occupies a stable position in space, such that he quickly recognizes where he is and his sense of confusion fades, society and his

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<sup>75</sup> Proust presented himself as a writer who used “un télescope pour apercevoir des choses, très petites en effet, mais parce qu’elles étaient situées à une grande distance, et qui étaient chacune un monde.” *Correspondance*, vol. XII, 230 – 231. Cited and discussed by Compagnon, 48.

<sup>76</sup> Kristeva, 485.



position within it are constantly changing over time. He might recognize individuals and some aspects of different milieus, but he has to update his conception of them with each new encounter. Integrating new information about others causes him to briefly doubt his conception of their social identity and reminds him that his mental representation of society is distinct from society itself.

The narrator pays particularly close attention to how people speak and what it communicates about their social identity, and the mental snapshots that he takes of others are often based on his interpretation of their speech and how it has changed since their last encounter. For Bergson, the cinematographic mode of consciousness is closely related to language and the identification of distinctive features as signs or practical markers of difference that can be assembled to inform the act of naming, labeling, and categorizing phenomena and then used to create a conceptual representation of the world in its process of becoming. The narrator's observations about others' speech fulfill this same function: he notes distinctive features in their speech and uses them to identify social taxonomies and update his map of social relations as the society around him evolves.

*A la recherche* takes place during a period of rapid social and linguistic change, which complicates the narrator's attempts to interpret what others' speech mannerisms communicate about their social identity and drives him to produce new theories of how speech and social identity affect one another. He often associates a speech mannerism with a specific part of society, such as the bourgeoisie or the peasantry, but observes people from different social backgrounds using it, then discusses what that tells us, either about the evolution of language or the evolution of that person's social trajectory, or both.

The narrator's observations on how individuals use multiple speech styles anticipate arguments about language articulated by Mikhail Bakhtin in "Discourse in the Novel" (1934) and then by sociolinguists such as William Labov beginning in the 1960s. Although they have very different ideological and methodological commitments, Bakhtin and Labov both argue that everyone is familiar with and uses a range of speech styles. For them, there are no single-style speakers. Bakhtin, Labov, and the many scholars who took up and extended their work, have been so influential that today we largely accept as common sense that individuals use different styles of speech – "code switching" is now part of the common parlance and regularly discussed in journalism for the general public, to the point that "Code Switch" is even the name of a popular NPR podcast. However, when Proust wrote, linguists were still primarily preoccupied with the analysis of what Ferdinand de Saussure called *langue*, or the abstract, stable system of rules and conventions unifying a single language, and not what he called *parole*, or how individuals use language in specific social situations, which would become the primary concern of sociolinguists.

The comparativists like Gaston Paris and Arsène Darmesteter whose work I introduced in Chapter 1 studied language as it was used, but on a large scale. For example, Paris argued in favor of collecting information on how linguistic variants are distributed geographically across France, beginning a process that has led to today's *Atlas du français de nos régions* and its map of where "chocolatine" and "pain au chocolat" predominate. Proust works on a much smaller scale, studying through his narrator linguistic behavior at the level of the individual. He shares sociolinguists' interest in how people use language in very specific social situations, and like them, observes that

individuals draw on multiple speech styles over the course of even a single sentence. The behavior he observes is not code switching or even heteroglossia, which both entail a more significant break between one speech style and another. It is a more subtle phenomenon of casual intermingling of speech styles within a single utterance that reveals language to be stylistically heterogeneous at the most fundamental level.

Referring to the narrator's close attention to how speech mannerisms move across society and how individuals' speech mannerisms change, Kristeva has called the novel a "kinéscope d'attitudes verbales."<sup>77</sup> For her, Proust's narrator provides us with many observations on how others speak that, when brought together, give us a sense of the development of each character's identity.

The narrator's approach to speech is also kinetoscopic in that he associates the kinetoscopic consciousness with the testing out of hypotheses, and he interprets others' speech mannerisms through speculative comments on what they indicate about a person and thus what their relationship to social identity is. He provides several different explanations for what determines linguistic behavior, and for how linguistic behavior and social identity affect one another, but none that is definitive. Within this kinetoscopic mode of perception, there is a drive towards the refinement and improvement of the techniques used to capture information and insert it into a narrative movement that creates a more accurate or lifelike representation of reality. This drive to create new explanations for why individuals adopt speech mannerisms associated with people from different social backgrounds conveys a fundamental uncertainty about the nature of the

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<sup>77</sup> Kristeva, 222.

connection between speech and social identity, between the signs he interprets and the reality he tries to access through them.

For the remainder of this chapter, I will describe the narrator's kinetoscopic approach to speech, or how he attempts to understand and represent the movement of speech mannerisms across social boundaries in order to create mental representations of who others are and how they fit into society. I will present the narrator's observations on what determines speech mannerisms, paying particularly close attention to his explanations of why the way individuals speak does not always reflect their caste, a term he uses interchangeably with class to mock the rigid worldview that a person's social identity is defined by the family into which they are born. In so doing, I am turning from the question of how speech mannerisms are perceived, which I discussed in Chapter 1, to the question of what determines their production.

Although I will focus on the narrator's kinetoscopic approach to speech, this discussion must also be informed by the narrator's description of the social kaleidoscope. The narrator periodically steps back to survey the changes affecting society as if he were appreciating them more from an aesthetic point of view, as formal variations to watch, but that it might be futile to try to understand because of their volatility. As I discussed in Chapter 1, the narrator finds the dramatic reversal of assumptions about others' social identities amusing. He at times seems to take delight in the formal variations created by the constant shifting and rearrangement of social relations as if he were watching some great kaleidoscopic social spectacle. However, he always returns to the kinetoscopic mode of perception – he questions the accuracy of his conception of society and of each

person's place within it and attempts to create a better mental representation of society by proposing new hypotheses about how to interpret others' speech mannerisms.

The speech mannerisms that I will discuss in this chapter are relatively unconscious: the narrator observes and comments on subtle nuances in others' speech that they, for the most part, are not aware of themselves. In the next chapter, I will discuss instances in the novel when characters try more consciously to control how they speak in order to appear to be someone that they are not. Proust's characters often change how they speak in order to perform different identities, with some engaging in intensive efforts to appear to be someone else that are akin to acting. I will turn to this theatrical dimension of language and how Proust uses it himself in his approach to dialogue in Chapter 3.

### III

#### *The Sociology of Combray*

*A la recherche* takes place during a period of French history in which rigid social boundaries based on birth became less salient and less critical for determining social relationships but still played an important role in structuring the social hierarchy. During the Third Republic, Rosalind Williams explains, "the hereditary aristocracy had been replaced by an elite open to birth, money, or talent, preferably two of the three and most probably a combination that included money."<sup>78</sup> The narrator follows these changes in elite Parisian society as it opens up to new members with extraordinary gifts and to the

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<sup>78</sup> Williams, 49.

very wealthy, and even benefits from them himself when he gains admittance to the Guermantes' salon.

The narrator watches as individuals cross social boundaries and as the social boundaries themselves begin to shift, creating new social formations. He also watches as individuals adopt speech mannerisms associated with different milieus from the ones they grew up in. At times, he interprets this linguistic behavior as a sign of particular intelligence or ignorance, but he also often interprets it as an indication of changes in a person's social relations. He does not reach a definitive explanation for why people use different speech styles or how this behavior affects their social identity. He advances more and more ways of explaining and interpreting linguistic behavior that accumulate, giving him multiple different conceptual lenses through which to view others' speech and social identities. To show how the narrator becomes aware of the role of language in mediating social identity, as well as the migration of people and speech mannerisms across social boundaries, I will first describe the attitude towards the signs of social status of the narrator's family and show how, over time, his own develops out of it.

The narrator writes that his family has a narrow worldview typical of the bourgeois milieu to which they belong: they have a caste-based understanding of society according to which social status is inherited through one's family. Early in the novel, the narrator describes "the sociology of Combray," or the bourgeois view of the world to which he is exposed through his parents and their milieu in Combray. He writes,

les bourgeois d'alors se faisaient de la société une idée un peu hindoue et la considéraient comme composée de castes fermés où chacun, dès sa naissance, se trouvait placé dans le rang qu'occupaient ses parents et d'où rien, à moins des

hasards d'une carrière exceptionnelle ou d'un mariage inespéré, ne pouvait vous faire pénétrer dans une caste supérieure.<sup>79</sup>

Because of this worldview, the narrator's family does not have a strong impetus to analyze and interpret the signs of social status. Instead, the narrator's family projects a premade understanding of society and each individual's position within it onto their speech. For them, it is not so much that a bourgeois man such as Swann speaks like a bourgeois man, but rather that he *must* speak like a bourgeois man, because he is one. They have little interest in, or even awareness of, the role of language in mediating social status, because, for them, social status is almost entirely determined by birth.

The sociology of Combray relies upon an exhaustive knowledge of others' parentage. The narrator's family is so well-acquainted with everyone in Combray that when, one day, he says his grandfather met a stranger, his great-aunt reacts with utter incredulity: "Un homme que grand-père ne connaissait point, s'écriait-elle. Ah! Je te crois bien!" He explains that, "On connaissait tellement bien tout le monde, à Combray, bêtes et gens, que si ma tante avait vu par hasard passer 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."<sup>80</sup> Although the narrator mocks his aunt in this passage, he never fully abandons the sociology of Combray himself and often relies on prior information about others and their family background when determining who they are. And, like his aunt, he expends a tremendous amount of time and effort speculating about the identity of strangers.

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<sup>79</sup> CS, 16.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 57.

Beyond Combray, in less familiar settings, the narrator's family has more difficulty determining others' social status. They have a particularly hard time understanding the structure of the elite Parisian society Swann frequents, a difficulty that is characteristic of their own bourgeois milieu: the narrator claims that "les trois quarts des hommes du faubourg Saint-Germain passent aux yeux d'une bonne partie de la bourgeoisie pour des décavés crapuleux."<sup>81</sup> This confusion results in large part from the unfamiliarity of the bourgeoisie with the tendency of elite Parisian society towards self-diminution. Those who truly belong to the world of salons put on airs of commonness and go out of their way to pretend like they do not care what others think of them. For example, the duc de Guermantes, welcoming the narrator into his home, affects the mannerisms of a servant and says, "Permettez-moi de vous débarrasser de vos frusques."<sup>82</sup> Taking such liberties as speaking like a servant is a way for the members of high society to playfully demonstrate their insouciance, the privilege of knowing they belong.

However, the effectiveness of this strategy diminishes the further they move away from their own milieu. The narrator remarks that,

c'est par un rustre qu'un homme élégant craindra de voir son élégance méconnue. Les trois quarts des frais d'esprit et des mensonges de vanité qui ont été prodigués depuis que le monde existe par des gens qu'ils ne faisaient que diminuer, l'ont été pour des inférieurs. Et Swann qui était négligent avec une

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<sup>81</sup> O, 271.

<sup>82</sup> CG, 404.



duchesse, tremblait d'être méprisé, posait, quand il était devant une femme de chambre.<sup>83</sup>

As "inferiors," the bourgeoisie is often just as incapable of comprehending the studied negligence of fashionable society as servants and often comes to the wrong conclusions about the social status of socially successful individuals like Swann.

Nothing indicates that Swann is bothered, or even knows, that the narrator's family does not appreciate the full extent of his social success, but if it did matter to him, he would have to put on airs a bit more in their presence, as he does with servants, in order to better perform the role of an elegant socialite the way they expect it to be performed, with more ostentation. At the same time, he would have to be careful not to indicate that he is concerned with what the narrator's family thinks of his social status, because appearing vain or betraying that one really does want to be viewed as socially successful can "diminish" a person. Finding a balance between demonstrating status and not seeming like you are the sort of pompous buffoon who cares about such matters is obviously challenging. To avoid this problem, Swann typically avoids overt references to his brilliant social life and tolerates misreadings of his social status – doing otherwise could imperil his success by making him look like an arriviste who needs all the world to know he had lunch with a princess. The confusion about Swann's social status in Combray is actually the necessary counterpart of his success in high society, because the same traits that charm important social figures like the duchesse de Guermantes, his discretion and tact, prevent him from openly discussing his relations with prestigious people in most situations.

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<sup>83</sup> CS, 189.

Although the narrator comes to understand the limitations of the sociology of Combray later in life, during his youth he relies heavily on the judgments of his older relatives, especially his grandmother. This is somewhat perilous, because his grandmother disdains most social interactions and places little value in a person's relations. Her worldview is related to but distinct from that of the rest of his family in that she distinguishes between "rang social" and "distinction,"<sup>84</sup> meaning that she strives to appreciate others' qualities independently of their position in the social hierarchy. For her, speech mannerisms, specifically how eloquently a person speaks, belong to the realm of distinction and thus have no relationship with social rank – she does not analyze others' speech in order to determine their social status. Instead, she takes pleasure in pointing out when others speak in a manner that runs counter to expectations and challenges assumptions of a correlation between talent and birth by demonstrating that people from humble social origins can be more eloquent than the aristocracy. The narrator explains that, "pour elle, la distinction était quelque chose d'absolument indépendant du rang social. Elle s'extasiait sur une réponse que le giletier lui avait faite, disant à maman : « Sévigné n'aurait pas mieux dit! » et en revanche, d'un neveu de Mme de Villeparisis qu'elle avait rencontré chez elle : « Ah ! ma fille, comme il est commun. »"<sup>85</sup> The tailor in question is Jupien and the nephew of Mme de Villeparisis is the duc de Guermantes, both of whom we will have occasion to discuss further, as they are some of the prime examples in the novel of people whose speech mannerisms the narrator, like his grandmother, considers remarkable given their caste.

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<sup>84</sup> CS, 20.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 20.

Despite admiring and adoring his grandmother, the narrator comes to recognize that she can be an unreliable source of information about others' social status when he witnesses her repeatedly making what he and the rest of his family think is an obvious mistake about Mme de Villeparisis's ties to the Guermantes. He writes,

Ma grand-mère qui à force de se désintéresser des personnes finissait par confondre tous les noms, chaque fois qu'on prononçait celui de la duchesse de Guermantes prétendait que ce devait être une parente de Mme de Villeparisis. Tout le monde éclatait de rire; elle tâchait de se défendre en alléguant une certaine lettre de faire-part: 'Il me semblait me rappeler qu'il y avait du Guermantes là-dedans'. Et pour une fois j'étais avec les autres contre elle.<sup>86</sup>

The narrator learns that Mme de Villeparisis actually is a Guermantes (again, she is the duc de Guermantes's aunt) in the next volume of the novel, *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*. By that point, however, he has apparently forgotten that he had already heard that Villeparisis was related to the duc and duchesse de Guermantes from his grandmother and is shocked to make this discovery.<sup>87</sup>

Even though the narrator's grandmother is in fact right about Mme de Villeparisis, he initially believes that she is wrong, and that she is wrong because she does not care about social rank. From his perspective, her mistake is linguistic as well as social: confused by the network of titles and alliances, she assigns the wrong meaning to aristocratic names and conflates two very different families. For his part, the narrator develops a serious interest in the etymology of names and in aristocratic lineages. Understanding the structure of elite French society has greater importance for him,

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<sup>86</sup> CS, 102.

<sup>87</sup> O, 322.

because he has social and erotic aspirations that his family does not. He is attracted to women from different castes and is fascinated by their social networks – a large part of the novel is devoted to his desire for the duchesse de Guermantes and attempts to insinuate himself into her social circle, which augments his interest in Mme de Villeparisis and her name once he learns the truth about her family background.

The narrator's grandmother has no particular interest in getting to know most aristocrats, and the rest of his family actually considers drawing too close to other castes as detrimental to one's own social status. When they find out about Swann's other life in high society, the narrator's great-aunt considers it unfortunate for him. The narrator explains that for her, "Quelqu'un qui choisissait ses fréquentations en dehors de la caste où il était né, en dehors de sa 'classe' sociale subissait à ses yeux un fâcheux déclassement," to the point that "[elle] avait même cessé de voir le fils d'un notaire de nos amis parce qu'il avait épousé une altesse et était par là descendu pour elle du rang respecté de fils de notaire à celui d'un de ces aventuriers, anciens valets de chambre ou garçons d'écurie, pour qui on raconte que les reines eurent parfois des bontés."<sup>88</sup>

Although the rest of the narrator's family is not so rigid as his great-aunt, they also have no interest in pursuing any form of social mobility. Her views are particularly extreme, but generally indicative of how the narrator's family treats associations with people from other castes. For example, in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, the narrator's mother becomes annoyed that he is eating lunch with a chauffeur and tells him, "Il me semble

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<sup>88</sup> CS, 21. Note also the slippage in the narrator's terminology between caste and social class, indicative of the close, nearly synonymous relationship between the two in his thoughts.

que tu pourrais avoir mieux comme ami qu'un mécanicien."<sup>89</sup> He explains that, "pour elle, qu'elle l'avouât ou non, les maîtres étaient les maîtres et les domestiques étaient les gens qui mangeaient à la cuisine."<sup>90</sup> Channeling his grandmother, the narrator happily eats with the chauffeur and appreciates his qualities, especially his eloquence, separately from his social rank, concluding that "le chauffeur était charmant et s'exprimait si simplement qu'on eût toujours dit paroles d'Évangile."<sup>91</sup>

The narrator's family has little need to understand the signs of social status, because they have no desire to navigate the social relations they indicate. The narrator's parents and close relatives prefer instead the familiar stability of Combray and of their own milieu, a social space in which they (think they) know everyone and where each person stands in the social hierarchy. Beyond this limited arena, for example in Paris or Balbec, the sociology of Combray is obviously less useful, because it is impossible to know everyone's family background, but the narrator's family does not make many excursions beyond their own familiar milieu. They think the social hierarchy is stable and also that it should be stable – venturing beyond the limits of their own circle could upset the social order and put them at risk of becoming déclassé.

When the narrator's family does express awareness of the way in which speech mannerisms communicate social status, it is because someone's speech mannerisms do not quite line up with their place in the social hierarchy, and their response is to think that person *should* speak like someone of their social status. For example, the narrator comments that,

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<sup>89</sup> SG, 415.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

ma mère, quand un valet de chambre s'émancipait, disait une fois « vous » et glissait insensiblement à ne plus me parler à la troisième personne, avait de ces usurpations le même mécontentement qui éclate dans les *Mémoires* de Saint-Simon chaque fois qu'un seigneur qui n'y a pas droit saisit un prétexte de prendre la qualité d'« Altesse ».<sup>92</sup>

The narrator's mother insists on deference to linguistic norms as a means of signaling respect for her family and for the social hierarchy. And, although he makes fun of his mother for her linguistic conservatism, he is by no means totally immune to this sort of reaction when people speak in a way that seems impertinent. For example, when he meets with Morel, the son of his great-uncle's manservant, he notes that “il affectait de me parler comme à un égal. Il avait à dire « vous », et le moins souvent possible « monsieur », le plaisir de quelqu'un dont le père n'avait jamais employé, en s'adressant à mes parents, que la « troisième personne. »”<sup>93</sup>

Although the narrator conveys some disdain for Morel's “affectation” in this passage, his reaction is much milder than that of his mother – he seems more bemused and curious than indignant and mocks Morel's tone, not the fact that he uses “vous.” And then, when he thinks someone like Jupien or the chauffeur speaks well, naturally and without affectation, the narrator follows the example of his grandmother and does not hesitate to praise their eloquence.

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<sup>92</sup> SG, 415.

<sup>93</sup> CG, 255.

#### IV

##### *The Sociolinguistics of Balbec*

The shortcomings of the sociology of Combray become more evident to the narrator in Balbec, where he experiences “l’émou, le désarroi social, la vanité inquiète, les désirs errants de la vie de bains de mer.”<sup>94</sup> For him, the beach is a space that confuses and suppresses the habitual markers of status, where there is a “changement des proportions sociales” because “tous les avantages qui dans notre milieu habituel nous prolongent, nous agrandissent, se trouvent là devenus invisibles, en fait supprimés.”<sup>95</sup> The inability to determine others’ social status and present oneself at an advantage would not be a problem if he, like his grandmother, cared little for what they thought and had no desire to interact with them, but he suffers tremendously from the inaccessibility of mysterious women from different social backgrounds, first Mlle de Stermaria and then the young women in Albertine’s circle. The narrator has a particularly difficult time determining the social status of the latter, who take on greater importance in the novel through the narrator’s relationship with Albertine.

When he first encounters Albertine and her friends, he rapidly proposes then dismisses several hypotheses about their social status based on their clothing, appearance, comportment, and speech mannerisms. Still unsure, he hears one of them using

des termes d’argot si voyous et criés si fort, quand je passai auprès d’elle (parmi lesquels je distinguai cependant la phrase fâcheuse de ‘vivre sa vie’) qu’abandonnant l’hypothèse que la pèlerine de sa camarade m’avait fait échafauder, je conclus plutôt que toutes ces filles appartenaient à la population

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<sup>94</sup> P, 60.

<sup>95</sup> O, 362.

qui fréquente les vélodromes, et devaient être les très jeunes maîtresses de coureurs cyclistes.<sup>96</sup>

His conclusion that Albertine and her friends are from a rebellious, athletic branch of the working class, whose modernity, mobility, and emancipation is symbolized by the bicycle, is even further off the mark than his previous hypothesis, that at least one of them came from an intellectual family too self-absorbed to care what the other beachgoers thought about her appearance and comportment. Both hypotheses are comical in their specificity, and quite inaccurate. Albertine and her friends are bourgeois, with some (Andrée) from considerably more wealthy families than others (Albertine). The narrator's error in this scene is to assume that language has a strict indexical relationship with social status: he thinks that, because the young women use slang he associates with the working classes, they must be working class.

Despite his erroneous conclusions, this scene demonstrates how imperative it becomes to the narrator to pin down others' social status, especially when he is attracted to them. And when the sociology of Combray fails him, because he has to determine the social status of a person without prior knowledge of their family background, he turns to the interpretation of signs that communicate a person's social status, such as their speech mannerisms.

Absent information concerning others' social backgrounds, the narrator initially assumes people belong to the caste with which he associates their speech mannerisms. In so doing, he takes a different approach to speech mannerisms from that of his grandmother, who considers them separately from social rank, and the rest of his family,

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<sup>96</sup> O, 359.



who have little awareness of what speech might communicate about a person's social status. Even though, like his grandmother, he is aware that the way a person speaks does not necessarily reflect their social status and is even amused when someone speaks in a way that is unexpected given their background, he still tries to determine the young women's caste from their speech mannerisms.

The narrator comes to the wrong conclusion concerning Albertine and her friends' social status, but not because he is mistaken in associating the way they talk with the working class – they are in fact using slang conventionally associated with the working class. His mistake is in assuming that the young women have stable, homogenous social identities that will be expressed uniformly in all of their actions; he interprets their speech mannerisms metonymically, as details indicative of their entire being, whereas he ought to consider their speech mannerisms as details that provide only a partial view of their social identity as it changes. In fact, as he realizes later, an individual's desire to appear a certain way – in this case lively, healthy, rambunctious – can cause them to speak in a way that temporarily obscures who they actually are. Instead of interpreting their speech mannerisms as signs of who they are, he ought to interpret them as signs of who they want to seem to be at that moment.

The narrator eventually learns that Albertine and her friends are bourgeois from the painter Elstir, who knows them. He quickly integrates this new information into his conception of the young women, showing how this kinetoscopic mode of analysis proceeds: each individual supposition about the young women presents a static, partial and potentially misleading, image of their identity, but taken together, in a series, they reveal more complex information about Albertine and her friends, their social origins and

trajectory, how they think and act, how they want to be perceived, and how all of these factors contribute to the way they appear at a given point in his relationship with them.

After Elstir informs the narrator that Albertine and her friends are bourgeois, the narrator observes in their speech what he already knows, that they are from relatively well-to-do families. Once he has more information about others' families, he reverts back to something like the sociology of Combray, but more attuned to speech. Like his family, he projects what he knows about others onto their speech. However, whereas his family treats a person's speech as a "transparent envelope" into which they put what they already know about them, the narrator pays close attention to how others speak and cites specific linguistic evidence that confirms what he knows about their family background. For instance, in *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, when discussing Bergotte's speech mannerisms, he notes that,

Certaines particularités d'élocution de Bergotte qui existaient à l'état de faibles traces dans la conversation de Bergotte ne lui appartenaient pas en propre, car quand j'ai connu plus tard ses frères et ses sœurs, je les ai retrouvées chez eux bien plus accentuées. C'était quelque chose de brusque et de rauque dans les derniers mots d'une phrase gaie, quelque chose d'affaibli et d'expirant à la fin d'une phrase triste.<sup>97</sup>

And later, enthralled by the voices of Albertine and her friends, he explains that,

les parents ne fournissent pas que ce geste habituel que sont les traits du visage et de la voix, mais aussi certaines manières de parler, certaines phrases

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<sup>97</sup> O, 124.

consacrées, qui presque aussi inconscientes qu'une intonation, presque aussi profondes, indiquent, comme elle, un point de vue sur la vie.<sup>98</sup>

Clearly, for the narrator, individuals acquire speech mannerisms in and from their families. In *Le Côté de Guermantes*, looking back and reflecting on how Albertine spoke when he first met her, he compares this linguistic influence of parents on their children to an inheritance. In *Balbec*, he writes, Albertine already demonstrated mastery over

un lot très sortable de ces expressions qui décèlent immédiatement qu'on est issu d'une famille aisée, et que d'année en année une mère abandonne à sa fille comme elle lui donne, au fur et à mesure qu'elle grandit, dans les circonstances importantes, ses propres bijoux.<sup>99</sup>

Of course, we know that the narrator was clearly not able to immediately tell that Albertine was from a well-to-do family from the way that she spoke, because he initially thought she was working class. As with Bergotte in the passage cited above, the narrator begins to see the influence of Albertine's family on her speech after he becomes more familiar with her background. Once he knows a person's caste, he can identify which speech mannerisms they acquired from it.

Instead of projecting an entirely preconceived notion of identity onto others' speech based on their family background, the narrator analyzes others' speech for actual examples of the influence of family, which is limited to the transmission of specific speech mannerisms that he describes in some detail, providing the reader with evidence supporting his claims. His analyses display confirmation bias – he finds what he is looking for – but he never claims that the speech of Bergotte and the young women in

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<sup>98</sup> O, 470 – 471.

<sup>99</sup> CG, 345.

Balbec is entirely determined by their caste. In the case of Bergotte, he indicates that the linguistic tendencies acquired within the family can fade into “de faibles traces” of familial influence over time. And as we will see later in this chapter, he also observes that Albertine’s speech mannerisms diverge from those of her family as she grows older and becomes more independent.

In contrast to his family, the narrator struggles to adapt his notion of others’ personalities and social identities over the course of his relationship with them, and he does so through careful analysis of features in their speech that he might have overlooked or forgotten. While describing his encounters with Albertine and her friends, he argues that, “Chaque être est détruit quand nous cessons de le voir ; puis son apparition suivante est une création nouvelle.”<sup>100</sup> As a result, the narrator has to recalibrate his memory of the young women’s voices each time he meets them. He explains,

Tracée par une inflexion, telle ligne profonde d’une de ces voix m’étonnait quand je la reconnaissais après l’avoir oubliée. Si bien que les rectifications qu’à chaque rencontre nouvelle j’étais obligé de faire, pour le retour à la parfaite justesse, étaient aussi bien d’un accordeur ou d’un maître de chant que d’un dessinateur.<sup>101</sup>

The narrator pays close attention to others’ speech mannerisms and revises his conception of their identity with each new encounter in accordance with his linguistic observations. These snapshots, strung together in a series, give him a sense of the social trajectory of each person he meets and allow him to form a kinetoscopic representation of their social identity.

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<sup>100</sup> O, 478.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 479.

At times, the narrator's observations confirm the presence of a familial influence, but, in his attentiveness to the aspects of a person's speech that he had forgotten or overlooked, the narrator also notices when their speech mannerisms change or do not correspond with what he expects from them or from someone of their caste. As evident from Albertine and her friends' use of slang the narrator associates with the working class, Proust's characters draw on multiple speech styles. In doing so, they disrupt the socioindexical function of language and introduce ambiguity into the relationship between language and social status in the novel. This ambiguity leads the narrator to develop widely divergent methods for interpreting sociolinguistic information as he attempts to explain why individuals use speech mannerisms associated with different castes.

## V

### *The Two Laws of Language*

The most prominent instance of a character speaking like someone from a different caste, the example that the narrator discusses most thoroughly, occurs in *Le Côté de Guermantes* during a discussion about the Dreyfus Affair in the Guermantes' salon. The Guermantes, along with most of their milieu, believe that Dreyfus is guilty. The marquis de Saint-Loup (the narrator's close friend and the nephew of the duc and duchesse de Guermantes) is not present, but the conversation turns to him, because he has scandalized his family by vocalizing his belief in Dreyfus's innocence. The duc de Guermantes exclaims in exasperation, "quand on s'appelle le marquis de Saint-Loup, on n'est pas dreyfusard, que voulez-vous que je vous dise!"

The narrator has a strong reaction to the duc de Guermantes's criticism of Saint-Loup that specifically targets the way he expresses himself by developing two laws of language. The first is that:

on s'exprime comme les gens de sa classe mentale et non de sa caste d'origine. Par là M. de Guermantes pouvait être dans ses expressions, même quand il voulait parler de la noblesse, tributaire de très petits bourgeois qui auraient dit: "quand on s'appelle le duc de Guermantes", tandis qu'un homme lettré, un Swann, un Legrandin ne l'eussent pas dit. Un duc peut écrire des romans d'épicer, même sur les mœurs du grand monde, les parchemins n'étant là de nul secours, et l'épithète d'aristocratique être méritée par les écrits d'un plébéien.<sup>102</sup>

According to the narrator, the expression "quand on s'appelle" comes from a petit bourgeois sociolect and expresses the petit bourgeois worldview that a person's caste determines their ideology. As a result, by saying "quand on s'appelle le marquis de Saint-Loup on n'est pas dreyfusard," the duc undercuts his own argument by demonstrating the mobility of worldviews across caste boundaries: clearly caste does not determine what people think, because here we have an example of an aristocrat thinking like a petit bourgeois.

The narrator's explanation of the duc's use of a petit bourgeois expression harks back to a claim he made in *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*: "rien n'altère autant les qualités matérielles de la voix que de contenir de la pensée: la sonorité des diphtongues, l'énergie des labiales, en sont influencées. La diction l'est aussi."<sup>103</sup> For him, thought affects speech, because, as people fall into patterns of thought, expressing the same ideas

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<sup>102</sup> CG, 226 - 227.

<sup>103</sup> O, 120.

in the same way repeatedly, their speech mannerisms become more defined and fixed. He writes that,

Les traits de notre visage ne sont guère que des gestes devenus, par l'habitude, définitifs. La nature, comme la catastrophe de Pompéi, comme une métamorphose de nymphe, nous a immobilisés dans le mouvement accoutumé. De même nos intonations contiennent notre philosophie de la vie, ce que la personne se dit à tout moment sur les choses.<sup>104</sup>

However, as cited above, this passage continues,

Sans doute ces traits n'étaient pas qu'à ces jeunes filles [Albertine and her friends in Balbec]. Ils étaient à leurs parents. L'individu baigne dans quelque chose de plus général que lui. À ce compte, les parents ne fournissent pas que ce geste habituel que sont les traits du visage et de la voix, mais aussi certaines manières de parler, certaines phrases consacrées, qui presque aussi inconscientes qu'une intonation, presque aussi profondes, indiquent, comme elle, un point de vue sur la vie.<sup>105</sup>

We are faced here with one of many examples of some apparent inconsistency in the narrator's remarks: his first law of language is that mental class defines how we speak, not caste of origin, but in the passage above, he states that something "more general," such as the family, shapes how we think and speak. Although he does not use the word caste in this passage, he does refer to a social context into which the individual is born that conditions them, a concept that is very close to caste. In his first law of language, the narrator presents mental class and caste of origin as if they are opposed – it is mental

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<sup>104</sup> O, 470.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 470 – 471.

class that shapes how we speak and not caste of origin. It would seem to follow from this that speech mannerisms are not inherited through the family. However, in the passage above, he observes that parents do pass their speech mannerisms onto their children.

The tension between the narrator's first law of language and his observation that many speech mannerisms are passed on from parents to their children stems largely from his tendency to express his analyses of specific speech mannerisms through broad universal claims, which eventually come into conflict with one another. In his first law of language, he seems to argue that caste has no bearing on how we speak and no relation to our mental class, whatsoever, which conflicts with his argument in the passage above, and observations he makes throughout the novel, that the social context we are born into does affect how we think and speak.

The tension in his comments also results from some ambiguity in the distinction between caste and the more general context in which the individual is immersed. The narrator typically uses the term caste when criticizing the rigid worldview that birth *entirely* determines our social identity. His comments on the more general context, like family, that affects our thought and speech are limited: family contributes *certain* patterns of thought that affect how we speak. Over the course of the novel, the narrator consistently rejects the view that society is divided into stable castes that completely define our social identity, but that position leaves room for the possibility that the family and milieu we are born into affect our behavior in a more localized and potentially impermanent fashion. For the narrator, the main error of the bourgeois worldview that social identity is determined by birth is that it assumes social identity is rigid and stable and does not account for the intellectual, erotic, or social forces that drive some



individuals to venture beyond the milieu they are born into. For him, the way we think, our mental class, can change and become less tethered to our caste of origin as we accumulate experiences. To understand speech, we have to compensate for this social and intellectual movement.

In order to somewhat resolve the tension between the narrator's first law of language and his observations on how an individual's family affects the way they speak, we could adopt Vincent Descombes's argument that, in *A la recherche*, "pour la plupart des gens, le milieu intellectuel, ou 'classe mentale', est justement la 'caste d'origine.'"<sup>106</sup> For Descombes, mental class and caste are not as diametrically opposed in the social space of the novel as the narrator seems to argue in his first law of language. Most of the characters in the novel do not break away from the influence of the milieu they are born into: characters from the same caste tend to share the same basic worldview and opinions. In support of this argument, we could point out that the narrator does claim that birth plays a much larger role in some parts of society than in others. He explains, for example, that,

Désertée dans les milieux mondains intermédiaires qui sont livrés à un mouvement perpétuel d'ascension, la famille joue, au contraire, un rôle important dans les milieux immobiles comme la petite bourgeoisie et comme l'aristocratie princière, qui ne peut chercher à s'élever puisque, au-dessus d'elle, à son point de vue spécial, il n'y a rien.<sup>107</sup>

One possible resolution to the tension between mental class and caste of origin, then, is that, for the narrator, they do not have uniform importance throughout society – in some

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<sup>106</sup> Descombes, 189.

<sup>107</sup> CG, 365.

spaces, such as the bourgeois milieu of Combray, family and caste play a greater role in determining how people speak and think than in others, such as the salon of the Guermantes (where the duc utters his “quand on s’appelle”).

To this argument, however, I would add that the narrator’s conflicting statements about mental class and caste of origin betray his evolving attitudes towards them and their influence on speech as he experiences different social milieus *over time*. Deleuze says that *A la recherche* is the account of the narrator’s “apprentissage des signes,” or a story that relates how the narrator learns, over the course of his early life, how to understand and interpret signs. For Deleuze, through this apprenticeship, the narrator comes to believe that people are ultimately more defined by their intellectual characteristics than by their social milieu. Deleuze writes that in *A la recherche*,

Les vraies familles, les vrais milieux, les vrais groupes sont les milieux, les groupes “intellectuels”. C’est-à-dire: on appartient toujours à la société dont émanent les idées et les valeurs auxquelles on croit. Ce n’est pas la moindre erreur de Taine ou de Sainte-Beuve d’avoir invoqué l’influence immédiate de milieux simplement physiques et réels. En vérité, l’interprète doit recomposer les groupes, en découvrant les familles *mentales* auxquelles ils se rattachent. Il arrive à des duchesses ou à M. de Guermantes, de parler comme de petits-bourgeois : c’est que la loi du monde, et plus généralement la loi du langage, est « qu’on s’exprime toujours comme les gens de sa classe mentale et non de sa caste d’origine ». <sup>108</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Deleuze, 101 - 102.

From this perspective, it is no surprise that Swann's speech does not communicate that he has a brilliant social life outside of his caste and the duc occasionally sounds petit bourgeois: if speech is shaped by thought, and ideas are not influenced by social relations, then an individual's speech mannerisms would be isolated from their social status. There would be a barrier dividing language, thought, and worldview from social milieu. This position is supported by the fact that the narrator meets intelligent, articulate, and open-minded people with very different social backgrounds. The same is true of the people he finds stupid, vulgar, and prejudiced, who are just as likely to be servants as aristocrats.

The narrator's grandmother influences his worldview more than any other single person in the novel, and his observation that the duc de Guermantes speaks like a petit bourgeois echoes his grandmother's observation that the duc is "commun" (see p. 16 above). In his first law of language, he largely falls back on her understanding of speech's relationship with social status, only replacing her terms "distinction" and "social rank" with his own terms, mental class and caste of origin.

However, the narrator's belief that the realm of ideas and intellect is separate from that of social relations is more aspirational than descriptive: he wants to believe, like his grandmother, that how people think and speak has nothing to do with their caste, but he keeps observing the opposite. The narrator's semiotic apprenticeship does not end with his elaboration of the two laws of language in *Le Côté de Guermantes*; we have to look at how his laws of language hold up later in the novel, which I will do by briefly tracing Saint-Loup's trajectory during the Dreyfus Affair. The narrator's position, that mental class defines how people speak, is anchored in the Dreyfus Affair, and is closely tied to his friendship with Saint-Loup, who provides proof for a time that some particularly

intelligent aristocrats could see through the bigotry and conformism of their caste. Saint-Loup, however, ends up returning to the fold, abandoning his belief in Dreyfus's innocence in an about-face that causes the narrator to reexamine the role of mental class.

In the beginning of his relationship with the narrator, Saint-Loup actively challenges the bourgeois view of society by criticizing the rampant ignorance in his aristocratic caste and seeking out more intellectual and artistic company. The narrator writes, "Il était ainsi amené à faire des avances à des gens dont mes parents, fidèle à la sociologie de Combray, eussent été stupéfaits qu'il ne se détournât pas."<sup>109</sup> For much of the Dreyfus Affair, Saint-Loup defends Dreyfus's innocence and embodies and confirms the narrator's belief that intelligent people can see past the prejudices of their family and milieu to evaluate individuals and opinions according to their intellectual merits. During one conversation on the Dreyfus Affair, the narrator, Saint-Loup, and another of the narrator's friends who thinks that Dreyfus is innocent, discuss other people who openly support Dreyfus despite the opposition of their families, and the narrator exclaims,

C'est que l'influence qu'on prête au milieu est surtout vraie du milieu intellectuel. On est l'homme de son idée; il y a beaucoup moins d'idées que d'hommes, ainsi tous les hommes d'une même idée sont pareils. Comme une idée n'a rien de matériel, les hommes qui ne sont que matériellement autour d'une idée ne la modifient en rien.<sup>110</sup>

This comment is presented as general but is also directed at Saint-Loup (the narrator turns to him as he says it). It is an expression of solidarity with his friend who, presumably touched, soon tells the narrator, "Tu es l'homme le plus intelligent que je connais, tu

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<sup>109</sup> O, 305.

<sup>110</sup> CG, 98.

sais.”<sup>111</sup> The passage is crucial for Deleuze’s argument, that “les vraies familles, les vrais milieux, les vrais groupes sont les milieux, les groupes « intellectuels, »” as it provides evidence that the narrator makes a distinction between intellectual milieu (the true milieu) and immediate, physical or social milieu. However, given that the narrator frequently gently mocks the errors and naïveté of his youth, it is important to note that this statement is in quotation marks – the narrator reports what he said to Saint-Loup but does not tell us whether he still endorses it or not.

For a time, Saint-Loup also provides proof that linguistic and intellectual exchanges go hand in hand and cut across social boundaries. Bloch, a friend of the narrator who is an adamant *dreyfusard*, draws closer to Saint-Loup during the Affair. The narrator frequently presents Bloch as tactless and grating, but he also observes that Bloch has a way of influencing the way others speak. For example, his sisters all begin to use his vocabulary and intonation. This extends to Saint-Loup: while mocking the aristocratic pretensions of his milieu, he sarcastically says, “Ma famille est épatante,” and the narrator comments that his friend had adopted “sans s’en rendre compte les intonations de Bloch comme il empruntait ses idées.”<sup>112</sup> This again demonstrates the close ties between thought and language in *A la recherche* – it is as if how one speaks is inseparable from how one thinks, such that the two must change together. Saint-Loup’s adoption of Bloch’s intonation also demonstrates that people who share the same ideas come to speak alike regardless of social boundaries, since Bloch is Jewish and comes from a very different social background than Saint-Loup.

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<sup>111</sup> CG, 98.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 247.

However, even for Saint-Loup, mental class only trumps caste of origin to an extent. While first introducing Saint-Loup, the narrator admits that in spite of his friend's efforts to cast off the social and ideological limitations of his milieu, "À retrouver toujours en lui cet être intérieur, séculaire, cet aristocrate que Robert aspirait justement à ne pas être, j'éprouvais une vive joie, mais d'intelligence, non d'amitié."<sup>113</sup> The narrator is primarily referring to Saint-Loup's charming manners and attentiveness, a quality that the narrator associates with the aristocracy. The narrator says that he actually wishes Saint-Loup were more the son of his father instead of trying so hard to rebel against his caste by reading Nietzsche and Proudhon. And given that the narrator does not much care for Bloch, it is implied that Saint-Loup's adoption of Bloch's ideas and language does not entirely please him, even as examples of the supremacy of intellectual milieu over social milieu.

Saint-Loup's aristocratic side reasserts itself in *Sodome et Gomorrhe* very dramatically. Swann, at this point sickly and marginalized, remarks to Saint-Loup at a social function that he knows they both think Dreyfus is innocent. Saint-Loup responds, "Mais, pas tant que ça; vous vous trompez complètement [...] C'est une affaire mal engagée dans laquelle je regrette de m'être fourré. Je n'avais rien à voir là-dedans. Si c'était à recommencer, je m'en tiendrais bien à l'écart. Je suis soldat et avant tout pour l'armée."<sup>114</sup> Saint-Loup then leaves abruptly before Swann can react.

Saint-Loup's transformation deals a blow to the argument that "l'influence qu'on prête au milieu est surtout vraie du milieu intellectuel,"<sup>115</sup> which the narrator

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<sup>113</sup> O, 305.

<sup>114</sup> SG, 97.

<sup>115</sup> CG, 98.

acknowledges indirectly through Swann. Soon after we learn of Saint-Loup's conversion, the prince de Guermantes confesses to Swann and the narrator that he and his wife have quietly come to believe that Dreyfus is innocent. Swann exclaims, "son opinion ne m'étonne pas, c'est une nature si droite!" and the narrator comments,

Swann oubliait que dans l'après-midi, il m'avait dit au contraire que les opinions en cette affaire Dreyfus étaient commandées par l'atavisme. Tout au plus avait-il fait exception pour l'intelligence, parce que chez Saint-Loup elle était arrivée à vaincre l'atavisme et à faire de lui un dreyfusard. Or, il venait de voir que cette victoire avait été de courte durée et que Saint-Loup avait passé dans l'autre camp. C'était donc maintenant à la droiture du cœur qu'il donnait le rôle de l'intelligence. En réalité, nous découvrons après coup que nos adversaires avaient une raison d'être du parti où ils sont et qui ne tient pas à ce qu'il peut y avoir de juste dans ce parti, et que ceux qui pensent comme nous, c'est que l'intelligence, si leur nature morale est trop basse pour être invoquée, ou leur droiture, si leur pénétration est faible, les y a contraints.<sup>116</sup>

In this passage, the narrator is poking fun at "our" tendency to believe that people with whom we disagree are driven by some crass motive that has nothing to do with the moral or intellectual merits of their position. On the other hand, we think that people agree with us exclusively because of their intelligence or moral integrity. It is Swann whose bias colors his explanations for others' beliefs, but by saying "nous," the narrator also includes himself (and everyone else) in the general category of people whose bias affects their evaluations of others' motivations.

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<sup>116</sup> SG, 110.

The narrator is guilty of this type of biased judgment with regard to Saint-Loup. While he is a *dreyfusard*, the narrator emphasizes his interest in philosophy and literature and states that what matters is one's intellectual milieu. However, right before revealing Saint-Loup's change of heart regarding the Dreyfus Affair, the narrator informs us that "en réalité l'amour de Robert pour les Lettres n'avait rien de profond, n'émanait pas de sa vraie nature, il n'était qu'un dérivé de son amour pour Rachel, et il s'était effacé avec celui-ci."<sup>117</sup> The narrator often presents intelligence and interest in literature as closely linked to one another. For example, like his grandmother, he is impressed by how eloquently Jupien speaks and says, "je discernai vite, en effet, chez lui une intelligence rare et l'une des plus naturellement littéraires."<sup>1</sup> And, as we saw in the passage explaining the narrator's first law of language, the narrator argues that people like Swann and Legrandin, who are "lettré," would never say something like "quand on s'appelle" and then associates superior mental class with the ability to write a good novel.

Given the proximity of intelligence to literary culture and talent in the narrator's comments, when he claims that Saint-Loup's interest in literature was motivated by his desire for the actress Rachel, he is also implying that Saint-Loup is not as intelligent as he had previously thought. When Saint-Loup changes his position on the Dreyfus Affair, his caste is reasserting its influence over him, but the narrator has also just strongly hinted that Saint-Loup's mental class is not what he thought it was. The narrator never expresses his own opinion on the Dreyfus Affair clearly; and, instead of admitting that he lets his beliefs influence his estimation of Saint-Loup's intelligence, he pushes his own lack of objectivity onto Swann, a very vocal supporter of Dreyfus who "trouvait maintenant

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<sup>117</sup> SG, 95.



indistinctement intelligents ceux qui étaient de son opinion.”<sup>118</sup> It is the narrator, however, who thinks that Saint-Loup is intelligent while he believes that Dreyfus is innocent and then strongly implies that he is not right before we learn that he has stopped defending Dreyfus.

Saint-Loup’s relationship with Rachel inflects much of his personality as he strives to cast himself in a mold that will impress the actress and her friends. It leads him to try and appear more intellectual and more rebellious by taking an interest in literature, becoming a *dreyfusard*, and associating with people beyond his caste, like the narrator and Bloch, who help him recast himself as the sort of free-thinking man he thinks Rachel will be attracted to. Saint-Loup’s relationship with Rachel also affects his speech dramatically, and in a way that outlasts his interest in literature or belief in Dreyfus’s innocence. Well after the relationship has ended and Saint-Loup’s tastes and opinions have reverted for the most part to those more typically associated with his caste, the narrator remarks that, “le dialecte de Saint-Loup [...] était emprunté à Rachel.”<sup>119</sup>

This introduces a second potential explanation for why people in the social space of *A la recherche* adopt speech mannerisms from different castes: proximity, especially intimate contact, with people from different backgrounds leads to linguistic exchanges across social boundaries. The narrator develops this explanation in the second law of language that he expounds in reaction to the duc de Guermantes’ “quand on s’appelle.” He says,

Quel était dans ce cas le bourgeois à qui M. de Guermantes, avait entendu dire:

“quand on s’appelle”, il n’en savait sans doute rien. Mais une autre loi du

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<sup>118</sup> SG, 110.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 214.

langage est que de temps en temps, comme font leur apparition et s'éloignent certaines maladies dont on n'entend plus parler ensuite, il naît on ne sait trop comment, soit spontanément, soit par un hasard comparable à celui qui fit germer en France une mauvaise herbe d'Amérique dont la graine prise après la peluche d'une couverture de voyage était tombée sur un talus de chemin de fer, des modes d'expression qu'on entend dans la même décade dites par des gens qui ne se sont pas concertés pour cela.<sup>120</sup>

In this law, which holds up much better over the course of the novel than the first, the narrator describes speech mannerisms as contagious, spreading randomly from person to person according to poorly understood mechanisms. However, what remains unknown is what causes specific individuals to adopt specific speech mannerisms from other castes. Broadly speaking, by referencing the United States and the railroad, he associates language change with the increased social and physical mobility of modernity and democracy.

Proust portrays the changes occurring in elite Parisian society through the Guermantes' milieu, which is more heterogeneous than any other in the social space of *A la recherche*. Over the course of the novel, the Guermantes admit ever greater numbers of culturally refined and socially influential members of the bourgeoisie to their salon and eventually intermarry with them. The duc has more and more interactions with members of the bourgeoisie and more exposure to their speech mannerisms. Large scale political, social, and economic transformations put the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie in contact more and more frequently, increasing the chances for linguistic exchanges between the

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<sup>120</sup> CG, 226 - 227.

two castes. The duc's susceptibility to bourgeois speech mannerisms reveals an aspect of his personality – he is a narrow-minded aristocrat, but it also makes him a bellwether of broad social and linguistic trends affecting his milieu in a time of increased social mobility and contact between members of different castes.

The narrator suggests that the increased physical and social mobility of the modern world increases the randomness of language change, but he also observes that linguistic exchanges resulting from proximity between two castes is not a new phenomenon. When socializing with aristocrats, he notes on several occasions a hint of “le ton paysan de l'ancienne aristocratie,”<sup>121</sup> a reminder of a historical period when the aristocracy lived in the countryside and had closer ties with the peasantry. For example, Mme de Villeparisis says to the historian M. Pierre, “Monsieur je croois que vous voulez écrire quelque chose sù Mme de Montmorency”<sup>122</sup> and the duchesse de Guermantes says, speaking about Rachel, “elle est venue réciter, avec un bouquet de lis dans la main et d'autres lis ‘su’ sa robe,” which leads the narrator to comment, “Mme de Guermantes mettait, comme Mme de Villeparisis, de l'affectation à prononcer certains mots d'une façon très paysanne, quoiqu'elle ne roulait nullement les *r* comme faisait sa tante.”<sup>123</sup> On another occasion, the narrator is charmed by the duchesse's “prononciation presque paysanne qui avait une âpre et délicate saveur terrienne” when she says that one of her cousins is “bête comme un (heun) oie.”<sup>124</sup> The peasant-like tone of Mme de Villeparisis and the duchesse strikes the narrator as very “vieille France” and evokes a time when the aristocracy spoke more like the peasants that lived on their lands.

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<sup>121</sup> CG, 190.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 469.

The narrator also experiences the linguistic exchanges that result from frequent interactions with members of different castes himself. Because he spends so much time with Françoise, he begins to pick up her patois. He does so almost instinctively, because, he says, “la langue la plus inconnue finit par s’apprendre quand on l’entend toujours parler. Je regrettai que ce fût le patois, car j’arrivai à le savoir et n’aurais pas moins bien appris si Françoise avait eu l’habitude de s’exprimer en persan.”<sup>125</sup> Most speech styles are not as marked as Françoise’s patois, such that proximity with other people from different social backgrounds would not lead to a linguistic exchange on such a conscious level as the narrator displays here, but rather to a more unconscious adoption of others’ speech mannerisms that would lead the duc de Guermantes to begin speaking like a petit bourgeois or Saint-Loup to begin speaking like Rachel without necessarily being aware of it themselves.

These exchanges that occur from regular contact between members of different castes in *A la recherche* appear to be accelerated by romantic relationships. Rachel’s influence on Saint-Loup is one example. Swann and Odette provide another: they famously begin saying “faire cattleya” as a euphemism for having sex, and they also come to share certain, less private speech mannerisms. For example, when the narrator goes to their house, they greet him saying “Comment allez-vous? (qu’ils prononçaient tous deux ‘commen allez-vous’ sans faire la liaison du *t*, liaison qu’on pense bien qu’une fois rentré à la maison je me faisais un incessant et voluptueux exercice de supprimer).”<sup>126</sup> As the narrator’s suppression of the liaison in “Comment allez-vous?” indicates, there is a strong correlation in *A la recherche* between desire, social proximity,

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<sup>125</sup> P, 145.

<sup>126</sup> O, 75.

and linguistic exchange. The narrator is attracted to Gilberte, Swann and Odette's daughter, which leads him to insinuate himself into her social circle and family life, and then to adopt the speech mannerisms he associates with her relations.

Here we begin to encroach on the subject of the next chapter, as desire often leads Proust's characters, like the narrator in this instance, to more consciously adopt speech mannerisms from others in an attempt to draw closer to them. Many characters in the novel are attracted to people from very different social backgrounds from them, and in their efforts to be near the people they desire, they take risks, defy conventions, and enter unfamiliar milieus that otherwise would have little interest for them. To be assimilated into these new milieus, Proust's characters often have to "prendre langue"<sup>127</sup> as the Verdurins put it – they have to get used to the language and conventions of that space. At first, this causes linguistic exchanges that might be conscious, like the narrator's suppression of the liaison in "Comment allez-vous?" However, as Rachel's effect on Saint-Loup's speech mannerisms demonstrates, it can also lead to unconscious habits that persist for years.

Just as the spread of infectious diseases and weeds can serve as a record of people's movements, the speech mannerisms the narrator observes are often indicative of individuals' movement through society. For the narrator, they can serve as records, even centuries later, of close ties between members of different castes. This greatly complicates the relationship between speech and social status, because it reveals that speech mannerisms still have a link to their caste of origin even as they leave it behind. The narrator's observation that "quand on s'appelle" is a petit bourgeois expression relies

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<sup>127</sup> CS, 212.

on the assumption that there is a particular way of speaking associated with the petite bourgeoisie. As they move across social boundaries, speech mannerisms retain the association with their caste of origin, which causes individuals' social identity to begin to splinter: for a short while, the narrator listens to the duc de Guermantes and hears a petit bourgeois, creating an association between the duc and the petite bourgeoisie that becomes stronger over time and foreshadows the duc's gradual loss of social status over the course of the novel.

As observed by the narrator, speech mannerisms can be adopted by people from different social backgrounds in a way that conveys some of their original sociolinguistic value onto the speaker. Speech mannerisms are not fixed to a single position in society, but they do retain an association with the social contexts in which they originate and are most frequently used. This point will be central to the following chapter, in which I will discuss how characters in *A la recherche*, as well as Proust himself, attempt to manipulate this association between speech mannerisms and the milieu in which they are typically used in order to take on different identities.

## VI

### *Changes in Albertine's Speech*

We have now introduced the main factors influencing speech mannerisms identified by the narrator (excepting conscious efforts to change one's speech). In different parts of the novel, he observes that family, intelligence, and contact with people from different milieus shape speech. He interprets speech mannerisms accordingly, as evidence of his acquaintances' personalities and social trajectories, developing different

explanations for linguistic behavior depending on the situation and the individual he is analyzing.

Over the course of his semiotic apprenticeship, his understanding of the relationship between speech and social status evolves, but none of his theories of what influences the way a person speaks gains complete dominance. Eve Sedgwick writes that Proust's work is characterized by "nonce taxonomy," or "the making and unmaking and remaking and redissolution of hundreds of old and new categorical imaginings concerning all the kinds [of people] it may take to make up a world."<sup>128</sup> Certainly, we have seen that the narrator introduces many, at times conflicting, methods of categorizing people through his comments on speech. The profusion of explanations that the narrator provides for linguistic behavior indicate a hesitation as to what ultimately determines the way a person speaks, especially what causes individuals to adopt mannerisms from different castes.

As an example of his hesitation between different explanations for why people adopt speech mannerisms from different castes, consider the narrator's description of Albertine's new vocabulary when he meets her in Paris. At the end of his stay in Balbec, the narrator made a move on her, but she turned him down. After a period of separation, she comes to Paris and visits him in his room. They talk, and the narrator notices that her vocabulary has expanded, making her sound more distinguished. Listening to her talk, he reflects on her new vocabulary and tries to determine what has caused it to change and what it entails for his relationship with her. He quickly concludes that the changes in how she expresses herself indicate a personal development away from her family and from the

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<sup>128</sup> Sedgwick, 23.

Albertine that refused his advances in Balbec. Describing her new vocabulary, he observes, “C’était si nouveau, si visiblement une alluvion laissant soupçonner de si capricieux détours à travers des terrains jadis inconnus d’elle que, dès les mots ‘à mon sens’, j’attirai Albertine, et à ‘j’estime’ je l’assis sur mon lit.”<sup>129</sup> Then, when she uses the word “mousmé” (an adjective derived from the Japanese noun “musume,” “娘,” for young girl), the narrator is so certain that she has changed and will no longer refuse his advances that he invites her to tickle him. She is on the verge of climbing into bed with him to test out his ticklishness when Françoise interrupts the two.

That the narrator’s linguistic observations drive this pivotal moment in the narrative, beginning the romantic liaison with Albertine that spans several volumes, is an indication of just how central his interest in speech mannerisms is to the novel. Although the conclusion of his analysis of her new vocabulary is very clearly, “I can have sex with Albertine now, she won’t reject me again,” he is not as certain about how she learned the new words. He says, “[mousmé] me parut révélateur sinon d’une initiation extérieure, au moins d’une évolution interne.”<sup>130</sup> he is convinced that she has grown beyond the limitations of her family and that her new vocabulary is indicative of a new worldview, one that is not opposed to sex, but he cannot tell if Albertine’s new way of speaking results from romantic experiences with someone from a different milieu or from a personal development.

Although he cannot determine where or how Albertine picked up her new vocabulary, he associates it with a social position above that of her family, closer to that of his own. He explains,

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<sup>129</sup> CG, 345.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 347.



le milieu d'Albertine ne me paraissait pas pouvoir lui fournir 'distingué' dans le sens où mon père disait de tel de ses collègues qu'il ne connaissait pas encore et dont on lui vantait la grande intelligence: 'Il paraît que c'est quelqu'un de tout à fait distingué.' 'Sélection', même pour le golf, me parut aussi incompatible avec la famille Simonet qu'il le serait, accompagné de l'adjectif 'naturelle', avec un texte antérieur de plusieurs siècles aux travaux de Darwin. 'Laps de temps' me sembla de meilleur augure encore.<sup>131</sup>

Again in this passage we see that, even as the narrator observes individuals adopting language from different social milieus, each expression or mannerism still has a link with a social position: Albertine is not a well-educated, bourgeois professional, but she sounds like one. This link is not strong enough for the narrator to be certain that Albertine learned to use words like "distingué," "sélection," and "mousmé" through direct contact with people from different milieus – perhaps she has been reading a lot and matured intellectually to the point that her mental class has changed. This hesitation is strange, because the narrator knows that Albertine frequently catches the attention of people from wealthier families on account of her attractiveness, and that she regularly gets invited to spend time with them. For example, she has a close relationship with Andrée, who is wealthier and more intellectual. Despite this, the narrator leaves room for the possibility that Albertine has just gotten smarter.

Of course, the ambiguity of the narrator's comment that "[mousmé] me parut révélateur sinon d'une initiation extérieure, au moins d'une évolution interne"<sup>132</sup> means that it can be interpreted as an observation about either the intellectual or the sexual

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<sup>131</sup> CG, 345.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 347.

maturation of Albertine. The narrator leaps from the observation that Albertine speaks in a more refined manner to the assumption that she has either had sex or is ready to.

The narrator's uncertainty about whether to ascribe Albertine's more sophisticated language to contact with someone from a different milieu or to her own intellectual development is characteristic of a broader hesitation throughout the novel between the two, which often go hand in hand. After noting Albertine's use of "à mon sens" and "j'estime," the narrator comments that,

il arrive que des femmes peu cultivées, épousant un homme fort lettré, reçoivent dans leur apport de telles expressions. Et peu après la métamorphose qui suit la nuit de noces, quand elles font leurs visites et sont réservées avec leurs anciennes amies, on remarque avec étonnement qu'elles sont devenues femmes si, en décrétant qu'une personne est intelligente, elles mettent deux *l* au mot intelligence.<sup>133</sup>

According to him, a metamorphosis occurs on the wedding night that affects the woman's speech and makes her appear more mature – there is a linguistic and intellectual exchange that takes place in conjunction with romantic experiences that cross social and intellectual boundaries.

Although the narrator never knows for sure whether Albertine had an erotic experience with a more educated person (her golfing friend, who turns out to be a talented playwright? Andrée?), he later ascribes her intellectual growth to his own contact with her. Admiring the style of her writing in her letter after they separate, he says, "j'admiraï aussi comme la cycliste, la golfeuse de Balbec, qui n'avait rien lu qu'*Esther*

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<sup>133</sup> CG, 345.

avant de me connaître, était douée et combien j'avais eu raison de trouver qu'elle s'était chez moi enrichie de qualités nouvelles qui la faisaient différente et plus complète.”<sup>134</sup>

When he first begins to notice Albertine's changing speech mannerisms, he cannot be certain that they result from contact with a more cultured person, but he becomes that person himself. Even if her new speech mannerisms did not result from a relationship with someone from a higher social position than that of her family, they do lead to such a relationship. Here, we see again how, in *A la recherche*, the interpretation of speech mannerisms can actually contribute to a change in a person's social identity to bring it into alignment with how it is perceived. The narrator demonstrates how “notre identité sociale est la création de la pensée d'autrui” in that his interpretation of the sociolinguistic information in Albertine's speech leads her to become what he thinks she might be – a woman who has lovers that are wealthier and more cultured than her.

## VII

### *Intelligence and Crossing Social and Linguistic Boundaries*

At the beginning of this chapter, we saw that the narrator tries to orient himself within physical space by way of “suppositions” when he wakes up in the middle of the night. When orienting himself within his social space, he also proceeds by way of suppositions. He makes suppositions about the personality, background, and relations of the people he meets. At the same time, he makes suppositions about the nature of the signs through which he interprets others' identity: are they signs of that person's caste, intelligence, or social relations beyond their caste? Supposition is a broad term that could

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<sup>134</sup> AD, 51.

refer to a guess, a hypothesis, or an assumption, and the narrator's comments on others' speech span this entire spectrum: at times he is more hesitant, for example when interpreting Albertine's new vocabulary, at times he speaks with more confidence, for example when he describes the duc de Guermantes's petit bourgeois way of expressing himself. He tends to think he knows where speech mannerisms originate – he associates them easily with a specific caste (the bourgeoisie, peasantry, etc.) or a specific person (Bloch, Rachel, etc.), but he finds it more challenging to determine why others adopt those mannerisms and thus what they communicate about them. By articulating several different explanations of what drives people to adopt new speech mannerisms from outside of their own caste, he betrays a hesitation concerning the nature of intelligence and social mobility, their relationship with one another, and their relationship with language. Is it because people have been exposed to different social milieus that they develop speech mannerisms that make them seem intelligent or is it because they have developed speech mannerisms that make them seem intelligent that they gain admittance to different social milieus?

The narrator's differing explanations for what determines linguistic behavior provide him with different perspectives through which he observes and describes others' identities. Although each individual observation is really a supposition – he guesses at the nature of the signs he interprets and thus at what they reveal, they accumulate over time, creating a composite notion of others' identities assembled from many different perspectives. As when he describes the experience of waking up in the middle of the night, he moves through differing hypotheses that together, create a disorienting kinetoscopic effect: he attempts to confirm and improve his mental representation of the

social space around him, but the constant modification and reevaluation of his conception of others and their position in society is also disorienting. At varying points in his relationship with each person, the narrator is more or less confident in the accuracy of the image of them that he has created in his own mind, and he periodically steps back to consider the transformation of each individual and of society as a kaleidoscopic spectacle to take in, but that is fundamentally incomprehensible. However, he always returns to the kinetoscopic response to disorientation of trying to situate oneself through analysis and suppositions. As is clear in the scene with Albertine, his efforts to analyze others' identities are often motivated by desire, adding a third layer of suppositions to his thoughts (Is this person interested in me romantically?) that provides a powerful impetus to try and pin down others' background and personality.

Like Albertine and Saint-Loup, Swann, Charlus, and Jupien move through different milieus and have erotic experiences that cross social boundaries and attract the narrator's interest, Swann with Odette, and Charlus with Jupien. Each of them also impresses the narrator with their eloquence and intelligence. Through these relationships, the narrator of *A la recherche* links intelligence with the ability to see past the limitations of caste: given the narrator's association of how people speak with how they think, it is not just that "un homme lettré" would never have said "quand on s'appelle le marquis de Saint-Loup, on n'est pas dreyfusard," but also that he would never have thought it. For him, intelligent people know that social background does not necessarily dictate beliefs and relationships and act accordingly, by adopting ideas, friends, and lovers from other castes. Indeed the narrator ties intelligence so closely to contact with individuals from other castes that it is unclear which leads to the other. This confusion occasionally

extends to his comments on language, making it impossible for the narrator to determine whether Albertine's linguistic refinement is indicative of intellectual growth or exposure to people from different social backgrounds.

One reason for this confusion is that characters in *A la recherche* pick up new means of expressing themselves through literature as well as through contact with other milieus. Jupien is the best example of this. The narrator observes that, “sans culture probablement, il possédait ou s'était assimilé, rien qu'à l'aide de quelques livres hâtivement parcourus, les tours les plus ingénieux de la langue.”<sup>135</sup> This is one of the main ways that the narrator connects his interest in speech to his interest in literature: both entail a sensitization to how people express themselves. Making the connection between literature and exposure to different speech styles even more explicit, the narrator states while complimenting the eloquence of the aristocrats in the Guermantes's salon that, “Un littérateur eût de même été enchanté de leur conversation, qui eût été pour lui [...] un dictionnaire vivant de toutes ces expressions qui chaque jour s'oublie davantage : des cravates à la Saint-Joseph, des enfants voués au bleu, etc.”<sup>136</sup> The narrator believes writers would take delight in experiences with different milieus, presumably because they could use what they learn to refine their own style or increase the linguistic diversity of their works. In turn, literature becomes an important depository of styles that can be substituted for direct contact with other milieus.

Through literature, characters like Jupien are exposed to different styles of speech. The characters in the novel that are particularly “lettré” also gravitate towards relationships with people from different social backgrounds. In the next chapter, I will

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<sup>135</sup> CG, 15.

<sup>136</sup> CS, 533 - 534.

show that desire leads Proust's characters to fixate on others' speech to such an extent that, at times, what they are attracted to is not so much a specific person as contact with a style of speech and through it, with someone of a particular social milieu. In *A la recherche*, interest in literature and desire that crosses social boundaries feed into one another because they are both motivated by attraction to different styles of speech.

## Chapter 3

### Speech and Imposture

#### I

#### *Pleasing Charlus*

In *Le Temps retrouvé*, the narrator discovers a male brothel. Jupien manages the establishment on behalf of the baron de Charlus, who conceived and funded the venture for his own pleasure – he is more a patron (in both senses of the word) than an owner motivated by profit. Frequenting the brothel as a particularly valued client, he prefers to avoid involvement in its day to day management, because he believes that running the brothel would make it harder to enjoy himself: the narrator explains that, “s’il voulait qu’on préparât ses plaisirs, [Charlus] voulait se donner à lui-même l’illusion que ceux-ci n’étaient pas préparés.”<sup>137</sup>

To this end, Jupien works behind the scenes to coordinate prostitutes who play-act into Charlus’s fantasies. Of course Jupien has other clients, but most of what the narrator observes in the brothel is a sort of interactive erotic theater with prostitutes performing for Charlus’s benefit. The baron is attracted to brutal men, but immoral thugs being rather difficult to locate (and presumably dangerous to work with), Jupien hires relatively naïve, innocent men and invents a fictional backstory full of heinous deeds for them, namely that they are “barbeaux” from Belleville who would prostitute their own sister.<sup>138</sup> He relates this story to Charlus before presenting the men, who then do their best to play the role Jupien has created for them.

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<sup>137</sup> TR, 135.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 131.



In these performances, the prostitutes change the way that they speak, using slang and vulgarity, to convince Charlus that they do in fact come from a criminal milieu. This behavior is one example of a linguistic phenomenon that the narrator observes on many occasions in different settings: individuals manipulate the socioindexical value of language in order to appear to be someone that they are not. They engage in linguistic impostures.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the narrator's comments on how individuals unintentionally adopt speech mannerisms associated with different milieus. For instance, the duc de Guermantes's "quand on s'appelle"<sup>139</sup> is not part of a conscious strategy to present himself as petit bourgeois – the association his exclamation creates between himself and the petite bourgeoisie is accidental, not desired. In this chapter, I will present the narrator's comments on individuals' intentional adoption of speech mannerisms from a different milieu to shape how they are perceived or take on an entirely new social identity.

How people use speech to project an illusory identity is a topic that interests the narrator throughout the novel, from his comments on La Berma's diction to his analysis of the lift operator's pretentious use of expressions associated with the bourgeoisie and aristocracy. The narrator also describes how Charlus and Bloch manipulate the socioindexicality of speech to avoid prejudice towards men who are attracted to men and Jews. All of these figures change the way they speak to perform an identity, and the narrator's comments on them are united in a broader investigation of speech and its ties to theatricality that traverses the entire novel.

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<sup>139</sup> CG, 226.

However, the narrator treats attempts to sound like someone from another milieu differently from La Berma's theatrical control over her diction or Charlus and Bloch's strategies for avoiding prejudice. When a person uses speech mannerisms associated with other milieus, it elicits a particular mocking and often derisive response from the narrator.

What the narrator ridicules is not so much that these attempts to sound like someone else are fraudulent or illegitimate (although that is often implied), but rather that they are artless. For example, when the prostitutes change the way they speak to try and convince Charlus that they are pimps and thugs, it does not work: Charlus is disappointed by "cet effort factice vers la perversité qui n'aboutissait qu'à révéler tant de sottise et tant d'innocence."<sup>140</sup> Expressing his dissatisfaction with one prostitute, he says to Jupien, "je ne le trouve pas assez brutal. Sa figure me plaît, mais il m'appelle crapule comme si c'était une leçon apprise."<sup>141</sup> The narrator overhears another prostitute ineptly trying to sound corrupt by ridiculously claiming that "quand j'étais gosse, je regardais par le trou de la serrure mes parents s'embrasser."<sup>142</sup> Realizing that his attempt to sound naughty is not succeeding, he tries to compensate with vulgarity by adding, "Fous-moi un rencart' (un rendez-vous)."<sup>143</sup> Charlus is not fooled, and the narrator explains that, "on sentait le chiqué, comme dans les livres des auteurs qui s'efforcent pour parler argot."<sup>144</sup> There is some irony in this statement, because "chiqué" is itself a colloquialism meaning affectation or bluff, but more importantly, the narrator's observation explicitly links the exchanges in the brothel scene to literature. Whether the authors in question use slang to

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<sup>140</sup> TR, 134.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

create a more youthful, urban persona for themselves or to write realistic dialogue for characters from milieus in which the use of slang is common, they are trying to use unfamiliar speech styles, like the prostitutes, to create illusory identities. And, the narrator points out, the effect flops because it sounds forced. Of course the narrator ridicules people who try to use speech mannerisms from other milieus because they are panderers or vain social climbers, but first and foremost, he mocks them because they are *bad artists*: they don't put on a convincing performance, they speak in a way that is so obviously inauthentic.

The brothel scene demonstrates three aspects of linguistic imposture (borrowing speech mannerisms from a different milieu to project an illusory identity) presented by the narrator that I will examine in greater depth below. First, as observed by the narrator, linguistic imposture is driven by desire (and the desire to please): Charlus is attracted to a specific type of person, so the prostitutes change how they speak to convince him they are who he wants them to be. Second, it is difficult to pull off: the men's attempts to sound like perverted brutes end up just communicating how innocent and naïve they are. And third, linguistic imposture is an exercise in creating and maintaining a fictional identity analogous to that which writers perform when they try to spice up their texts with different styles of language. Proust portrays the prostitutes as clumsy ingénus making gaffes in their eagerness to please Charlus, but the way he frames the scene, between a discussion of Charlus's willful suspension of disbelief and a reference to authors' use of slang, indicates that there is more at stake in it than bawdy humor. What interests him in these exchanges is how the artifice is related to art, especially what it reveals about the role of speech styles in fiction – how they can be used to create an illusion of identity, but

also how their misuse can disrupt that illusion. Through his criticisms of these linguistic performances, the narrator suggests his own thoughts on how to use different speech styles to project a fictional identity in a self-referential gesture to the novelist's craft.

In this chapter, I will discuss these three aspects of linguistic imposture in *A la recherche* to show what they reveal about the narrator's conception of the relationship between speech and identity and to show how they fit into Proust's approach to the novel.

## II.a

### *The Desire to be Admired*

The prostitutes' interactions with Charlus are an extreme and particularly striking incidence of Proust's characters changing how they speak to project an illusory identity, because they are attempting to totally transform who they appear to be for a single client by adopting an unfamiliar speech style. However, many of Proust's characters borrow a few speech mannerisms from other milieus in order to control how they are perceived in less radical ways, such as to seem more cultivated and wealthy. This entire spectrum of linguistic behavior, from adopting a totally different speech style to borrowing a few speech mannerisms, is driven by what the narrator calls in a discussion of his first impression of Andrée "a desire to be admired."

When he first encounters Andrée, the narrator assumes that her primary interest is sports and that she comes from a robust, vivacious, working class milieu, largely because she and her friends use slang that he associates with that milieu. Later he learns that Andrée is from a bourgeois family and her primary interest is actually translating George Eliot and not, as he had thought, bicycle races. She appeared athletic to him because her

doctor had ordered her to take up sports to overcome “sa neurasthénie et ses troubles de nutrition.”<sup>145</sup> Neurasthenia is a designation for a psychological condition characterized by low energy and nervous exhaustion that is now defunct. George Beard popularized the concept of neurasthenia with his book, *American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences* (published in 1881), in which he argued that rates of neurasthenia were particularly high in the United States because the intense activity of its population left many in a state of physical and mental fatigue.

Proust’s father, Dr. Adrien Proust, co-authored a book on neurasthenia with Gilbert Ballet, *L’Hygiène du neurasthénique*, that was published in 1887. In this text, he and Ballet argue that neurasthenia is a hereditary condition triggered and exacerbated by certain environmental factors.<sup>146</sup> Referencing Beard’s work, they argue that there had been an increase in rates of neurasthenia during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe and in the United States due to increased competition between individuals as societies moved away from more rigid social hierarchies. They write,

Autrefois, les classes étaient comme parquées derrière des barrières infranchissables et bien peu, hormis les forts, cherchaient à sortir du milieu où le hasard de la naissance les avait placés. Aujourd’hui les lois et les mœurs ont supprimé ces barrières, chacun s’efforce de s’élever plus haut que ses ancêtres ; la concurrence a grandi, les conflits d’intérêts de personnes se sont multipliés dans toutes les catégories d’états ; les ambitions souvent peu justifiées se donnent libre carrière ; une foule d’individus imposent à leur cerveau un travail au-dessus de ses forces ; viennent les soucis, les revers de fortune, et le système

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<sup>145</sup> O, 503.

<sup>146</sup> A. Proust and Ballet, 125 – 127.

nerveux, sous le coup d'une excitation incessante finit par s'épuiser. Ainsi s'expliquerait la fréquence croissante de la neurasthénie à notre époque et sa prédominance dans les villes, parmi les classes moyenne et supérieure, dans tous les milieux en un mot où la culture intellectuelle, ainsi que le trafic commercial et industriel sont portés à leur plus haut degré d'intensité.<sup>147</sup>

It is clear from this passage that underlying the diagnosis of neurasthenia is a bourgeois view of modern society as chaotic and full of people struggling for upward social mobility – aspirants who potentially threaten to compete with members of the bourgeoisie and upend their economic, professional, and cultural dominance. For Dr. Proust and Ballet, however, this new social order presents risks to those trying to achieve upward social mobility, not the bourgeoisie: people become too ambitious and work themselves into a state of nervous exhaustion trying to improve their lot in life beyond what is possible given their talents.

As is evident from this passage, a diagnosis of neurasthenia carries within it a social and intellectual judgment. It is both a medical condition and an expression of social disapproval: the patient is making themselves sick because they refuse to accept their place and acknowledge their limitations. The implication for Andrée is that, as a bourgeois woman, she has gotten above herself by pursuing her interest in translation and literature.

Dr. Proust and Ballet propose that it is possible to prevent neurasthenia from developing or counteract its effects by replacing “l'habitude ancestrale, innée” with

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<sup>147</sup> A. Proust and Ballet, 10.

“l’habitude individuelle, acquise.”<sup>148</sup> In *Histoire de l’Eugénisme en France: Les médecins et la procréation XIXe au XXe siècle*, Anne Carol explains that French doctors were on the front lines of a major scientific and intellectual debate over the role of hereditary and environmental factors in determining a person’s physical, mental, and moral health. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a renewal of interest in the work of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, who developed his own theory of evolution before Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species*. Lamarck argued that organisms transmit characteristics acquired over the course of their lives to their progeny. He believed, for example, that animals would adapt to their environment by using certain organs more, strengthening them, while allowing others to atrophy, and these adaptations would then be transmitted to their descendants. This argument was particularly attractive to many French doctors as an alternative (presented by a Frenchman!) to the distorted, eugenicist versions of Darwinism circulating at the time whose proponents tended towards hereditary fatalism and presented few options for (or even argued against) treating medical conditions considered to be inherited.

Dr. Proust and Ballet position themselves squarely within this neo-Lamarckian moment by arguing that education, habit, and effort can correct and even counteract hereditary characteristics. They write that it is possible to structure a person’s life to help them develop a mental, physical, and moral hygiene that will strengthen their resistance to a congenital susceptibility to certain medical conditions. If some environmental factors, such as a competitive workplace that encourages a sedentary lifestyle and intellectual strain, will trigger a person’s predisposition towards neurasthenia, different conditions

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<sup>148</sup> A. Proust and Ballet, 128.

will help them overcome it. Andrée appears to be following a program of treatment identical to that which they proscribe for neurasthenics, namely avoiding mental strain and engaging in physical activity in a less urban setting.

Andrée uses working class slang in this context, as if it were part of her treatment, a corrective therapy for an intellectual disposition considered dangerous for someone of her class and gender. In another of his works, *Éléments d'hygiène*, Dr. Proust maintains that people can change and improve how they speak through practice. For example, he writes that “Pour bien parler, bien lire et bien chanter, l'éducation et l'exercice sont nécessaires. La lecture à haute voix, la déclamation sont d'une grande utilité, et certains vices d'articulation (bégaiement) sont heureusement traités par l'exercice de la parole et de la lecture à haute voix.”<sup>149</sup> Andrée does not have a lisp or a stutter, but she is pushing herself to adapt how she speaks to conform better to her milieu's ideas about how a young woman should speak. Neurasthenia was believed to be particularly prevalent in the liberal professions in which sedentary lifestyles and mental labor were common. So, Andrée uses slang to distance herself from the milieus associated with neurasthenia, as if it were a sort of sociolinguistic brace that will correct her intellectual bent and bring her identity into alignment with the ideal of a normal bourgeois woman.

The revelation that Andrée is pushing herself to be more physically active and not actually athletic leads the narrator to comment that our first impressions of other people are often false, because “on prend suffisamment l'aspect, les façons de ce qu'on n'est pas mais qu'on voudrait être, pour faire illusion au premier abord. À l'apparence extérieure, l'affectation, l'imitation, le désir d'être admiré, soit des bons, soit des méchants ajoutent

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<sup>149</sup> A. Proust, 29.



les faux semblants des paroles, des gestes.”<sup>150</sup> For the narrator, people have some control over how they speak, which they use to change how they seem to others out of a “*désir d’être admiré.*” Dr. Proust and Ballet write that one of the most powerful means of directing people towards healthy habits is “*l’estime témoignée en public.*”<sup>151</sup> social approval, especially from authority figures like parents and teachers, encourages and reinforces certain thoughts and behaviors until they become automatic. The desire to be admired motivates Proust’s characters to adapt how they speak in response to a similar form of social approval, but in a manner that is more erotically charged. The desire to be admired is a drive to impress others and capture their attention that could refer to a desire to be esteemed (for others to admire your strength, sophistication, wit, success, etc.), a desire to be attractive (for others to admire your beauty), or some combination of the two. This leaves some ambiguity concerning Andrée’s motives: is she trying to make herself more vivacious in order to appeal to potential suitors or as part of a more generalized effort to garner social approval? By pushing herself to seem more athletic, Andrée is trying to correspond better to her own bourgeois milieu’s conception of an ideal, healthy young woman. But there is also some projection in the narrator’s claim as he spends a great deal of time watching Andrée, Albertine, and their friends and is insinuating here that Andrée wanted to be admired by someone like him – she wanted the eroticized attention he was directing at her.

The narrator also stipulates that people are motivated by “*le désir d’être admiré, soit des bons, soit des méchants,*” suggesting some skepticism towards the notion that social approval can be controlled and used in the manner proposed by Proust’s father, to

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<sup>150</sup> O, 503.

<sup>151</sup> A. Proust and Ballet, 147.

encourage healthy habits and self-betterment. The desire to be admired is a mirroring back of others' desires, an attempt to refashion oneself into someone else's ideal that manifests itself in response to a specific individual's preferences, as when the prostitutes try to speak like brutes for Charlus's benefit, or to a more generalized social pressure, as when the lift operator uses expressions like "mon confrère" and "mon collègue"<sup>152</sup> associated with the liberal professions in an attempt to make himself sound more impressive. As is evident in these examples, the desire to be admired reveals a power dynamic within the social space of the novel. Those who control access to resources like money and social status exert influence on how others speak, because so many people need to please them or want to imitate them to improve their own socioeconomic conditions. This is perhaps one reason the narrator presents the desire to be admired as a morally ambivalent force, not, like Dr. Proust and Ballet, as one that can be used to direct people towards "good" habits: it takes form in response to power relations that might be expressed through medical discourse as concern for someone's wellbeing but are ultimately defined by the ability of some people, with their own interests and tastes, to determine which characteristics will be considered worthy of admiration for others.

Anne Henry argues that Gabriel Tarde strongly influenced Proust's conception of society and language.<sup>153</sup> Tarde insists on imitation as the mechanism through which behaviors, customs, and beliefs become distributed throughout society, typically following a "water tower" pattern – they begin in the dominant milieus of a society and

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<sup>152</sup> SG, 186-187.

<sup>153</sup> Henry, *Marcel Proust*: "Pour qui a fréquenté l'œuvre de Tarde et celle de Proust, la communauté des conceptions en matière sociale s'impose avec tant d'évidence que la relation d'influence du premier sur le second s'établit avant qu'entrent en œuvre les documents," 344; "Un des aspects qui a visiblement frappé Proust dans le système de Tarde est la fonction centrale que celui-ci attribue au phénomène du langage," 361.

are then adopted by progressively lower rungs in the social hierarchy.<sup>154</sup> The same is true of linguistic behavior with its “propagation du haut en bas, du supérieur à l’inférieur.”<sup>155</sup> According to Henry, “toujours est-il que la partition tracé par Tarde entre les imitateurs et les inventeurs est si bien respectée par *La Recherche* que deux catégories émergent finalement, les moutons et les élus.”<sup>156</sup> One can in fact find this water tower effect on display in *A la recherche* in the way people imitate the duchesse de Guermantes or when servants speak like socialites. However, Proust’s characters do not just imitate the social elite to win others’ esteem, they also try to please and seduce them. This at times creates a countervailing tendency to the water tower effect, because it leads characters like the prostitutes and Andrée to adopt the speech mannerisms of milieus typically considered beneath them in the social hierarchy. In *A la recherche*, structures of social and economic dependence drive people, especially women, servants, and prostitutes, to recast themselves in a manner that mirrors the social elite, at times by directly imitating their mannerisms but also by attempting to reflect back their desires, which can entail speaking in a more vulgar, less sophisticated manner.

## II.b

### *Oral Fetishes*

Proust’s characters change how they speak to please or impress others, but why does speech specifically become such a focal point in their efforts to garner admiration?

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<sup>154</sup> Tarde, *Les lois de l’imitation*, 240. “L’invention peut partir des plus bas rangs du peuple ; mais pour la répandre, il faut une cime sociale en haut relief, sorte de château d’eau social d’où la cascade continue de l’imitation doit descendre.”

<sup>155</sup> Tarde, *La Logique sociale*, 228.

<sup>156</sup> Henry, *Proust romancier*, 137.

In this section, I will examine how desire for a physical, mental, or social connection with another person manifests itself as a fixation on their speech mannerisms in *A la recherche*. Proust's characters try to change the way that they speak in response to this tendency of desire to coalesce around speech mannerisms.

For the narrator, a major part of what makes a person's speech mannerisms singular is their voice, or the way that the physical contours of the mouth, lips, throat, and sinuses affect the way they speak. Early on in his relationship with Albertine, the narrator becomes fascinated with her nasal intonation, which he explains is perhaps due to,

des hérédités provinciales, une affectation juvénile de flegme britannique, les leçons d'une institutrice étrangère et une hypertrophie congestive de la muqueuse du nez. Cette émission, qui cédait bien vite du reste quand elle connaissait plus les gens et redevenait naturellement enfantine, aurait pu passer pour désagréable. Mais elle était particulière et m'enchantait. Chaque fois que j'étais quelques jours sans la rencontrer, je m'exaltais en me répétant : « On ne vous voit jamais au golf », avec le ton nasal sur lequel elle l'avait dit, toute droite, sans bouger la tête. Et je pensais alors qu'il n'existait pas de personne plus désirable.<sup>157</sup>

The narrator quite graphically evokes Albertine's internal passageways and bodily fluids (mucous, emissions) through his description of the way she speaks and insists that this corporal aspect of her speech makes her desirable. He later notes that, "Albertine avait une prononciation si charnelle et si douce que, rien qu'en vous parlant, elle semblait vous embrasser. Une parole d'elle était une faveur, et sa conversation vous couvrait de

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<sup>157</sup> O, 440.

baisers.”<sup>158</sup> The narrator makes a similar observation when he explains after an angry encounter with Charlus that “il y avait certains êtres qu’il lui suffisait de faire venir chez lui, de tenir pendant quelques heures sous la domination de sa parole, pour que son désir, allumé dans quelque rencontre, fût apaisé.”<sup>159</sup> Speech originates in the body and the narrator and Charlus, in their desirous state, fixate on it because it has a materiality that can lend a sensual aspect to conversations.

What’s more, this sensuality of speech is lasting, because through contact with another person’s speech mannerisms, one becomes familiar with the way they speak and can reproduce it in their absence: the narrator speaks like Albertine to amuse himself when he has not seen her for some time. Imitating her nasal intonation, he says “On ne vous voit jamais au golf” as a way to feel closer to her and exult in her existence. He also imitates her posture, with his body “toute droite, sans bouger la tête,”<sup>160</sup> as if, by speaking and holding himself like her, his body actually became hers. The narrator’s attraction to Albertine manifests itself as a fixation on the way that she speaks because of the sensual connection it creates between them, which is so strong that he can reproduce her speech mannerisms in her absence as a way to invoke her presence and feel physically united with her.

The narrator also takes a strong interest in Albertine’s way of speaking because of what it reveals about how she thinks. Throughout the novel, he displays a strong impulse to understand others’ perspectives, which he refers to as “ma disposition à me mettre à la

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<sup>158</sup> CG, 350.

<sup>159</sup> SG, 30.

<sup>160</sup> O, 440.

place des gens et à recréer leur état d'esprit."<sup>161</sup> And because he believes that the way people think affects how they speak, he attempts to access others' thought processes and reestablish their worldviews by analyzing their speech mannerisms.

His impulse to try to understand how others think intensifies and becomes more specific when he is attracted to them. Enamored with Albertine and her friends in Balbec, he pays very close attention to the way they speak in part because, as he observes, "nos intonations contiennent notre philosophie de la vie,"<sup>162</sup> and thus analyzing how the young women speak allows him to feel psychologically closer to them. Then, as his relationship with Albertine develops, he becomes increasingly obsessed with how she specifically speaks in his efforts to penetrate her worldview and figure out how he fits into it.

In *La Prisonnière* the narrator claims that, "le seul bain de Jouvence, ce ne serait pas d'aller vers de nouveaux paysages, mais d'avoir d'autres yeux, de voir l'univers avec les yeux d'un autre, de cent autres, de voir les cent univers que chacun d'eux voit, que chacun d'eux est; et cela nous le pouvons avec un Elstir, un Vinteuil, avec leurs pareils."<sup>163</sup> This passage is one of the narrator's strongest claims about what he thinks people want and of what he thinks art can do – we thirst after a change of perspectives, and this is possible through the work of great artists. Given the intensity of his engagement with the work of Elstir and Vinteuil and the potential he sees in painting and music, it is curious that he never pursues those art forms. Instead, he is drawn to literature and writing. The justification of this predilection is perhaps to be found in a statement he

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<sup>161</sup> O, 252.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 470.

<sup>163</sup> P, 246.

makes shortly after his comments on Elstir and Vinteuil. Singling out music as a particularly rich art form, he explains,

je me demandais si la musique n'était pas l'exemple unique de ce qu'aurait pu être — s'il n'y avait pas eu l'invention du langage, la formation des mots, l'analyse des idées — la communication des âmes. Elle est comme une possibilité qui n'a pas eu de suites, l'humanité s'est engagée dans d'autres voies, celle du langage parlé et écrit.<sup>164</sup>

In this passage, the narrator is not so much lamenting the outcome of humanity's attempts to communicate as he is contemplating the possibility of another existence in which the dominant method of communication would be music. At the same time, he indicates that humanity opted to pursue "la communication des âmes" through language. Most people, including the people he is most intent on understanding – Albertine, her friends, and his other romantic interests – are neither musicians nor artists, but the narrator explores the possibility of a "communication of souls" with them through his analyses of how they speak. Commenting on the young women in Balbec, he explains, "leurs paroles détonnaient, pareilles à ces strophes des temps antiques où la poésie encore peu différenciée de la musique se déclamait sur des notes différentes" and compares their voices to musical instruments – it is as if their speech contained within it the residue of that unexplored, undeveloped musical means of communication between souls.<sup>165</sup> And he treats their way of speaking in the same way he treats music, as a means of accessing and understanding another person's perspective.

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<sup>164</sup> P, 246 - 247.

<sup>165</sup> O, 470 and 479.

The narrator's observation that "nos intonations contiennent notre philosophie de la vie"<sup>166</sup> also suggests a more radical possibility, namely that because our worldviews are actually contained within our speech mannerisms, to speak like someone else is to adopt their worldview. Speech provides us with a way to not just understand another's perspective, but to actually enter into and experience it.

The belief that language is very closely tied to how people think, to the point that it actually contains their worldview, is of course not particular to the narrator. Specifically, the narrator's comments on the relationship between language and thought are reminiscent of Arthur Schopenhauer's theory of language. Schopenhauer, whom the narrator references in a praising manner, writes that,

If one has properly grasped the spirit of a foreign language, one has also taken a large step toward understanding the nation that speaks that language for, as the style is related to the mind of the individual, so is the language to the mind of the nation. A complete mastery of another language has taken place when one is capable of translating not books but oneself into the other language, so that without losing one's own individuality one can immediately communicate in that language.<sup>167</sup>

Like the narrator, Schopenhauer believes that the way people think shapes the way they speak and, consequently, it is possible to access and appreciate others' worldviews by becoming familiar with and understanding how they speak. Schopenhauer, however, takes this line of thought a step further than the narrator to consider its implications for

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<sup>166</sup> O, 470.

<sup>167</sup> Schopenhauer, 33 - 34. For an example of the narrator's apparent esteem for Schopenhauer, see TR, 46.



foreign language acquisition, claiming that to speak other languages is to translate oneself into them, to recreate one's identity within a different language, perspective, and culture.

In practice, the narrator pursues the possibility of using language to move into others' worldviews through his role as narrator. In a rare moment of narrative self-reflexivity in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, he explains that,

Il y a des moments où pour peindre complètement quelqu'un il faudrait que l'imitation phonétique se joignit à la description, et celle du personnage que faisait M. de Charlus risque d'être incomplète par le manque de ce petit rire si fin, si léger, comme certaines suites de Bach ne sont jamais rendues exactement parce que les orchestres manquent de ces "petites trompettes" au son si particulier, pour lesquelles l'auteur a écrit telle ou telle partie.<sup>168</sup>

In this passage, the narrator compares his own narrative craft to painting and music, the two art forms in which he saw such wonderful, rejuvenating potential to change perspectives. However, whereas Elstir's paintings and Vinteuil's sonata allow the public to experience the world as the artists did, the narrator's aim is to reproduce and describe Charlus's laugh in order to evoke the baron's presence for the sake of his audience. He compares this task to that of orchestras performing Bach's suites. In this analogy, he is the musician, not the composer, who would be Charlus. Antoine Compagnon explains in *Proust entre deux siècles* that Proust associates playing music with a form of possession by the composer: "Charlus reprochait précisément au jeune homme [Morel] de négliger le 'côté médiumnique' de l'interprétation musicale. Le pianiste doit se conduire comme s'il était un médium placé sous le contrôle du compositeur lui-même, comme s'il réincarnait

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<sup>168</sup> SG, 333.

le compositeur.”<sup>169</sup> The narrator presents himself as someone whose goal is similarly to serve as a conduit between the reader and Charlus, to act as a medium through which the reader can have contact with the baron. In this process, it is as if Charlus’s laugh contained part of his identity, the way music contains part of a composer’s identity. Charlus’s laugh is like a magical incantation that, accurately reproduced, would allow the narrator to channel the baron’s spirit so that the reader can experience his presence too.

In *A la recherche*, desire coalesces around speech mannerisms because they provide a means of understanding how others think, but also because they contain within them the promise of establishing a mental or spiritual bond with another person, entering into their perspective, and potentially even channeling their identity. Most radically, the narrator’s interest in Albertine is renewed when he begins to suspect that she has romantic attachments to women and realizes that he may not understand her as well as he thought. His impulse to put himself in others’ place is stimulated and frustrated by his inability to figure her out; his desire for her is augmented by the inaccessibility of her perspective, which leads him to fixate obsessively on the way she speaks. Elisabeth Ladenson writes that the narrator “sees Gomorrah alternately as a foreign country to which he can never be issued a visa, and as a freemasonry with its own incomprehensible rules and indecipherable sign system.”<sup>170</sup> Much of the narrator’s relationship with Albertine revolves around his attempts to crack that sign system, to discover in her way of speaking evidence of her liaisons with women, but also a means to understand and enter into a perspective that resists and excludes him.

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<sup>169</sup> Compagnon, 278.

<sup>170</sup> Ladenson, 16.

Finally, the narrator also ties speech to desire for contact with other milieus. Some of the characters in *A la recherche* have a strong attraction to a particular milieu that causes them to fixate on how the people of that milieu speak, beginning with the narrator who, as mentioned, is partially drawn to the young women at Balbec because of their use of slang that he associates with an athletic, irreverent, working class. Charlus is also attracted to speech styles associated with specific milieus. As we have seen, he seeks out erotic encounters with men who sound like they belong to the criminal underworld of Paris. And he is not the only one of Jupien's clients who comes to the brothel in search of contact with people from particular milieus: the narrator overhears in the brothel "des clients qui demandaient au patron s'il ne pouvait pas leur faire connaître un valet de pied, un enfant de chœur, un chauffeur nègre. Toutes les professions intéressaient ces vieux fous."<sup>171</sup> Foreigners, especially soldiers from other countries (the brothel scene takes place during World War I), are also in high demand; the narrator specifically notes that some clients "réclamaient surtout des Canadiens, subissant peut-être à leur insu le charme d'un accent si léger qu'on ne sait pas si c'est celui de la vieille France ou de l'Angleterre."<sup>172</sup> As evident from these preferences, social and national exoticism dominate the fantasies of the brothel's clients, who view the prostitutes not as individuals but as representatives of a particular profession or nationality. As a result, what engages the clients' desires are traits associated with or considered representative of a group, like certain speech mannerisms. These traits evoke a social or national space with which they are conventionally associated such that, through them, the client has the impression of becoming intimate with a representative of an otherwise forbidden or inaccessible milieu.

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<sup>171</sup> TR, 130.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

For Charlus, the attraction to another milieu goes beyond a mere desire for contact with people of different social backgrounds. As he reviews the prostitutes in the brothel, “Charlus s’arrêtait longuement à chacun, leur parlant ce qu’il croyait leur langage, à la fois par une affectation prétentieuse de couleur locale et aussi par un plaisir sadique de se mêler à une vie crapuleuse. ‘Toi, c’est dégoûtant, je t’ai aperçu devant l’Olympia avec deux cartons. C’est pour te faire donner du ‘pèze.’ Voilà comment tu me trompes.’”<sup>173</sup> He is not just attracted to brutes, pimps, and murderers, he wants to mix with and belong to their seedy milieu himself, which he attempts to do by speaking the way he thinks people from the Parisian underworld speak. He fixates on certain speech mannerisms because he can reproduce them to feel closer to, or even united with, the people he is attracted to.

In the Introduction of this dissertation, I discussed the narrator’s observation that the way people speak was “le but de ma recherche parce qu’il me donnait un plaisir spécifique, le point qui était commun à un être et à un autre.”<sup>174</sup> We might at first assume this remark refers to an abstract, taxonomical pleasure: he derives intellectual gratification from making sense of and organizing the social world around him by classifying people according to their speech mannerisms. His interest in classifying others is, however, sharpened and intensified by his attraction to them. Commenting on the young women in Balbec, he writes,

Les paroles qui s’échangeaient entre les jeunes filles de la petite bande et moi étaient peu intéressantes, rares d’ailleurs, coupées de ma part de longs silences. Cela ne m’empêchait pas de prendre à les écouter quand elles me parlaient autant de plaisir qu’à les regarder, à découvrir dans la voix de chacune d’elles

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<sup>173</sup> TR, 132.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 24.

un tableau vivement coloré. C'est avec délices que j'écoutais leur pépiement. Aimer aide à discerner, à différencier. Dans un bois l'amateur d'oiseaux distingue aussitôt ces gazouillis particuliers à chaque oiseau. L'amateur de jeunes filles sait que les voix humaines sont encore bien plus variées.<sup>175</sup>

The narrator's interest in how others speak is augmented by a desire to forge a connection with them. For him, the way people speak provides a basis on which to classify them, but also the grounds on which a common identity is built, "le point qui était commun à un être et à un autre."

Proust's characters pursue and express a sense of physical, mental, and social union with others through language. The narrator and Albertine, Swann and Odette, Saint-Loup and Rachel – many of the major romantic relationships in the novel are accompanied by a convergence of speech mannerisms. It is the desire for a bond with another person, a shared identity, forged through language, that makes attraction coalesce around speech mannerisms in *A la recherche*.

Many of Proust's characters, like the prostitutes in Charlus's brothel, change the way that they speak in response to this fixation on language. They try to exploit the strong connection between speech and identity to give others the impression of being in the presence of someone that they would want to pursue a relationship with. On both sides of this dynamic, there is a tendency to act as though a person's identity were actually contained within their speech style. The imposter tries to temporarily adopt someone else's identity by speaking like them, and their target is attracted to certain speech styles as a way to establish a connection with the people associated with that way

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<sup>175</sup> O, 469.

of speaking. This is true even when the person who is attracted to certain speech styles, like Charlus, knows that what they are witnessing is a linguistic performance. On both sides of this dynamic, there is an impulse to substitute contact with speech styles for contact with the people associated with them.

Charlus's interaction with the prostitutes is emblematic of how speech styles become embroiled in interpersonal dynamics of desire and power throughout the novel. By using a speech style from another milieu, the prostitutes demonstrate that it is not irrevocably tied to that milieu – people from other backgrounds can imitate and use it. And yet, the prostitutes use the speech style because of its association with that milieu – they want Charlus to think that, because they use slang from the Parisian underworld, they belong to the Parisian underworld. Throughout the novel, Proust's characters display a similarly contradictory attitude towards speech styles. They stretch and test the relationship between speech and identity by adopting new ways of speaking in order to take on the characteristics of the individual or milieu associated with them, demonstrating both that speech styles move across social boundaries as they are learned and acquired by new people and that they retain a link to the people who have used them in the past.

In these linguistic impostures, speech mannerisms are fetishized. They become the site where desires are expressed and satisfied, because they are treated as the key to a person's identity that gives access to their body, mind, and milieu. They are a part of a person or group's identity that takes on an almost magical relationship with the whole, linguistic masks that contain not a god but an individual or group's identity and transfer their attributes to the person who uses them.

### III

#### *Bad Acting*

As tempting as it is to try to shape one's social identity by manipulating sociosemiotic codes, the narrator also observes that it is very difficult to pull off such impostures because of how easy it is to slip and say something that reveals a lack of fluency within a speech style and thus a lack of familiarity with the people who use it. The prostitutes' bungled attempts to sound like pimps and murderers for Charlus are a literary illustration of an argument that Mikhail Bakhtin makes in "Discourse in the Novel." In this essay, Bakhtin points out that individuals have experience with many different speech styles and are capable of using them to differing degrees. For Bakhtin, the individual's ability to understand and use many different speech styles is a universal and fundamental quality of the human faculty for language – no one uses a single, stable way of speaking, we all use a changing amalgam of different styles that each have their own social connotations. However, according to Bakhtin, there are limits to the extent to which we can use speech styles with which we are not very familiar. He writes that when a person tries to speak like someone else, "many words stubbornly resist, others remain alien, sound foreign in the mouth of the one who appropriated them and who now speaks them; they cannot be assimilated into his context and fall out of it; it is as if they put themselves in quotation marks against the will of the speaker."<sup>176</sup> The prostitutes' inept use of slang provides an example of this resistance of words to being used in a new context by someone who is not accustomed to using them.

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<sup>176</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 294.

The narrator invites us to laugh at the expense of the prostitutes, servants, aristocrats, and many other people he encounters who try to use speech styles with which they are unfamiliar to shape how they are perceived because they are bad actors whose linguistic performances he considers unconvincing. But he also experiences the resistance of language to being used by new people in a new context personally when he tries to speak in the patois of Françoise. He picks up this patois almost instinctively, because, he says, “la langue la plus inconnue finit par s’apprendre quand on l’entend toujours parler.” From his perspective, he even begins to pronounce it more or less correctly. He explains that Françoise, however, “trouvait entre nos deux prononciations des abîmes qui la ravissaient, et se mit à regretter de ne plus voir des gens de son pays auxquels elle n’avait jamais pensé depuis bien des années et qui, paraît-il, se seraient tordus d’un rire qu’elle eut voulu entendre.”<sup>177</sup> The narrator shows through his experience with Françoise’s patois that individuals learn new speech styles automatically through contact with people from different backgrounds. However, mastering a new speech style is similar to mastering a foreign language in that, even after he has become comfortable using the patois, there are still traces within his speech that indicate he learned it later in life. Indeed the narrator says he would have preferred it if Françoise had spoken Persian instead of a patois, because he would have learned it just as naturally from the regular contact with her.<sup>178</sup>

The narrator observes while watching Albertine and her friends that speech mannerisms are, like facial features, “des gestes devenus, par l’habitude, définitifs”<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> P, 145.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 470.



and that they are passed down from parents to their children. In doing so, he seems to apply Lamarckianism to language: through repetition and habit, a person's speech mannerisms become fixed characteristics that can be transmitted to their children. Someone might be able to slowly change the way they speak away from the speech style they inherited from their family, but it would take time and practice to replace what Proust's father called "l'habitude ancestrale, innée" with "l'habitude individuelle, acquise."<sup>180</sup> If a person pushes the process too hard, substituting concerted effort for long exposure, their use of the new speech mannerisms will inevitably sound like "une leçon apprise."<sup>181</sup> And even after extensive contact with another speech style, it is doubtful that a person can truly and definitively adopt it, without an accent or other trace of their older way of speaking to betray their origins.

For the narrator, when a person tries to impersonate someone else by adopting their speech style, it also sounds awkward and forced because of the often counterintuitive manner in which identity is communicated through language. For example, what the baron wants from the prostitutes is inherently paradoxical. The narrator observes that, "le voleur, l'assassin le plus déterminé ne l'eussent pas contenté, car ils ne parlent pas leur crime."<sup>182</sup> It is easy to read through this sentence without noticing that it is not that criminals do not speak *about* their crime but rather that criminals do not "speak their crime" ("ne parlent pas leur crime") because we are not used to seeing the verb "parler" used transitively in this manner. For the narrator, crime has no direct connection with language because criminals want to hide their identity and

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<sup>180</sup> A. Proust and Ballet, 128.

<sup>181</sup> TR, 124.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 134.

are actively trying to suppress any obvious signs that might betray the fact that they have committed a crime: criminals do not want to be caught, so they try not to speak, look, or act like criminals. As a result, in order to speak like a criminal, you have to speak like someone who does not want to be identified as a criminal.

The narrator develops his ideas about speech and crime in *La Prisonnière* when he thinks Albertine is being unfaithful to him with other women. Suspicious, he becomes obsessed with Albertine's linguistic tics and what they might reveal about what she does when he is absent. He cannot trust the content of what she says and concludes that "les paroles elles-mêmes ne me renseignaient qu'à la condition d'être interprétées à la façon d'un afflux de sang à la figure d'une personne qui se trouble."<sup>183</sup> Because Albertine, like a criminal, would want to hide her misdeeds, she would not "speak her infidelities" except by accident, so the narrator has to look for clues hidden within the way she speaks that might indicate whether she has been unfaithful.

In fact, the narrator claims that in his jealousy, the *only* thing he can do is pay closer attention to how Albertine speaks. In so doing, he compares himself to a judge trying to determine if a defendant is guilty of a crime. He explains that he is "réduit pour toujours, comme un juge, à tirer des conclusions incertaines d'imprudences de langage qui n'étaient peut-être pas inexplicables sans avoir recours à la culpabilité."<sup>184</sup> The narrator has to consider that Albertine's voice trembles or she hesitates because, for instance, she does not want to reveal something embarrassing, and not because she is trying to hide an infidelity. This leads to a hermeneutic dead end: in the absence of empirical evidence, linguistic slips are all that the narrator has to interpret in his search

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<sup>183</sup> P, 80.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 50.

for the truth, but such slips only reveal that something is being hidden and cannot be definitively interpreted without knowing what is being hidden.

The narrator expands on this dilemma later in *La Prisonnière*, commenting that, "On sait bien que chaque assassin en particulier s'imagine avoir tout si bien combiné qu'il ne sera pris, en somme les assassins sont presque toujours pris. Au contraire, les menteurs sont rarement pris, et parmi les menteurs, plus particulièrement les femmes qu'on aime. On ignore où elle est allée, ce qu'elle y a fait, mais au moment où elle parle, où elle parle d'une autre chose sous laquelle il y a cela, qu'elle ne dit pas, le mensonge est perçu instantanément. Et la jalousie redoublée puisqu'on sent le mensonge, et qu'on n'arrive pas à savoir la vérité."<sup>185</sup>

The narrator knows when Albertine is lying, because she takes on what he claims is "l'intonation de la femme qui ment, commun à toutes les classes,"<sup>186</sup> but his analysis of her speech cannot take him any further, to indicate what she is hiding. Still, knowing that someone is lying is valuable information in itself, so the jealous narrator becomes increasingly obsessed with how Albertine speaks. And eventually she does slip up. In an argument, he offers to give her money so that she can invite the Verdurins to dinner. She responds, "Grand merci! Dépenser un sou pour ces vieux-là, j'aime bien mieux que vous me laissiez une fois libre pour que j'aille me faire casser..."<sup>187</sup> then catches herself and does not finish her sentence. The narrator is tormented by the need to figure out what she was going to say and then realizes that it was "me faire casser le pot," an expression that

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<sup>185</sup> P, 168.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 324.

is so vulgar that “même la dernière des grues, et qui consent à cela, ou le désire, n’emploie pas avec l’homme qui s’y prête cette affreuse expression.” He concludes that a woman would only speak like this with a female lover “pour s’excuser de se donner tout à l’heure à un homme” and that, fatigued and frustrated, Albertine “avait commencé de parler comme elle eût fait avec une de ces femmes, avec, peut-être, une de mes jeunes filles en fleurs.”<sup>188</sup> Distraught, he pretends to want to send Albertine away so that he will not have to explain what he has just realized.

The narrator’s treatment of Albertine’s speech mannerisms should be viewed in the context of a broader epistemological shift that occurred at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Carlo Ginzburg, who describes this shift, argues that during this period, signs were increasingly treated as clues – evidence to be interpreted in order to reestablish a narrative of what happened and who did it. Ginzburg follows this shift back to the Italian art historian Giovanni Morelli, who developed a new method of attributing paintings by looking at small, hidden features within an artist’s style rather than the broad, easily recognizable traits that could be easily imitated by a forger. For Morelli, there are aspects of a person’s style that they can control, but also other, more subtle features, that they are unaware of that give away who the true creator of a painting is. Ginzburg explains that, after Morelli, “the art connoisseur resembles the detective who discovers the perpetrator of a crime (or the artist behind a painting) on the basis of evidence that is imperceptible to most people.”<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> P, 327.

<sup>189</sup> Ginzburg, 88 – 89.

The critic Edgar Wind explains that, for Morelli, “personality should be found where personal effort is weakest,”<sup>190</sup> an argument that Ginzburg associates with Freud, who goes much further to argue that it is possible not just to identify a person from the way they express themselves, but also to gather information about what preoccupies them, their childhood experiences, etc. from speech mannerisms and tics that they are not aware or in control of.

The narrator similarly scrutinizes the way Albertine speaks particularly when she is tired and not paying as close attention, hoping that she will reveal a facet of her personality that she usually suppresses around him. In his relationship with Albertine, the narrator acts like a forensic linguist who tries to determine information about a suspect or perpetrator’s social background, psychology, and behavior from slight idiosyncrasies in the way they use language. For him, once suspicions are aroused, there is a sort of linguistic arms race between the person trying to find the truth and the person trying to hide it: the unfaithful lover and the criminal try harder to erase any signs of their culpability in how they speak, and the jealous lover and judge must pay closer attention to any linguistic slips that might indicate guilt. As the confrontation goes on, it becomes more difficult for the guilty party to maintain their linguistic mask, with the result that even though murderers “ne parlent pas leur crime,” “les assassins sont presque toujours pris.” The guilty suspect’s slips are more Lamarckian than Freudian, however: through her liaisons with women, Albertine develops patterns of thought and speech that she can restrain in the presence of the narrator for a while but that eventually manifest themselves. She cannot hide her sexuality, suppress her true thoughts, indefinitely because they wear

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<sup>190</sup> Wind, 38. Cited by Ginzburg, 89.

grooves in her psyche until, in a moment of inattention, she gives in to her inclination and says something that reveals how she really, *normally*, thinks.

The linguistic arms race between the person hiding the truth and the person trying to find it creates a problem for the prostitute trying to sound like a criminal for Charlus that is almost comical in its convolution. To actually speak like a murderer, the prostitutes would have to speak like a person who does not want to sound like a murderer, but they would have to pretend to slip up from time to time, thus revealing that they are in fact murderers – but not too obviously of course. In short, it would involve a double imposture. The prostitutes would have to sound like someone who is trying to sound like someone else, but not completely succeeding.

Fortunately for the prostitutes, unlike Albertine and the narrator or the criminal and the judge, the prostitutes and Charlus are not working at cross purposes. The prostitutes want to convince Charlus that they are criminals and Charlus wants to believe that they are criminals. The baron is not suspicious. On the contrary, he wants to fall for the prostitutes' imposture and, as a result, the realization that they are only pretending to be criminals is an unpleasant surprise. The narrator explains, "Le client est stupéfié, dans sa naïveté, son arbitraire conception du gigolo, car ravi des nombreux assassinats dont il le croit coupable, il s'effare d'une contradiction et d'un mensonge qu'il surprend dans ses paroles."<sup>191</sup> Whereas the judge and jealous lover are forced "à tirer des conclusions incertaines d'imprudences de langage,"<sup>192</sup> Charlus is forced to confront the innocence of the prostitutes because of their clumsy attempts to communicate guilt.

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<sup>191</sup> TR, 131 – 132.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 50.

The dilemma faced by the prostitutes is representative of a broader issue within the novel: almost everyone is trying to control the way they speak to change how they are perceived, which makes it harder to imitate the way they speak. Servants do not sound like servants, they sound like servants who want to sound like aristocrats. Aristocrats, in turn, do not sound like aristocrats, they sound like aristocrats affecting to speak like peasants. But people from the countryside like Françoise, under the influence of what the narrator calls “le démon du pastiche,”<sup>193</sup> want to sound trendy and urban. Nearly everyone within the novel seems to be possessed by this “démon du pastiche,” meaning that to imitate their speech mannerisms you would first have to understand who they would want to sound like, and then imitate the way they would imitate someone else.

Today, forensic linguists debate the existence of a “linguistic fingerprint,” or the notion that each person has a way of speaking and writing that is as unique to them as their thumbprint and can be used to identify them.<sup>194</sup> In the social space of *A la recherche*, if people have a linguistic fingerprint, it is not in a specific, stable speech style easily associated with them, but rather in the interaction of how they want to be perceived with their level of familiarity with the different speech styles they use to affect how others view them.

Because they do not consider the heterogeneity of individuals’ speech mannerisms and how they try to perform identity, most of the characters in *A la recherche* who try to sound like someone else fail. What’s more, because they do not consider how a person’s motivations affect the way they navigate between different

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<sup>193</sup> CG, 62.

<sup>194</sup> For a fascinating survey of research on this topic, especially as it applies to anonymous online activity see Chi Luu’s “Gone (Cat)Fishing: How Language Detectives Tackle Online Anonymity.”

speech styles, most of the characters in *A la recherche* also fail to disguise their own intentions in imitating others' way of speaking. Their desire to, for example, please others or appear refined or hide their social origins is apparent to the narrator through their impostures. In the end, it is by trying to sound like someone else that they reveal who they are and what they want.

The brothel scene is emblematic of a confrontation between two different strategies of control expressed through language found throughout *A la recherche*. Charlus owns the brothel and determines the roles which the prostitutes must perform. He has immense control over their behavior, which manifests itself as a strong influence on the way they speak. The prostitutes in turn manipulate the socioindexicality of language to give him the impression that they are who he wants them to be in order to gain his favor and presumably get him to give them money. Charlus controls the forms the prostitutes must use to control him.

Any risk that the prostitutes' tactic might succeed and enable them to use Charlus's desires to gain influence over him is mitigated by the fact that, as observed by the narrator, it is functionally impossible for them to satisfy him – their performances are invariably inadequate because it is very difficult to use an unfamiliar speech style.

Even if they were to put on a convincing performance, it is doubtful that the prostitutes might be able to use their influence to radically alter the power dynamics of their relationship with the baron. Anne McClintock writes that “as a theater of signs, S/M grants temporary control over social risk. By scripting and controlling the *frame* of representation [...] the player stages the delirious loss of control within a situation of



extreme control.”<sup>195</sup> This is certainly true of Charlus’s interactions with the prostitutes: he wants to forget that what he is experiencing is a performance, but ultimately he knows that he is the one in charge, even as he plays the role of a powerless victim at the mercy of brutes. The brothel allows him to experiment with an inversion of relations of dominance in a controlled setting.

Kristeva argues that Proust reveals the sadomasochistic dynamics that shape identity because he emphasizes the displays of dominance and submission that govern how people are included or excluded from groups.<sup>196</sup> These displays are often counterintuitive, with many apparent role reversals as in Charlus’s interactions with the prostitutes, because the most dominant social figures, like the Guermantes, abhor simple displays of strength and power as vulgar. Instead, they demonstrate their dominance through a capacity to determine the forms others must adhere to. Similarly, submission is not demonstrated through blatantly obsequious and sycophantic behavior, but rather through attempts to conform to the forms proscribed by others. This is most evident in the Verdurins’ salon, in which new members must “prendre langue,”<sup>197</sup> or learn the social and linguistic customs that structure the salon, like when and how to laugh. Although the narrator discovers “la réversibilité des styles”<sup>198</sup> as Kristeva puts it, or the way forms can be imitated and reproduced, he also observes how difficult it is to inhabit a different speech style. Thus, by controlling the forms others must adhere to, the elite Parisian socialites also ensure that the people who aspire to gain their favor will appear awkward and clumsy, like people stumbling through a foreign language.

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<sup>195</sup> McClintock, 147.

<sup>196</sup> Kristeva, 287.

<sup>197</sup> CS, 212.

<sup>198</sup> Kristeva, 243.

#### IV

##### *Imposture and the Novel*

In writing his novel, Proust uses a broad range of speech styles to produce dialogue for characters from all walks of life in a dynamic social space. The narrator's comments on linguistic impostures in *A la recherche* contain rich sociological and linguistic observations, but the issue of how to best imitate others' use of language is also a matter of immediate practical and technical concern for Proust as a novelist, and he had some considerable expertise on this topic. In his time, Proust was lauded by his friends for the extraordinary impersonations he often performed at social functions;<sup>199</sup> he wrote remarkable pastiches of major French literary figures; and *A la recherche* is itself a testament to his ability to adopt different speech styles and take on different identities. The narrator's comments on linguistic impostures in *A la recherche* provide a means for Proust to hint at his own technique of using language to impersonate other people.

If we extend the narrator's analogy that the prostitutes are like authors who force themselves to use slang, then Charlus represents the reading public (the prostitutes : Charlus :: authors : the reading public). In Proust's time, literary explorations of the Parisian underworld were numerous and popular, as they are today. Like Charlus, the audience for these novels wants to enter into and explore dangerous and criminal milieus, but in a context that is structured to cater to their fantasies. And authors use speech mannerisms associated with these milieus (like slang and profanity) to help arouse and satisfy their audience's interest in them. Like Charlus, part of the reading public seeks out

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<sup>199</sup> Milly, *Les Pastiches de Proust*, 13.

exposure to dangerous or inaccessible milieus through contact with the speech styles associated with them.

But how should a novelist overcome the challenges associated with using unfamiliar speech styles when trying to write dialogue for characters from diverse milieus? Although the narrator does not explicitly lay out a program of how to learn new speech styles or pull off a linguistic imposture, his comments on the prostitutes' attempts to sound like brutes provide an example of what not to do, namely deploy unfamiliar speech mannerisms in a heavy-handed fashion. And he demonstrates an alternative way of handling unfamiliar speech styles in a minor, easily overlooked part of the brothel scene. Before Charlus comes into the room where the prostitutes wait when unoccupied, the narrator watches as “deux clients très élégants, en habit et cravate blanche sous leurs pardessus – deux Russes, me sembla-t-il à leur très léger accent – se tenaient sur le seuil et délibéraient s'ils devaient entrer.”<sup>200</sup> The narrator thinks the men are Russian, and refers to them from that point on as “les Russes,” but the accent of the two men is actually so slight that there is no evidence of it in their one line (“Quoi! Après tout on s'en fiche?”) which they deliver as they attempt to overcome their nervousness entering the brothel.

As opposed to the clumsy prostitute or novelist who draws too heavily on speech styles with which they are not comfortable, the narrator avoids using a Russian accent entirely by limiting the amount of direct speech attributed to the two men and by relying on narrative framing to explain the absence of a marked accent in their one line of dialogue – he tells us they have a very slight accent. Given the difficulty of the role they

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<sup>200</sup> TR, 139.

are called on to perform, the prostitutes would do better to follow the narrator's example. Their imposture would last longer if they spoke less, without trying to replicate unfamiliar speech styles, and relied more on the narrative frame that Jupien creates for them with his stories about their background. Since Charlus has willfully suspended his disbelief, his desiring imagination will do most of the work necessary to turn the prostitutes into pimps from Belleville as long as they avoid any glaring slips that might disrupt the illusion. The same lessons would seem to apply broadly to novelists: they can rely on the imagination of their readers, their desire to be drawn into the story, to fill out the fiction, so long as there are no obvious and jarring incongruities like poorly imitated Russian accents.

Proust also uses his narrator, who is a fictional character and only responsible for the form of the narrative in appearance, to distance himself from the necessity of accurately reproducing different speech styles. A suspicious reader might ask why the two nervous Russians are having a fairly private discussion about entering a brothel for men who want to have sex with men, a very risky act that could have serious juridical and social repercussions if they were caught, in French. But Proust has built in an insurmountable defense to any objections that the two men do not seem or sound like Russians: his narrator has clearly acknowledged that he might be wrong about the nationality of the two men. "Deux russes, *me sembla-t-il.*" Maybe they are Bulgarian or Polish, or maybe they actually are Frenchmen with an accent the author does not recognize, say Basque. Who knows?

As I noted in the introduction, Proust, as opposed to Faulkner, Joyce, or Mann, is less notable for his inclusion of vernaculars than for the extent to which his narrator

analyzes the way different people speak. Instead of using the technique established by realist and naturalist authors, which is to include an abundance of recognizable linguistic markers that immediately communicate essential information about a character's social identity, Proust draws attention to the role of subjectivity in the interpretation of linguistic markers through his narrator's commentary on how others speak. And the narrator often hedges and admits that he misinterprets the socioindexicality of language (for example when he thinks the young women in Balbec are working class), which allows Proust to deflect any potential criticisms about the verisimilitude of the dialogue in the novel. It seems unlikely that many readers would question the narrator's linguistic observations, like that the two men are Russian or that the duc de Guermantes's "quand on s'appelle" is a petit bourgeois expression, but if they did, the skepticism would be directed at the narrator, who makes these claims, and not at Proust.

The fact that the two men the narrator thinks are Russian speak in French is also typical of Proust's approach to dialogue. His characters do not have a single, stable way of speaking but rather move through different speech styles. With the exception of a few individuals like Jupien and the chauffeur who speak simply and naturally, Proust's characters use somewhat foreign speech styles and thus do not have an "authentic" way of speaking. Instead of imitating speech mannerisms typically associated with a milieu, Proust focuses on the interaction of how an individual would want to sound with their background and talents to produce dialogue that often sounds clumsy and inauthentic, but because of the characters' affectations and incompetence, not his own.

Thus far I have focused on the techniques Proust uses to deflect any skepticism about the accuracy of his use of different speech styles. Now let us turn to his techniques

for producing dialogue that communicates the tensions that define the characters' identities. As Milly writes, *A la recherche* "porte de nombreuses traces de l'esprit pasticheur de Proust, dans les conversations des personnages: chacun d'eux a son langage particulier, qui trahit jusqu'à la caricature ses origines, son caractère, ses vices."<sup>201</sup> Milly's statement is a very useful and concise summary of Proust's approach to dialogue and contains several observations that I would like to reinforce.

First, Milly associates Proust's approach to dialogue with pastiche. Proust wrote about the Lemoine Affair in the literary style of authors such as Balzac, Flaubert, Renan, and Michelet, publishing these pastiches in *Le Figaro*. They are now considered some of the defining texts in the genre, to the extent that Richard Dyer calls 1908, the year when Proust began publishing these works, the *annus mirabilis* of pastiche.<sup>202</sup>

The subject of Proust's pastiches – all of them touch on Henri Lemoine's fraudulent and ultimately debunked claim to have found a way of fabricating artificial diamonds – seems to be a reference to Proust's own attempt to counterfeit the style of extremely prestigious authors and play with what Dyer calls, "the borderline of false but plausible."<sup>203</sup> Hannah Freed-Thall similarly argues that, "In his Lemoine Affair pastiches, Proust is enchanted not so much by alchemy and miraculous transformations, but by the failed bluff – the conjuring trick that falls flat."<sup>204</sup> As we have seen, Proust's fascination with the failed bluff is also on full display in *A la recherche* in his narrator's comments on linguistic impostures. From his pastiches to his novel, Proust had a sustained interest in the extent to which it is possible to take on another person or group's identity by

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<sup>201</sup> Milly, *Proust et le style*, 22.

<sup>202</sup> Dyer, 52.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>204</sup> Freed-Thall, 161.

counterfeiting their use of language and in the technical issues that cause these impersonations to succeed or fail.

Because Proust makes a distinction throughout his works between written, literary style and oral, conversational style, from his critique of Sainte-Beuve's literary criticism in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* to his narrator's comments on the style of the fictional author Bergotte, it might seem strange to associate Proust's pastiches with his approach to dialogue. Proust suggests, however, that pastiche is a practice that crosses the oral/written divide when his narrator refers to "le démon du pastiche" in his comments on Françoise's adoption of fashionable, urban speech mannerisms from her daughter. And written pastiches exploit the same ambiguity in the relationship between language and identity that so many of Proust's characters attempt to manipulate to their own benefit. Pastiches rely on the fact that linguistic mannerisms are not permanently and exclusively tied to the people who use them – Proust can imitate Flaubert's way of writing. But, at the same time, pastiches demonstrate that linguistic mannerisms retain their association with the people who have used them when they are adopted by someone new – the pastiche appears to be a text by Flaubert even though it was written by Proust. As we have seen, Proust's characters use language similarly by adopting others' speech mannerisms in order to seem like them.

There are also some illuminating similarities in Proust's approach to pastiche and his technique for writing dialogue for his characters in *A la recherche*. Most notably, instead of reproducing a few aspects of a writer's style, Proust tried to anticipate how they would respond to new circumstances and make new stylistic judgments. Gérard Genette explains that,

Proust se félicitait d'avoir introduit dans son pastiche de Renan l'adjectif *aberrant*, alors peu usité, et qu'il trouvait "extrêmement Renan", bien que Renan lui-même ne l'eût sans doute jamais employé — ou plutôt, pour cette raison même : "Si je le trouvais dans son œuvre, cela diminuerait ma satisfaction de l'avoir inventé." Ce renanisme d'autant plus satisfaisant — et plus conforme aux normes du genre — de n'être pas un simple *renanème* illustre bien, selon le mot même de Proust, la part d'*invention* qu'exige le pastiche.<sup>205</sup>

For many readers, this attention to the role of invention in style, or how an author's style would change and develop in a new context, makes Proust's pastiches particularly successful. For example, Jacques Rivette was an early admirer of Proust's pastiches and wrote to the author that, "Nous nous amusons de voir chaque écrivain 'revenir' tout entier et refaire au contact d'un événement qu'il n'a pas connu, les mêmes gestes exactement par lesquels il réagissait sur ceux que lui apportent la vie. Le foyer de son activité mentale est retrouvé, la lampe allumée dans son cerveau."<sup>206</sup> Rivette describes Proust in the way Charlus describes a good musician, as a sort of medium who channels another's identity. The authors seem to come back to life and speak through Proust, because his pastiches so accurately reflect the innovative, dynamic aspects of an author's style and anticipate how they would react to new events and new stylistic variants.

Pierre Bourdieu was also a great admirer of Proust's pastiches and cites this passage from Rivette and Proust's correspondence in *La Distinction*, adding that, "le pastiche vrai, dont Proust donne l'exemple, reproduit non les traits les plus marquants

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<sup>205</sup> Genette, 84.

<sup>206</sup> Rivette, 326. Also, Bourdieu, *Distinction* 193.



d'un style – à la façon de la parodie ou de la caricature – mais l'habitus.<sup>207</sup> Bourdieu defines habitus as the mental processes that govern individuals' aesthetic judgments and preferences in the competition for social status and distinction. For Bourdieu, Proust's pastiches are so impressive because he reanimates the faculty of judgment that governs how the authors choose between stylistic variants.

In *A la recherche*, Proust similarly focuses on the social and psychological factors that determine how his characters navigate between different speech styles and adopt new mannerisms. As a result, Proust's characters have rich and varied ways of expressing themselves incorporating speech mannerisms from different milieus into a single phrase that reflect the complex and tense interaction of their social background and talents with their desire for admiration and self-advancement. They use language in a way that is both limited and dynamic, that reflects both the influence of their social background and their attempts to improve their social status.

Milly also remarks that each of Proust's characters has a way of speaking that *betrays* their origins, character, and vices. Proust writes in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* that "les beaux livres sont écrits dans une sorte de langue étrangère."<sup>208</sup> As we have seen, however, there is an element of foreignness in nearly everyone's way of speaking in *A la recherche*. From the prostitutes in Charlus's brothel to Françoise to the duchesse de Guermantes, almost all of Proust's characters actively try to adopt new ways of using language that sound foreign in their mouths. It's this inauthenticity in the way people use language – how they learn and invent new mannerisms – that makes it possible to take up the linguistic mask they have created for themselves and pretend to be them.

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<sup>207</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 193.

<sup>208</sup> CSB, 299.

The last part of Milly's observation that I would like to highlight is that each of Proust's characters "a son langage particulier, qui trahit jusqu'à la *caricature* ses origines, son caractère, ses vices."<sup>209</sup> The narrator comments in *Sodome et Gomorrhe* that "il est bien inutile qu'un directeur dépense des centaines de mille francs à acheter des costumes authentiques et des bijoux vrais qui ne feront aucun effet, quand un grand décorateur donnera une impression de luxe mille fois plus somptueuse en dirigeant un rayon factice sur un pourpoint de grosse toile semé de bouchons de verre et sur un manteau en papier."<sup>210</sup> Proust approaches dialogue similarly, often using somewhat exaggerated, caricatural speech mannerisms brought to life by the narrator's explanations and analyses. For example, the German Prince von Faffenheim greets Mme de Villeparisis saying, "Ponchour, matame la marquise"<sup>211</sup> and the narrator explains this very stereotypical accent by commenting that he expected the Prince's speech to evoke "le frôlement des Elfes et la danse des Kobolds" but was disappointed when the German spoke "avec le même accent qu'un concierge alsacien."<sup>212</sup> Many of the hallmarks of Proust's approach to dialogue are present in this passage: the prince is using an unfamiliar speech style in a way that betrays his true origins in an exaggerated manner. The lift operator's attempts to sound like a socialite, or the way the duchesse de Guermantes affects a rural, peasant pronunciation of her r's are only slightly less caricatural.

To bring this chapter to a conclusion, I would like to look at one last passage from *A la recherche* that exemplifies Proust's approach to linguistic imposture as I have described it above. In *Le Côté de Guermantes*, the narrator finds a letter written by a

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<sup>209</sup> Milly, *Proust et le style*, 22. My emphasis.

<sup>210</sup> SG, 274.

<sup>211</sup> CG, 254.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

servant to one of his friends. It reads,

*Cher ami et cousin,*

*J'espère que la santé va toujours bien et qu'il est de même, pour toute la petite famille particulièrement pour mon jeune filleul Joseph dont je n'ai pas encore le plaisir de connaître mais dont je préfère à vous tous comme étant mon filleul, ces reliques du cœur on aussi leur poussière, sur leurs restes sacrés ne portons pas les mains. D'ailleurs cher ami et cousin qui te dit que demain toi et ta chère femme ma cousine Marie, vous ne serez pas précipités tous deux jusqu'au fond de la mer comme le matelot attaché en haut du grand mât, car cette vie n'est qu'une vallée obscure. Cher ami il faut te dire que ma principale occupation de ton étonnement j'en suis certain, est maintenant la poésie que j'aime avec délices, car il faut bien passer le temps. Aussi cher ami ne sois pas trop surpris si je ne suis pas encore répondu à ta dernière lettre, à défaut du pardon laisse venir l'oubli. Comme tu le sais, la mère de Madame a trépassé dans des souffrances inexprimables qui l'ont assez fatiguée car elle a vu jusqu'à trois médecins. Le jour de ses obsèques fut un beau jour car toutes les relations de Monsieur étaient venues en foule ainsi que plusieurs ministres. On a mis plus de deux heures pour aller au cimetière ce qui vous fera tous ouvrir de grands yeux dans votre village car on n'en ferai certainement pas autant pour la mère Michu. Aussi ma vie ne sera plus qu'un long sanglot. Je m'amuse énormément à la motocyclette dont j'ai appris dernièrement. Que diriez-vous mes chers amis si j'arrivais ainsi à toute vitesse aux Écorres. Mais là-dessus je ne me tairai pas plus car je sens que l'ivresse du malheur emporte sa raison. Je fréquente la duchesse de Guermantes, des personnes que tu as jamais entendu même le nom dans nos ignorants pays. Aussi c'est avec plaisir que j'enverrai les livres de Racine, de Victor-Hugo, de Pages choisies de Chenedollé, d'Alfred de Musset, car je voudrais guérir le pays qui me donner le jour de l'ignorance qui mène fatalement jusqu'au crime. Je ne vois plus rien à te dire et t'envoie comme le pélican lassé d'un long voyage mes bonnes salutations ainsi qu'à ta femme à mon filleul et à ta sœur Rose. Puisse-t-on ne pas dire d'elle : Et rose elle n'a vécu que ce que vivent les roses, comme l'a dit Victor Hugo, le sonnet d'Arvers, Alfred de Musset tous ces grands génies qu'on a fait à cause de cela mourir sur les flammes du bûcher comme Jeanne d'Arc. À bientôt ta prochaine missive reçois mes baisers comme ceux d'un frère Périgot Joseph.<sup>213</sup>*

This letter is full of obvious errors that contrast with striking passages of lyricism that the servant has copied, often incorrectly, from Musset, Hugo, and Malherbe in order to impress his friend. It is a pastiche in the older sense of a mélange of borrowed styles. The servant's plagiarism introduces multiple voices into the letter and shows how, for Proust,

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<sup>213</sup> O, 548 - 9.

individuals try to adopt others' linguistic mannerisms to change how they are perceived and, in the process, disrupt any direct, one-to-one relationship between language and identity. Because people already speak in an inauthentic manner, the difficulty of linguistic imposture is to anticipate how a person would attempt, and fail, to use language to project an illusory identity.

For Proust, there is always an element of illusionism in self-expression as people try to impress, pander, or otherwise control how they are perceived by manipulating language to create a new identity for themselves. Although the narrator often sneers at the pretensions and artificiality of the people he meets, their silly displays also introduce an element of invention and theatricality into social life that reveals the potential for artistic linguistic impersonations and transformations of the self. By examining how individuals try and fail to control how they are perceived by changing how they speak, Proust shows how fictions and theatricality arise naturally in social interactions and explores the possibility of using language to take on new identities while demonstrating the technical challenges that limit and disrupt that project. In the next chapter I will discuss further challenges to the project of taking on another person or group's identity by adopting their speech mannerisms that arise as a result of prejudice.

## Chapter 4

### Speech and Discrimination

#### I

##### *The Limits of Assimilation*

In *Marcel Proust et le Jockey Club*, Louis de Beauchamp explains that Proust “connaissait les manières d’être, de faire et de dire des membres du Jockey mieux qu’ils ne les connaissaient eux-mêmes”<sup>214</sup> and yet was unable to gain admittance to the exclusive group. Proust could play the part of refined socialite and member of the Jockey Club, but familiarity with the conventions of the Club were not the only factor used to evaluate candidates: the fact that Proust’s mother was Jewish and his family had no aristocratic lineage most likely worked against him since very few Jewish or bourgeois people were allowed to join the Jockey Club.

Hannah Arendt observes that the members of each of “the cliques” in *A la recherche* use “a mysterious sign-language as though they needed something strange by which to recognize each other.”<sup>215</sup> The “as though” in her observation is critical, because for the most part the members of each milieu in the novel already know who belongs and who does not, who is a regular and who is a newcomer. They do not need a special way of dressing, acting, or speaking to help them identify outsiders. This is particularly evident when the Jewish and gay<sup>216</sup> characters in *A la recherche* use the sign-language to

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<sup>214</sup> Beauchamp, 155.

<sup>215</sup> Arendt, 85.

<sup>216</sup> The narrator of *A la recherche* expresses dissatisfaction with the term homosexuality and most frequently calls gay men *invertis*, but also has several other ways of referring to gay and lesbian people. For a thorough analysis of these various terms that is beyond the

which Arendt refers to indicate that they belong to Parisian high society – they discover, much like Proust, that it is not enough to adopt others’ lifestyle and mannerisms to be accepted by them.

Arendt does not refer specifically to speech styles, but they are clearly a major part of the sign-language she refers to. We have seen over the past three chapters how extensively the narrator investigates the socioindexicality of speech and how people use it to try to confuse social taxonomies and transgress social boundaries. The narrator also observes that the manipulation of the socioindexicality of speech takes on greater urgency in the face of prejudice – he analyzes at length how Swann, Bloch, and Charlus adapt how they speak to fit into milieus typically considered hostile to Jewish and queer people. In this chapter, I will discuss how these three characters use the socioindexicality of speech to avoid or overcome discrimination, as well as the potential futility of this project.

Consider first Swann and his position within the Guermantes’ salon. Like Proust, Swann was raised Catholic in a bourgeois family with some Jewish background, but developed a perfect understanding of the speech mannerisms of Parisian high society. Unlike Proust, Swann is actually accepted into the Jockey Club and develops very intimate relationships with the most fashionable aristocrats in France. The way Swann speaks is indicative of the frequent and close contact he has with those aristocrats, especially the Guermantes: the narrator remarks that if one listened closely to the way Swann spoke, “c’étaient les mêmes phrases, les mêmes inflexions, le tour de la coterie

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scope of this chapter, see Ladenson, 30 – 43. It should also be noted that, although the narrator links male and female homosexuality and takes an interest in both, they are not treated symmetrically. There is far more discussion in *A la recherche* of the experience of gay men in high society than of lesbians, because of the prominence of Charlus but also because the narrator keeps the most important lesbian character, Albertine, hidden away in his home for much of the novel.

Guermantes.”<sup>217</sup> In particular, Swann comes to share a number of speech mannerisms with the duchesse, to such an extent that Kristeva suggests they might be lovers.<sup>218</sup>

In fact, Swann speaks more eloquently than most of the other people frequenting the Guermantes’ salon – he stands out against the backdrop of ignorant and pretentious aristocrats because he has such a refined, subtle way of expressing himself. And unlike the duc and duchesse de Guermantes, he does not take such liberties as affecting the pronunciation of peasants or playfully using the vocabulary of servants. As Jean Recanati explains, if Swann sticks out in the Guermantes’ salon, “ce n’est pas par défaut d’aristocratie, ce serait plutôt par excès.”<sup>219</sup>

And yet, despite Swann’s mastery of the Guermantes’ speech style, his position within their predominantly aristocratic milieu remains tenuous. Early in the novel, a marquise expresses shock that someone with Jewish ancestry like Swann is able to frequent the salons of aristocrats with strong ties to the Catholic Church, adding, “Je sais qu’il est converti, et même déjà ses parents et ses grands-parents. Mais on dit que les convertis restent plus attaché à leur religion que les autres.”<sup>220</sup> Her comment leads nowhere as her interlocutors refuse to turn on Swann, but it demonstrates how some people in the Guermantes’ milieu try to use his Jewish family background to build up antagonism towards him within the salons of the Faubourg Saint-Germain.

The fact that Swann’s family is bourgeois and that he marries a courtesan further marginalize him within the Guermantes’ milieu and his strong belief in Dreyfus’s innocence eventually puts him at odds with prevailing sentiment in the aristocracy,

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<sup>217</sup> CS, 336.

<sup>218</sup> Kristeva, 103.

<sup>219</sup> Recanati, 104.

<sup>220</sup> CS, 329.

causing him to suffer a *déclassement* as his relations with anti-dreyfusards fray.<sup>221</sup>

Towards the end of his life, Swann is a much less prominent figure in the Guermantes' salon than when he first appears at the beginning of the novel.

In short, from a linguistic perspective Swann appears to belong fully to the Guermantes' milieu, but he is still considered and treated as a marginal figure within it. His mastery of the Guermantes' speech style is a constant reminder that an impressive command of a milieu's linguistic conventions does not entail full assimilation into it. As we saw in Chapter 1, the way Swann speaks impresses the duchesse and contributes to his success in her salon, but the ability to speak like a Guermantes does not make him a Guermantes. As someone with a Jewish family background, he can never be fully accepted into their milieu, to such an extent that even though his daughter eventually marries into the Guermantes' family after his death, she does not use her father's name and ceases almost entirely to speak about him, as if she has to suppress her association with him in order to realize his dream of creating a close relationship between his family and that of the duc and duchesse.

Bloch and Charlus also adapt their speech mannerisms to fit into the predominantly Catholic and straight milieus of the Parisian salons. At first the objective of this linguistic behavior might seem straightforward: Swann, Bloch, and Charlus are using the sign-language to which Arendt refers to indicate that they belong to Parisian high society. They use the socioindexicality of speech to disguise that they are Jewish or gay and avoid awakening others' prejudices. However, the motivation behind their linguistic behavior is more complex and troubling than this because many, if not all, of

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<sup>221</sup> CG, 564.



the people in the salons already consider Swann and Bloch as Jews and know that Charlus is gay. What is the point of trying to erase the signs of difference, of using language to seem as though you are not Jewish or queer if people have already categorized you as such?

To discriminate can mean both to identify differences and to treat people differently – unfairly – because of some aspect of their identity. The two meanings of the verb are closely related, because to treat types of people differently, you must be able to identify differences and categorize people into groups. The narrator discusses at length the signs betraying that a person is Jewish or queer and Proust scholars, especially following Eve Sedgwick's *The Epistemology of the Closet*, have analyzed how the struggle to categorize individuals and the attendant drama of ignorance and discovery structures the narrative. However, in *A la recherche*, there is a curious delay between the two forms of discrimination: individuals identify someone as Jewish or gay but do not immediately tell others or act on their knowledge, with the result that people who belong to these heavily stigmatized minorities are allowed to frequent, at least for a time, milieus that are generally hostile to them.

Arendt argues that, in Proust's novel (and in the period of European history depicted in the novel), being Jewish or homosexual was no longer considered a crime to be punished but rather a vice to which fashionable society was drawn out of a sense of perversion. According to Arendt, the professed aversion and secret attraction to Jewish and queer people led to their being accepted into the salons but,

resulted in that typically equivocal situation in which the new members could not confess their identity openly, and yet could not hide it either.

Such were the conditions from which arose the complicated game of exposure and concealment, of half-confessions and lying distortions, of exaggerated humility and exaggerated arrogance, all of which were consequences of the fact that only one's Jewishness (or homosexuality) had opened the doors of the exclusive salons, while at the same time they made one's position extremely insecure.<sup>222</sup>

Arendt's argument would help explain Swann, Bloch, and Charlus's linguistic behavior: consciously or unconsciously, they are using the socioindexicality of speech to navigate this peculiar historical situation in which Jewish and queer people could become central figures in the most prestigious Parisian salons, but only so long as that stigmatized part of their identity remained an open secret that made them seem exotic and mysterious.

In *Le Temps sensible*, Kristeva responds to and criticizes Arendt's argument. For her, the role of Jewish and queer people in the salons of *A la recherche* as both objects of fascination and pariahs does not result from a specific historical situation as Arendt claims, but rather from a sadomasochistic dynamic inherent to all social formations. Kristeva writes that, "Hannah Arendt se trompe: la judéité selon Proust n'est pas un vice. 'Assimilée', insérée dans une autre religion (ici la catholique) au titre d'étrangeté fascinante et abjecte, la judéité manifeste l'inhérence du sadomasochisme au cœur obscur de toute société."<sup>223</sup> Queer people in the novel play a similar function according to Kristeva, for whom, together, "le narrateur, les juifs comme Swann et les homosexuels comme Charlus, détiennent le secret de la société, fût-elle la plus raffinée, celle de Saint-

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<sup>222</sup> Arendt, 82.

<sup>223</sup> Kristeva, 281.

Germain.”<sup>224</sup> This secret is that a sadomasochistic impulse drives dominant groups, like the aristocrats of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, to bring people who are different (bourgeois, Jewish, queer) into their milieu out of a perverse attraction to that which disgusts them and a need to demonstrate and take pleasure in their own dominance over other types of people.

From this perspective, the way Swann, Bloch, and Charlus speak indicates subservience, a willingness to ply themselves to others’ linguistic conventions, that allows the regulars of the salons to feel and enjoy their dominance as these marginal figures struggle to look, act, and speak like them. One result of this sadomasochistic dynamic, however, is that it gradually confuses social taxonomies as people like Swann actually master the “mysterious sign-language” of high society and become both marginal and central figures within it, blurring the boundary between who belongs to the most exclusive milieus and who does not and subverting the notion of an “identité de langage,”<sup>225</sup> or a group identity demarcated by specific stylistic and linguistic features.

Arendt and Kristeva provide us with two powerful explanations of the equivocal situation of Swann, Bloch, and Charlus within the salons that have been very influential in scholarship on Proust’s treatment of topics related to Jewish and queer identity. To this discussion, I will bring a close analysis of the role that speech styles play in the experience of these characters in order to show how they adapt linguistically to their precarious position within the salons as well as the (limited) role that speech styles play in structuring the social space of *A la recherche*.

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<sup>224</sup> Kristeva, 278.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 287.

In the next section I will present how Bloch, who is from a Jewish family without much social status, uses the socioindexicality of language to reinvent himself as a socialite. In Section III, I will examine Charlus's linguistic strategy for deflecting suspicions about his sexual orientation. Finally, in the last section, I will discuss the role of performance in Swann, Bloch, and Charlus's experience and how it has been understood by scholars in order to show how the association of Jewish and queer people with theatricality contributes to the fragility of their position within Parisian high society.

## II

### *Bloch's Semiotic Apprenticeship*

The narrator's friend Bloch undergoes a radical social transformation over the course of the novel: he enters the narrative as a tactless youth from a poorly regarded Jewish family but becomes an elegant socialite and regular of the Guermantes' salon by its conclusion. Because the narrator follows Bloch's social trajectory and notes the peculiarities in his friend's speech mannerisms, Bloch's character arc provides us with a rich and detailed example of the role speech styles play in anti-Semitism and social mobility in *A la recherche*.

For much of the novel, the narrator portrays Bloch as eager to build a social network beyond his family's insular Jewish milieu, but frustrated in this pursuit by his gauche and caustic personality. From a Jewish family that is "peu estimée" by Christians and by "les couches superposées des castes juives supérieures à la sienne," Bloch is also, according to the narrator, "mal élevé, névropathe, snob."<sup>226</sup> He has neither the social

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<sup>226</sup> O, 311.

graces to convince others to overlook his pedigree nor the pedigree to convince others to overlook his lack of social graces, and thus finds himself shut out of bourgeois and aristocratic circles for much of his early life.

Like the narrator, Bloch goes through a semiotic apprenticeship, only his is more painful as he has to slowly learn how to speak and behave in high society through humiliating errors and rejections. Over the course of this apprenticeship, Bloch's speech mannerisms reflect the narrowing social distance between him and the milieus he wishes to frequent: initially, he has a harsh nasal intonation and makes grating mistakes like mispronouncing "Venise" as "Venaïse"<sup>227</sup> that mark him as an outsider but by the end of the novel he has acquired a distinctive "chic anglais" and a haughty voice "où le nasonnement d'autrefois prenait un air de dédain d'articuler"<sup>228</sup> that match his status as a regular of the Guermantes' salon.

Although the narrator is surprised by Bloch's metamorphosis in *Le Temps retrouvé*, in retrospect it is evident that this change was already underway in his early interactions with his friend. In Balbec, the narrator overhears Bloch mocking the pronunciation of other Jews in the beach town, saying "Je ne suis pas par principe irréductiblement hostile à la nationalité juive, mais ici il y a pléthore. On n'entend que: 'Dis donc, Apraham, chai fu Chakop.'"<sup>229</sup> Then, when the narrator visits with Bloch's family, his friend is irritated by his uncle's use of words like "Schlemihl" and "Meschorès" that are part of "ce dialecte mi-allemand, mi juif dont l'emploi ravissait M.

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<sup>227</sup> O, 307.

<sup>228</sup> TR, 259.

<sup>229</sup> O, 305.

Bloch dans l'intimité, mais qu'il trouvait vulgaire et déplacé devant des étrangers."<sup>230</sup>

Early on then, Bloch demonstrates awareness of a speech style that identifies people as Jewish and is embarrassed that his relatives use it without realizing it might be looked on pejoratively by non-Jews.

The narrator explains that Bloch "entendant son oncle dire « Meschorès » trouvait qu'il laissait trop paraître son côté oriental, de même qu'une cocotte qui invite de ses amies avec des gens comme il faut, est irritée si elles font allusion à leur métier de cocotte ou emploient des mots malsonnants."<sup>231</sup> This is one of several analogies that compare the shame Bloch feels about being Jewish to that of people with ties to immoral or criminal milieus that indicate how, as Arendt argues, Jewishness is regarded as a vice in the social space of *A la recherche*.<sup>232</sup> Bloch adapts to this sense that much of society regards Jews as morally compromised by imposing a strict divide between a private speech style that he uses with his family and a public speech style that is less obviously associated with Jews.

As Bloch learns the sign-languages that identify people as Jewish or not Jewish, there are some giveaways that are more apparent than others, like terms borrowed directly from other languages, that he purges from his public speech style first. In his earliest interactions with Bloch, the narrator finds his friend's speech mannerisms harsh and clumsy but they already indicate a linguistic evolution away from the speech style of

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<sup>230</sup> O, 340.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid, 341.

<sup>232</sup> See also CG, 239: when someone refers to Bloch as a Jew in Mme de Villeparisis's salon, he responds "« Mais comment avez-vous pu savoir? Qui vous a dit? » comme s'il avait été le fils d'un forçat."

his family because he is avoiding the Hebrew, Yiddish, and German expressions he uses at home.

By switching to a speech style that is less obviously marked as Jewish, however, Bloch exchanges one form of embarrassment for another. Although he is able to avoid stereotypical Jewish speech mannerisms, he still speaks in a way that marks him as someone who wants to appear like he belongs to high society but obviously does not. For example, he pronounces the English loan word “lift” as “laïft” while talking with the narrator and Saint-Loup. This mistake clearly indicates that Bloch is unfamiliar with the wealthy milieus that frequent posh establishments outfitted with elevators like the hotel in Balbec. Although the narrator and Saint-Loup are inclined to look past Bloch’s error as inconsequential (the narrator explains that Saint-Loup “trouvait cette faute de prononciation d’autant moins grave qu’il y voyait surtout un manque de ces notions presque mondaines que mon nouvel ami méprisait autant qu’il les possédait”<sup>233</sup>), realizing his mistake, Bloch assumes Saint-Loup was internally laughing at him and is humiliated.

Bloch’s mispronunciation of “lift” is further evidence of a linguistic movement away from his family’s speech style: he is expanding his vocabulary, albeit painfully, to include terms more frequently encountered in high society. His reaction also indicates a social movement away from his family accompanying the changes in his speech mannerisms: Bloch’s shame results from being in the presence of people (the narrator and Saint-Loup) who are more familiar with the linguistic conventions of high society and thus know he has made a glaring mistake. Bloch is making connections with more

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<sup>233</sup> O, 307.

exclusive parts of society by associating with the narrator and Saint-Loup, and embarrassing as it is, saying “laïft” does not sabotage these relationships.

Many of the characters in the novel stay in an awkward intermediate position, trying to sound like someone of a different milieu but unable to pull it off. Either no one corrects their mistakes or, like Françoise, they react to being corrected with indignation and pride. By contrast, when Bloch realizes that he has been mispronouncing the word “lift,” he is annoyed with the narrator and Saint-Loup but recognizes that he was wrong. Like many of the other characters in *A la recherche*, Bloch spends much of the novel clumsily trying to sound like someone from a different milieu, but the “lift” episode establishes him as someone who accepts the linguistic authority of his bourgeois and aristocratic acquaintances and is able to comprehend his own linguistic mistakes, which will help him, eventually, settle into a new, more refined way of speaking.

Characters who do not share Bloch’s capacity to modify how he speaks remain socially stagnant, implying that this talent plays some role in Bloch’s social mobility, but the way he speaks so closely mirrors his position in his social trajectory that it is difficult to determine whether there is a causal relationship between the changes in how he speaks and in his social status. Do the changes in how he speaks merely reflect his halting movement away from his family’s milieu towards the Guermantes’ or do they actually contribute to his social mobility?

Bloch has two major opportunities to build up relationships in new milieus that end in spectacular failure. First, he begins to frequent the narrator’s bourgeois family but is eventually banned from their house. Then later in the novel, Mme de Villeparisis invites him to her salon but, after his first visit, makes it clear he is not to return. These



experiences unfold in a similar manner that demonstrates the limited role Bloch's speech mannerisms play in his social mobility.

In both episodes, the people Bloch is interacting with already know he is Jewish. The narrator's grandfather has a preternatural capacity to tell from people's names that they are Jewish, but an exceptional talent is not needed in this case: in Mme de Villeparisis's salon, Bloch is shocked when someone refers to him as a Jew and the narrator remarks, "étant donné son nom, qui ne passe pas précisément pour chrétien, et son visage, son étonnement montrait quelque naïveté."<sup>234</sup> Speech mannerisms are just one part of the sign-languages Arendt refers to, which include less malleable traits like names and physiognomy that come into play before Bloch even opens his mouth. If the motive of his code-switching between the speech style he uses with his family and the one he uses in public is to hide that he is Jewish, his efforts are futile so long as these other traits remain unchanged.

What's more, although Bloch does not appear to realize it, being identified as Jewish could actually work in his favor. Swann frequents the narrator's family and the aristocrats of the Faubourg Saint-Germain even though they consider him a Jew and the narrator remarks that in a milieu like that of Mme de Villeparisis, "un Israélite faisant son entrée comme s'il sortait du fond du désert, le corps penché comme une hyène, la nuque obliquement inclinée et se répandant en grands 'salams', contente parfaitement un goût d'orientalisme."<sup>235</sup> The regulars of the salons are drawn to Jews so long as they are able to perform either the role of the sophisticated, assimilated Jew or the orientalist caricature of an Israelite. By playing down his background, Bloch puts himself in an awkward

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<sup>234</sup> CG, 239.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 182 - 183.

position between the poles of assimilated and oriental Jew, with the result that he is viewed as a bizarre, suspect individual who does not fit into either of the prefabricated Jewish identities familiar to Parisian high society. And considering that much of the paranoia directed at Jews during this period resulted from the perception that they were agents of corruption confusing social taxonomies and disrupting the traditional social order,<sup>236</sup> Bloch's status as someone who is not entirely foreign but also does not quite fit in puts him in a particularly precarious position within bourgeois and aristocratic milieus.

In his interactions with the narrator's family and Mme de Villeparisis's guests, Bloch does not speak French in a manner that marks him as someone from a poorly regarded Jewish family – he does not accidentally slip into his family's speech style or make any glaring mistakes reminiscent of his mispronunciation of “lift” that would attract others' derision. However, he still does not appear to understand the norms of conversation in polite society and thus has an uncanny – familiar and yet strange – aura about him. It is not clear to his interlocutors whether he is simply unfamiliar with the conventions of their milieus or intentionally flouting them, with the result that they find him vaguely threatening.

For example, when Bloch comes to visit the narrator's family, he displays a shockingly eccentric, seemingly sarcastic attitude. He appears to mockingly pretend to cry when the narrator's grandmother complains she is not feeling well; he refuses to talk about the weather; and, arriving an hour and a half late to dinner, instead of apologizing, he says, “Je ne me laisse jamais influencer par les perturbations de l'atmosphère ni par les

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<sup>236</sup> See for example Otto Weininger's influential tract, *Sex and Character*, in which Jews are repeatedly portrayed as blurring conceptual and social categories in a way that threatens the order of European society.

divisions conventionnelles du temps. Je réhabiliterais volontiers l'usage de la pipe d'opium et du kriss malais, mais j'ignore celui de ces instruments infiniment plus pernicieux et d'ailleurs platement bourgeois, la montre et la parapluie.”<sup>237</sup> Bloch attempts to play the role of aesthete and speaks a French that is quite virtuosic and literary, full of flourishes and extravagance. But he also disregards the rules governing what it is and is not acceptable to say in polite society. For once in *A la recherche*, what is said seems to be more important than how it is said, because there is an obligation to convey one's sincere sympathies to an elderly person in pain, to exchange banalities about the weather, to apologize when one is late, and to censor yourself before telling a rather serious bourgeois family that you do not use umbrellas because they are “platement bourgeois.”

Throughout this passage, it is unclear whether Bloch is trying to be funny, simply ignorant of the rules governing what it is appropriate to say in polite society, or intentionally snubbing these rules to insult the narrator's family. At best he is tactless, at worst he is willfully impertinent. The narrator's father summarizes his family's evaluation of Bloch, declaring “mon pauvre fils, il est idiot ton ami.”<sup>238</sup>

Léon Poliakov writes that, after the emancipation of the Jews and the suspension of vestimentary regulations, “l'Occident ne pouvait se passer de la certitude d'une distinction qui devint, une fois effacés les *signes visibles* identifiant le Juif, une *invisible essence*.”<sup>239</sup> Similarly, when more Jews began speaking the languages of the countries in which they lived, there was a shift towards viewing Jews as distinguished not by a marked speech style, but rather by a tone or attitude. For example, Adolf Hitler writes in

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<sup>237</sup> CS, 91.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Poliakov, 321.

*Mein Kampf* that “A man can change his language without any trouble – that is, he can use another language; but in his new language he will express the old ideas; his inner nature is not changed. This is best shown by the Jew who can speak a thousand languages and nevertheless remains a Jew.”<sup>240</sup> The ambiguity as to whether Bloch is being sincere or mocking echoes stereotypes of Jews’ tendency towards sarcasm and irony, and he discovers in his early interactions with bourgeois and aristocratic milieus that, although he has a speech style that is not obviously Jewish, there are always other, less apparent signs that mark him as different from his hosts.

These exchanges alarm the narrator’s parents but not enough to convince them to take action against Bloch, who continues visiting their house until he finally crosses a line that marks him in their eyes as a clear threat to their family. In a conversation with the narrator, Bloch says that the narrator’s “grande-tante avait eu une jeunesse orageuse et avait été publiquement entretenue.”<sup>241</sup> The narrator relates the incident to his parents, who then decide Bloch is no longer welcome in their household. The fact that Bloch is Jewish, disregards formalities, and has a seemingly impertinent tone are not what directly cause Bloch to be barred from visiting the narrator, but they predispose the narrator’s family to view him as suspicious, such that they react quickly and harshly to cut off ties with him at the first sign he poses a risk to their family’s reputation.

Bloch is banned from Mme de Villeparisis’s salon after a very similar series of events. He misreads others’ cues, puts on an exaggerated show of confidence, uses sarcasm inappropriately, and displays a near total lack of tact. Most notably, Bloch starts

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<sup>240</sup> Hitler, 312. This passage is cited by Gilman, 242 who examines at much greater length how anti-Semitism took shape in response to Jews’ use of European languages.

<sup>241</sup> CS, 92.

up a conversation about the Dreyfus Affair with the diplomat M. de Norpois, who humors Bloch for a while but skirts around the topic, clearly indicating that he wants to move on to a less sensitive subject. Bloch, oblivious to these signals, barrels on, repeatedly bringing the discussion back to the Affair.

Mme de Villeparisis's guests do not take any action against Bloch, who provides them with a source of amusement as they deflect his questions about the Dreyfus Affair in a way that humiliates him. But he again eventually crosses a line. Refusing to move on from the topic of the Dreyfus Affair, he asks the archivist M. Vallenères if the marquise ever receives M. du Paty de Clam (an officer charged with the investigation of Dreyfus early on in the Affair) or M. Joseph Reinach (a prominent supporter of Dreyfus).

Vallenères, a fervent nationalist, begins to wonder if Bloch is a spy collecting information for the Jewish "Syndicat" and relates the incident to Mme de Villeparisis, who decides to make it clear Bloch is no longer welcome because "il était au moins mal élevé, peut-être dangereux pour la situation de M. de Norpois. Enfin elle voulait donner satisfaction à l'archiviste."<sup>242</sup> As when he is barred from the narrator's household, someone reports what Bloch has said to the local social authority, who then takes action against him. The fact that what Bloch says is reported in both instances emphasizes that what is important is what he has said and not how he said it. His speech mannerisms are unusual – bookish and somewhat archaic – but not off-putting. Norpois is actually pleasantly intrigued by how Bloch speaks and later tells the narrator, "Il est assez amusant, avec sa manière de parler un peu vieux jeu, un peu solennelle. Pour un peu il

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<sup>242</sup> CG, 239.

dirait: ‘les Doctes Sœurs’ comme Lamartine ou Jean-Baptiste Rousseau.”<sup>243</sup> What causes problems for Bloch is again not the way he speaks but rather his attitude, although amusingly, whereas the narrator’s family questioned his sincerity, he is viewed as too direct in Mme de Villeparisis’s salon. When his literary, old-fashioned speech style is paired with obliviousness to the norms of conversation in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, which include an implicit formal interdiction of serious discussions on controversial topics, the result is a bizarre clash of refinement and tactlessness that generates confusion as to whether Bloch is simply unfamiliar with the conventions of this milieu or intentionally flouting them in a threatening manner.

Underlying prejudices force Bloch to go out of his way to communicate that he has no aggressive intent or risk provoking an excessive reaction. In this context, the importance of changing how he speaks to align more with the speech style of his bourgeois and aristocratic acquaintances is not to pass as one of them so much as to indicate that he accepts their authority over a given social space, to communicate that he poses no threat to them or their cultural dominance. This is why the “lift” episode is so crucial, because it establishes Bloch as someone who accepts the linguistic authority of the bourgeoisie and aristocracy, and thus might eventually be tolerated in their midst for a time.

The obligation to demonstrate submissiveness by adopting others’ speech style, however, creates a double bind for Jews in the social space of *A la recherche*, because by speaking, dressing, and acting like their Catholic acquaintances, it can appear as though they are trying to hide their Jewish family background. Because so much of the paranoia

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<sup>243</sup> CG, 234.

directed at Jews in the Dreyfus Affair was driven by anxieties over their ability to integrate themselves into milieus dominated by the aristocracy like the officer corps, changing how they speak could make Jews seem suspicious, like they were trying to infiltrate high society rather than assimilate into it. The equivocal situation described by Arendt in which the Jewish characters in *A la recherche* have to somehow both be visible and invisible within high society results from this double bind of having to demonstrate submission to others' cultural and social dominance without seeming to want to hide that one is Jewish. Bloch is unable to navigate these competing demands – his efforts to fit in combined with his tactlessness generate suspicion, with the result that he is eventually labeled a security risk and potential spy.

To what extent do Bloch's speech mannerisms affect his social mobility then? His fate seems largely out of his control. He makes missteps, but whether or not he is accepted into the salons of the Faubourg Saint-Germain is determined more by prevailing sentiment towards Jews than anything he says or does. At the beginning of his visit to Mme de Villeparisis's salon, the narrator explains that "il est vrai que le kaléidoscope social était en train de tourner et que l'affaire Dreyfus allait précipiter les Juifs au dernier rang de l'échelle sociale. Mais d'une part le cyclone dreyfusiste avait beau faire rage, ce n'est pas au début d'une tempête que les vagues atteignent leur plus grand courroux."<sup>244</sup> Bloch enters Mme de Villeparisis's salon at an inopportune moment, right as the storm of anti-Semitism is about to break, pushing even the more established and eminently tactful Swann to the margins of the Faubourg Saint-Germain. Bloch's gaffes only hasten the

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<sup>244</sup> CG, 181.

inevitable reaction against him by attracting attention to him and heightening others' suspicions.

When the narrator encounters Bloch in the Guermantes' salon in *Le Temps retrouvé*, his friend goes by the pseudonym "Jacques du Rozier," he has a new way of articulating and a new style that changes his appearance so dramatically that even "ce nez juif disparaissait comme semble presque droite une bossue bien arrangée,"<sup>245</sup> all of which makes it much more difficult to tell that he is a Jew from a particularly humble family. The older habitués of the Guermantes' salon, like the narrator, of course still know that Bloch is Jewish but by this point in the narrative, after the First World War, there is also less suspicion of Jews in general – it is not clear that anyone would think it particularly important that Bloch is from a Jewish family.

At each point in Bloch's social trajectory, his speech mannerisms reflect his position with respect to the salons of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, which suggests that they do play some role in his social mobility. Learning a new way of speaking appears to be a prerequisite for admission into the Guermantes' milieu. But the defining factor determining the course of Bloch's social trajectory is prevailing sentiment towards Jews within the Faubourg Saint-Germain, which pushes people to find ever more hidden signs of Jewishness. The narrator claims that "notre identité sociale est la création de la pensée d'autrui" and that a person's voice can be "une transparente enveloppe" that others fill with their preconceptions about the speaker.<sup>246</sup> Bloch is one of the characters who best illustrates these observations, because when others expect him, as a Jew, to be gauche and caustic, he speaks and acts in a way that seems tactless and aggressive, but when the

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<sup>245</sup> TR, 259.

<sup>246</sup> CS, 19.



social kaleidoscope turns and attitudes towards Jews improve, he speaks and acts like a refined habitué of the Guermantes' salon. The way he speaks, the way he is viewed, and broad social attitudes towards Jews are so closely aligned that he appears to have very little control over his own identity.

And the narrator suggests that the social kaleidoscope could turn again, transforming Bloch back into a despised and stereotypical Jew. Kristeva points out that, already in the name “Jacques du Rozier,” there is a not so subtle hint that Bloch cannot erase the signs of his Jewishness, as “la rue des Rosiers” is the most prominent, central street of the Marais, a Parisian neighborhood celebrated for its large Jewish community.<sup>247</sup> And later in *Le Temps retrouvé*, the narrator observes Bloch up close and notes that in his face “se tenait le visage presque effrayant, tout anxieux d’un vieux Shylock attendant, tout grimé, dans la coulisse, le moment d’entrer en scène, récitant déjà le premier vers à mi-voix.”<sup>248</sup> When Shylock first appears in *The Merchant of Venice*, he is negotiating a loan. His first line is, “Three thousand ducats, well” to which Bassanio replies, “Ay, sir, for three months.”<sup>249</sup> For the narrator, Bloch’s transformation into Jacques du Rozier is temporary; his friend will yet undergo an atavistic reversion and take on the stereotypical personality and speech mannerisms of a Jew – as well as the role of villain and social pariah. This passage is often read as one of the more glaring examples of the narrator’s own prejudice towards Bloch as a Jew, but if we consider the extent to which Bloch’s social identity is determined by how the people around him view

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<sup>247</sup> Kristeva, 86.

<sup>248</sup> TR, 237

<sup>249</sup> Shakespeare, 1096.

Jews, it is also one of the most prescient moments in the novel, which seems to anticipate the raging return of anti-Semitism in the 1930s.

### III

#### *Charlus, Hiding in Plain Sight*

Charlus of course begins the novel in a completely different position than Bloch: he is one of the key figures in the Guermantes' family and one of the most sought after individuals in Parisian high society. His challenge is to preserve his social status from the scandal that would arise if his sexual orientation were ever made public, not to improve it despite the prejudices against him. Bloch and Charlus's experiences also differ because, although the narrator of *A la recherche* associates the plight of gay men with that of Jews through sustained analogies between these two minority groups (that Arendt and Kristeva extend), there are some important differences between their situations within the social space of the novel. Before turning to how Charlus uses language to try to maintain his position within Parisian high society, let us examine these broad differences to understand the specific nature of the hostility directed at gay men in the narrator's society.

One major difference between the experience of Jewish and queer people in the novel is that the social kaleidoscope periodically turns, hurling Jews en masse to the periphery of the Faubourg Saint-Germain then bringing them back towards its center, but public sentiment towards queer people is more stable. In *Le Côté de Guermantes*, the Dreyfus Affair brings anti-Semitism to a dramatic peak that then recedes, but the Eulenburg Affair, which Proust credited with popularizing the term homosexuality in

France, is mentioned only once in the novel, and in passing.<sup>250</sup> This affair, which began in 1906 a few months after Dreyfus was officially exonerated and continued for two years as high-ranking Prussian aristocrats were put on trial for homosexuality, is often cited as one of the events that inspired Proust to begin writing *A la recherche*, but the scandal and its effects on French high society are not chronicled in the novel. Similarly, the trials and imprisonment of Oscar Wilde are referenced only in passing by the narrator when he writes that gay men are “sans situation qu’instable, comme le poète la veille fêté dans tous les salons, applaudi dans tous les théâtres de Londres, chassé le lendemain de tous les garnis sans pouvoir trouver un oreiller où reposer sa tête.”<sup>251</sup> Emily Eells explains that, in his notes for this passage, Proust mentioned Wilde by name but then opted to avoid an explicit reference to him in the published novel.<sup>252</sup> Instead of delving into the specifics of the Eulenburg and Wilde trials and how they focalized public attention on homosexuality, Proust leaves them in the background of the narrative. They are part of the landscape, setting the tone for his investigation of homosexuality by establishing the broad criminal and social risks of being gay, which are a constant in the novel.

Another way that Jewish and queer people are treated differently in the social space of *A la recherche* is that someone’s Jewishness can be referenced openly in public conversation without creating an immediate scandal. When one of Mme de Villeparisis’s guests openly refers to Bloch as a Jew, it shocks and embarrasses him, but this act in

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<sup>250</sup> SG, XIV – XVI and 338

<sup>251</sup> TR, 17.

<sup>252</sup> Eells, *Proust’s Cup of Tea*, 80. For more on Proust and Wilde, see Eells, “Proust and Wilde: « Une curiosité complexe »” and Kaye, “Oscar Wilde and the Politics of Posthumous Sainthood: Hofmannsthal, Mirbeau, Proust.” For more on Proust and the Eulenburg Affair, see Compagnon’s preface to SG, XIV – XV, and Ladenson, 38n for a brief summary of the work on this topic.

itself does not create an immediate social backlash against him. By contrast, when the Verdurins begin telling people that Charlus is gay, it quickly leads to a public confrontation and scandal.

The narrator lets us know early on that he lives in a society in which being publicly identified as queer – especially as a gay man – can be extremely dangerous: two of the first references to same-sex desire in the novel include dramatic explosions of violence. First, before the narrator knows that Charlus is attracted to men, Saint-Loup explains that the baron nearly beat to death a man who made advances on him in a brothel, and adds that, in the ensuing scandal, the man had to go to court and clear his name, which proved very difficult.<sup>253</sup> Then, the narrator observes as Saint-Loup similarly reacts with violent anger to a man who makes a pass at him in the street, leaving him with a bloodied face and potentially a broken jaw.<sup>254</sup> Saint-Loup and Charlus are later revealed to have romantic relationships with men, which suggests that if they reacted with hostility, it may have been out of fear of being drawn into a scandal themselves. Whatever motivated these attacks, they illustrate the grave legal and physical dangers associated with being gay in the social space of *A la recherche*.

And finally, the narrator argues that gay men, as the examples of Charlus and Saint-Loup's violent reactions illustrate, do not bond together in solidarity in times of particular oppression as Jews do during the Dreyfus Affair. The Eulenburg and Wilde trials raised the visibility of gay men in Europe, including to queer people, providing the conditions for an emergent sense of queer identity, but for the narrator, gay men are still locked in a cycle turning on and denouncing each other. According to him, gay men are

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<sup>253</sup> O, 317.

<sup>254</sup> CG, 174.

like Jews in that they take on the characteristics of a race in their persecution, become closer with one another in the face of discrimination, but they do not yet appear to have a sense of solidarity and do not defend one another.

Given these conditions, the gay characters in the novel are under greater obligation to hide their desires than Bloch is to hide that he is Jewish. According to the narrator, this pressure directly impacts how gay men speak: simply having to switch the gender of adjectives when discussing their romantic interests changes their rapport with language, which they must consciously and carefully use to perform heterosexuality.<sup>255</sup> Fear of the social repercussions of being publicly identified as queer even leads them to change how they speak with one another. For instance, the narrator recounts how the duc de Châtellerauld pretends to be English, saying “I do not speak french” (sic) over and over to avoid revealing his name to a man with whom he has just had a liaison.<sup>256</sup> Most of the characters in *A la recherche* use the socioindexicality of speech to try to control how they are perceived, and Châtellerauld’s performance is yet another example of the clumsy theatricality the narrator observes everywhere he goes, only taken to a comic extreme – no one else in the novel goes quite so far as to pretend to be from an entirely different country. Because of the urgency with which they must use language to confuse social

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<sup>255</sup> SG, 19. “Vivant enfin, du moins un grand nombre, dans l’intimité caressante et dangereuse avec les hommes de l’autre race, les provoquant, jouant avec eux à parler de son vice comme s’il n’était pas sien, jeu qui est rendu facile par l’aveuglement ou la fausseté des autres, jeu qui peut se prolonger des années jusqu’au jour du scandale où ces dompteurs sont dévorés ; jusque-là obligés de cacher leur vie, de détourner leurs regards d’où ils voudraient se fixer, de les fixer sur ce dont ils voudraient se détourner, de changer le genre de bien des adjectifs dans leur vocabulaire, contrainte sociale légère auprès de la contrainte intérieure que leur vice, ou ce qu’on nomme improprement ainsi, leur impose non plus à l’égard des autres mais d’eux-mêmes, et de façon qu’à eux-mêmes il ne leur paraisse pas un vice.”

<sup>256</sup> Ibid., 35.

taxonomies and perform fictional identities to protect themselves, the queer characters of *A la recherche* are in the vanguard of the broad tendency towards theatricality in the social space of the novel discussed in the previous chapter.

Like the characters who try to sound like criminals or socialites, the queer figures in the novel struggle to maintain their linguistic masks, accidentally speaking in a manner that betrays their sexual orientation. As we saw in the last chapter, it takes a very long time, but the narrator is eventually able to fatigue and exasperate Albertine to the point that she accidentally says something revealing that she has sexual relationships with women. He has far less difficulty determining that men are gay and, after watching Charlus and Jupien's courting, comments,

Combien de fois plus tard fus-je frappé dans un salon par l'intonation ou le rire de tel homme, qui pourtant copiait exactement le langage de sa profession ou les manières de son milieu, affectant une distinction sévère ou une familière grossièreté, mais dont la voix fausse suffisait pour apprendre: « C'est un Charlus » à mon oreille exercée comme le diapason d'un accordeur.<sup>257</sup>

The narrator develops his ear by observing the acquaintances he knows to be gay. Similar to how he begins to notice all of Albertine's bourgeois speech mannerisms once he knows that she is bourgeois, he is able to identify the speech mannerisms indicating that a man is gay once he knows their sexual orientation. In his first encounters with Charlus, before he knows that he is gay, the narrator notes that the baron has a particularly

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<sup>257</sup> SG, 63.

feminine voice and intonation.<sup>258</sup> Two volumes later, in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, after watching Charlus and Jupien's mutual seduction, the narrator explains that "non seulement les contrastes de son visage, de sa voix, mais rétrospectivement les hauts et les bas eux-mêmes de ses relations avec moi, tout ce qui avait paru jusque-là incohérent à mon esprit, devenait intelligible."<sup>259</sup> Specifically, the narrator realizes that Charlus's feminine voice and intonation were clear indications that he was gay, writing "j'avais pu trouver que M. de Charlus avait l'air d'une femme: 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."<sup>260</sup> In general, he explains, everything that he had previously been unable to comprehend about Charlus's mannerisms "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."<sup>261</sup> After this first experience of decoding the way Charlus's sexuality is expressed through his speech mannerisms, the narrator becomes far more attuned to the signs communicating other people's sexual orientation and is more confident in his ability to decipher them.

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<sup>258</sup> O, 330. "Sa voix elle-même, pareille à certaines voix de contralto en qui on n'a pas assez cultivé le médium et dont le chant semble le duo alterné d'un jeune homme et d'une femme, se postait au moment où il exprimait ces pensées si délicates sur des notes hautes, prenait une douceur imprévue et semblait contenir des chœurs de fiancées, de sœurs, qui répandaient leur tendresse. Mais la nichée de jeunes filles que M. de Charlus, avec son horreur de tout efféminement, aurait été si navré d'avoir l'air d'abriter ainsi dans sa voix, ne s'y bornait pas à l'interprétation, à la modulation des morceaux de sentiment. Souvent, tandis que causait M. de Charlus, on entendait leur rire aigu et frais de pensionnaires ou de coquettes ajuster leur prochain avec des malices de bonnes langues et de fines mouches."

<sup>259</sup> SG, 16.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid., 17.

The narrator's confidence in his ability to understand how Charlus's sexuality affects his speech mannerisms is on full display later in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*. Mme Verdurin asks Charlus "Avez-vous pris de mon orangeade?" and the baron, "Avec un sourire gracieux, sur un ton cristallin qu'il avait rarement et avec mille moues de la bouche et déhanchements de la taille, répondit: 'Non, j'ai préféré la voisine, c'est de la fraisettes, je crois, c'est délicieux.'" The narrator then comments that,

Il est singulier qu'un certain ordre d'actes ait pour conséquence extérieure une manière de parler ou de gesticuler qui les révèle. Si un monsieur croit ou non à l'Immaculée Conception, ou à l'innocence de Dreyfus, ou à la pluralité des mondes, et veuille s'en taire, on ne trouvera dans sa voix ni dans sa démarche, rien qui laisse apercevoir sa pensée. Mais en entendant M. de Charlus dire de cette voix aiguë et avec ce sourire et ces gestes de bras: "Non, j'ai préféré sa voisine, la fraisettes", on pouvait dire: "Tiens, il aime le sexe fort", avec la même certitude que celle qui permet de condamner, pour un juge un criminel qui n'a pas avoué.<sup>262</sup>

The narrator believes that being gay or lesbian necessarily affects the way people speak and scrutinizes how others' speech mannerisms express their sexual orientation. As is evident in this passage, for him there is a linguistic boundary separating queer and straight people, but it is also apparent that this boundary is not policed: no one reacts publicly to Charlus's "j'ai préféré sa voisine, la fraisettes" despite how obviously it communicates his sexual orientation. No one is scrutinizing the way the habitués of the

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<sup>262</sup> SG, 356.



salons speak, waiting for someone to betray their homosexuality in order to publicly oust them from fashionable society.

The pressure on the gay men in the salons of *A la recherche* to hide their sexuality is peculiar, because many individuals, like the narrator, know or suspect which of their acquaintances are gay but discretely keep this information to themselves, with the result that the homosexuality of figures like Charlus is broadly known in high society but not openly discussed. Arendt and Kristeva argue that this equivocal situation results from the mixture of fascination and disgust that homosexuality elicits from the socialites of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, but there are also other factors that contribute to the fragile code of silence protecting the queer characters in the salons, such as the desire to shield a friend or relative from scandal or to benefit from an association with a prestigious figure like Charlus. Together these sentiments create a situation in which the gay men in the salons must engage in linguistic performances not so much to keep others from knowing about their sexuality as to keep it from becoming a matter of open speculation and conversation.

Charlus has a particularly striking and bold strategy for navigating these perilous conditions. The narrator lives in a society in which, although it was not illegal to make love with someone of the same sex, being publicly identified as gay could, as we have seen, still have serious juridical, physical, and social repercussions. Unlike the prostitutes that pretend to be thugs for him in his brothel, Charlus understands that someone who commits acts others consider immoral and potentially criminal would not want to be identified as such and thus that a gay man would not want to sound like a gay man. When asked if a prominent social figure is gay, the baron replies, “*mais pas du tout [...] s’il*

l''était, il n'en aurait pas tellement l'air."<sup>263</sup> Charlus applies this logic to himself and makes very little effort to change how he speaks or acts in order to convince others he has nothing to hide. For example, Charlus mocks the narrator in "une voix aiguë, mièvre et cadencée" for not being able to tell that one of their acquaintances, Brichot, is in love, saying, "Oh ! ces enfants [...] il faut tout leur apprendre, ils sont innocents comme l'enfant qui vient de naître, ils ne savent pas reconnaître quand un homme est amoureux d'une femme. À votre âge j'étais plus dessalé que cela." The narrator then comments that Charlus "aimait employer les expressions du monde apache, peut-être par goût, peut-être pour ne pas avoir l'air, en les évitant, d'avouer qu'il fréquentait ceux dont c'était le vocabulaire courant."<sup>264</sup> Charlus appears to be particularly aware that people attract attention and make themselves suspicious by changing how they speak. So, to hide that he is gay – and attracted to rough, immoral brutes who use slang terms like "dessalé" – he speaks as normal and relies on an implied, "si *je* l'étais, *je* n'en aurais pas tellement l'air" to protect him from scandal. This injects some ambiguity into the narrator's comments on Charlus's speech mannerisms, which, at some points, he views as obviously linked to his sexuality, a direct expression of it, and at others as potentially part of a performance of gayness.

Although daring and brilliant, Charlus's strategy does not trick people into thinking he is straight. He is protected from scandal because people are so desperate to have him attend their events that they would never dream of turning on him. The baron cultivates an air of exclusivity around himself by aggressively refusing invitations and has a personality that electrifies the people around him (his smallest, most insignificant

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<sup>263</sup> P, 290.

<sup>264</sup> SG, 477.

acts are imitated by so many that they blossom into trends that traverse Paris<sup>265</sup>). As a result, he is one of the most sought after individuals in the novel and most of the characters that cross paths with him, like the narrator, are too curious about his sexual orientation, too discrete to directly broach such a topic, or too concerned with cultivating an association with him to use his sexuality against him. As a result, so long as he maintains the flimsiest of defenses against charges of homosexuality (that will not come), he can speak as normal, in a manner that allows him to satisfy others' curiosity about homosexuality and causes him to stand out as a particularly memorable and unique figure in the salons.

Even Mme Verdurin, who eventually sets out to destroy Charlus's reputation, ignores it so long as the baron helps improve the standing of her salon. The narrator comments, "L'homosexualité ne lui déplaisait pas, tant qu'elle ne touchait pas à l'orthodoxie."<sup>266</sup> This orthodoxy is a set of rules governing how the members of her "clan" are supposed to behave. Mme Verdurin finally turns on Charlus because he breaks these tacit rules by openly discussing the people who refuse to attend her salon, boasting of his own role in improving its stature, and, most seriously, forming a relationship with Morel that Mme Verdurin worries will lead them to associate in a manner that she cannot control, outside of her salon. These actions threaten the cohesion of Mme Verdurin's salon as well as her dominance over it, leading her to lash out at Charlus with the most readily available weapon, his sexual orientation.

Mme Verdurin turns on Swann for similar reasons. She fears he will cultivate a relationship with Odette that she cannot control and that will result in the two lovers

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<sup>265</sup> O, 317 - 318.

<sup>266</sup> P, 269.

gradually disassociating themselves from her salon. Michael Herrmann argues that Swann cannot remain in the Verdurin's salon because he retains his own way of speaking and does not adopt the linguistic conventions of the milieu.<sup>267</sup> Mme Verdurin expects her guests to “prendre langue,”<sup>268</sup> a euphemism she uses to refer to how new members must accustom themselves to the peculiarities of her salon, which include a long list of terms like “fidèles” and “ennuyeux” that take on special meaning for the members of the “petit noyau” that regularly visit her.<sup>269</sup> However, Swann's unchanged speech mannerisms are more a sign of his continued independence from Mme Verdurin than the basis on which she eventually ejects him from her salon. She tolerates his linguistic infractions and only moves against him when his relationship with Odette begins to threaten the cohesion of her salon.

Like Swann, Charlus speaks in a manner that causes him to stand out in Mme Verdurin's salon. He is not disciplined specifically for the way he speaks, but his speech mannerisms point to the tensions between himself and Mme Verdurin in a way that marks him as someone who cannot remain in her salon, because he is drawing too much attention to himself, away from her. Throughout *A la recherche*, there is a fatalism associated with the way people speak, which points to the fractures in milieus and foreshadows future transformations in the organization of society in a way that strongly suggests a causal relationship between how people speak and their social trajectory without actually demonstrating it.

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<sup>267</sup> Herrmann, 249.

<sup>268</sup> CS, 212.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., 185 – 187.

Once she decides Charlus threatens the cohesion of her salon, Mme Verdurin turns on him, asking her husband to warn Morel of the baron's reputation. This sets in motion a chain of events that leads to Morel publicly confronting the baron. Witnessing this clash, the narrator is surprised that Charlus does not react. The baron, unable to speak, looks around confused and hurt, as if searching for help from someone else. But the narrator's surprise at Charlus's passivity reveals that he has misread this situation: there is nothing the baron can say. He was able to maintain his position not because of his wit and clever ways of manipulating the sociolinguisticity of speech to convince others he is actually straight but rather because so many people wanted to continue associating with him. Once a single person decides they no longer desire his company and attacks his reputation, there is nothing Charlus can do to protect himself: his sexuality has become a topic of open discussion and any protestations on his part would only aggravate the scandal. He looks around for help because what protects him is the bonds he has with others that help him keep his secret, and when neither the narrator, nor Bichot, nor anyone else comes to his aid, he is left exposed and defenseless. Charlus's aphasia, which becomes more pronounced towards the end of his life, is not a strategic blunder so much as a reflection of his new status as a social outcast. In *A la recherche* the way a person speaks is often like a map of their social network, and as the number of Charlus's relations diminishes, so does his ability to speak.

Charlus's social transformation is more drastic and has greater finality to it than Bloch's. For the narrator, Bloch may play the role of socialite for a while, but there is always the possibility the social kaleidoscope will shift again, causing a new metamorphosis of his social identity. By contrast, once Charlus loses his position, there is

no suggestion that he might one day recuperate it – he becomes increasingly invalid, isolated, and incomprehensible over the course of *Le Temps retrouvé*. Bloch's fate depends on broad social trends that come and go affecting all Jews, who rally together in difficult times, but Charlus loses his social status permanently and finds himself almost totally socially isolated as a result of the caprices of a few individuals. This indicates that gay men are in a more precarious position within the salons than Jews – the most esteemed social figures can be enveloped in scandal at any point if even a few people decide to bring public accusations of homosexuality against them.

Charlus and Bloch adopt opposite linguistic strategies in response to the prejudice they face. Whereas Bloch tries to conform to the linguistic conventions of the salons, Charlus allows himself to stand out and uses speech mannerisms conventionally associated with gay men to convey he has nothing to hide. The way Bloch and Charlus speak and how they are perceived are so closely tied that at times it seems as though the way they speak is what determines their social trajectory: Bloch is able to become a socialite because he finds an intonation that suits his nasal voice; Charlus fails to defend his position because he cannot find the right words to respond to Morel. This creates ambiguity as to whether Bloch and Charlus have some capacity to control their fate by adapting how they speak that obscures how both find themselves exposed and vulnerable, regardless of how they speak, because of the extent to which their position within the salons depends on the whims of those around them.

## IV

### *The Limits of Performance*

Hannah Arendt argues that in turn of the century Europe, high society was primarily driven by “an aggressive contempt for middle-class standards, which undoubtedly was one of the strongest motives for the admission of individuals and whole groups of people who had belonged to socially unacceptable classes. The same motive that had enabled Prussian aristocrats to meet socially with actors and Jews finally led in France to the social prestige of inverts.”<sup>270</sup> According to Arendt, Jewish and queer people were annexed into the salons not just in the model of actors, to shock middle-class values, but as performers themselves in the carefully orchestrated social theater of high society: homosexuals were to perform abnormality and Jews mystery. Much like actors, they were marginal figures, associated with immorality and scandal, brought into the salons as curiosities, to animate and attract attention to the salons, but always remaining in a precarious position subject to the whims of their hosts.

As we saw in the last chapter, there is a tendency towards theatricality throughout the social space of *A la recherche*, which Kristeva claims presents “une des premières visions modernes de la société-spectacle.”<sup>271</sup> For her, Proust’s Jewish and queer characters are emblematic of this dynamic, the dramatic vanguard experimenting with the capacity of performance to affect a person’s relationships and social identity as they adapt to the prejudices against them. In the process, she argues, they reveal the artificial, constructed nature of identity and begin unraveling the notion of “une identité de langage”

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<sup>270</sup> Arendt, 85.

<sup>271</sup> Kristeva, 392.

at the heart of “le clanisme,” or the semiotic factors that regulate the boundaries of the various salons in the novel, Arendt’s mysterious sign-language.<sup>272</sup>

There is in fact a persistent association between Jewishness, homosexuality, and performance throughout the novel: Bloch is a playwright, Rachel an actress, Charlus engages in sexual role-playing, and Jupien and the prostitutes in the male brothel produce the fictions the baron enjoys.<sup>273</sup> More recently, however, critics have begun to push back against Kristeva’s argument that Proust unravels clannishness and “firm constructions of identity”<sup>274</sup> by revealing them to be posture and artifice. Focusing more on the topic of Jewish identity, Freedman observes that “the invocation of the performative with respect to Proust’s Jews also has the function of reminding us of the opposite of the lesson that invocations of performativity generally enforce, namely, the possibility that we are not free to affirm our identifications as we desire to be.”<sup>275</sup> In a similar vein, Maurice Samuels is skeptical of Kristeva’s “attribution to Proust of a postnational, postracial sensibility” and explains that, “Proust does at certain moments in the text present Jewish and other identities as unstable and performative, but he also presents them at other moments as inherent and fixed.”<sup>276</sup>

To this discussion, what I would like to add is that when we look specifically at the role of the socioindexicality of speech in the novel, it shows that while the narrator

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<sup>272</sup> Kristeva, 287.

<sup>273</sup> See also Kristeva, 266 for an explanation of how “Les homosexuels dans *Sodome et Gomorrhe* s’expriment en vers juifs raciniens,” Compagnon, 278 for a discussion of the relationship between inversion and artistic genius, and Sam Bloom’s “Proust’s Jewish Theater” for a similar argument about the proximity of artistic talent and vice, as an obstacle to Jewish assimilation.

<sup>274</sup> Freedman, 359.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

<sup>276</sup> Samuels, 256.



has a sustained interest in how people perform different identities, he also draws our attention to how frequently these performances fail. For the most part in *A la recherche*, when people try to use the socioindexicality of speech to control how they are perceived, it does not work. There are multiple reasons for this. The narrator shows that people interpret the socioindexicality of speech differently, meaning that there is no stable semiotic system to exploit to change one's social identity. He also points to how difficult it is to use unfamiliar speech styles and take on unfamiliar roles because of how complex and heterogeneous people's speech mannerisms are. And finally, the narrator shows that the success or failure of a performance relies a great deal on the broad social context of its reception.

When the narrator finally gets to go to the theater and see the actress La Berma, whom he has idolized from afar, he first looks for the signs of her talent in the way she speaks – her diction. But he cannot find anything specific about the way she performs her lines that is unique to her. It seems to him that anyone could imitate her technique. He only experiences admiration for her when the performance ends and the audience erupts into enthusiastic applause. In *A la recherche*, reputations built on theatrical talent are fragile, because the success or failure of a performance depends less on the technique of the actress (something they can control, that is unique to them) than on the disposition of their audience. As tastes change, La Berma loses her artistic stature and has to face the scorn of her rivals and the ambivalence of the public. The Jewish and gay characters in the salons demonstrate a similar principle: how they speak, how they perform their identities, is less important in determining their position in the salons than the broader

social context that defines others' attitudes towards them. In "le théâtre du monde"<sup>277</sup> as in the world of theater, reputations are precarious because they are built on performance and thus dependent on the whims of the public. The artistic trajectory of La Berma, from the most celebrated actress in France to a washed-up has been, and Rachel, from a spurned experimental actress to a respected one, mirror the social trajectories of Swann, Bloch, and Charlus between the margins of the salons and their center.

In order to have a more lasting, stable position within the salons, the Jewish and gay figures would have to find a way to be more fully incorporated into them. But for Arendt, in the social theater of the salons, each character has their own distinct role that cannot be exchanged – performance creates a degree of cohesion, but not a path to assimilation. The role of Jewish and queer people in the salons is to be different. Much like actors, they are tolerated in the salons as curiosities and as representatives of communities associated with immorality and scandal.

What I have attempted to show in this chapter, however, is that the Jewish and gay characters in the salons are not just required to perform abnormality and mystery within the salons. Because they are associated with vice, scandal, and danger, they are also required to demonstrate that they are not threats to the hosts of the salons and their other guests. They attempt to preserve discretion around their Jewishness and homosexuality not to hide it so much as to show that they can keep it under wraps, that they can titillate and thrill without presenting any real risk to the people around them.

Freedman writes that in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, "like but even more so than that of the homosexual, the figure of the Jew arose from a semiotic problem:"<sup>277</sup> the

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<sup>277</sup> SG, 255.

presence of queer and Jewish people in all walks of life and in different countries made it difficult to categorize them, such that they came to be viewed increasingly as “pliable, metamorphic, ambiguous.”<sup>278</sup> This notion that Jewish and queer people were shape shifters contributed to the hostility directed at them by feeding into fears of infiltration and divided loyalties. However, if the prejudice and paranoia surrounding them was in part generated by a semiotic problem, *A la recherche* demonstrates that there was no semiotic solution to the situation in which they found themselves. The narrator comments at length on the visibility and invisibility of Jewish and queer people, but the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that characterize their experience in the salons is driven more by whether they are perceived as serving or threatening others’ interests and the strength of the affective bonds they have formed with the salon organizers than the strategies they use to fit in or stand out.

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<sup>278</sup> Freedman, 336.

## Conclusion

In *A la recherche*, the way people speak is so closely associated with who they are that it contains within it a seductive promise, that by adopting someone else's speech mannerisms, it is possible to develop a shared identity with them. Nearly all of Proust's characters test out this possibility. They change how they speak hoping that they will become more like the people they sound like. Throughout Proust's oeuvre, there is an ambiguity as to whether language contains within it real magical power: by speaking or writing like someone else can we actually channel their identity or is it just a parlor trick – an eerie way of evoking someone's presence in their absence. Clarifying this issue is of particular importance to social climbers, lovers, and people belonging to stigmatized minorities, who adapt how they speak, manipulate the socioindexicality of language, to try to establish a sense of shared identity with others. Their attempts reveal, however, that it is very difficult to make someone else's speech style your own, because of the heterogeneity of the speech mannerisms they draw on and the strategic manner in which they too use the socioindexicality of speech to perform identity.

In *Pastiches*, Richard Dyer observes that “there may be an especially strong case to be made for the affinity for pastiche of Jews and gays in the past two centuries, groups that are both placed outside prevailing social norms and yet can pass within them.”<sup>279</sup> Under pressure to hide the stigmatized part of their identity, they became more conscious of sociosemiotic codes, more adept at using them, and thus free to discover their (limited) role in regulating social boundaries. In relating Swann, Bloch, and Charlus's experiences, Proust shows that social and linguistic boundaries do not entirely align – the borders

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<sup>279</sup> Dyer, 132.

around different milieus are not defined exclusively by linguistic criteria. As a result, even if you manage to adopt another person or milieu's speech style, there is no guarantee that you will be able to develop a shared identity with them.

The narrator of *A la recherche* famously becomes frustrated with his social outings and expresses that he would be better off staying at home and work. As a last observation to conclude this dissertation, I would contend that one reason for this turn away from society is that, in his excursions into society, the narrator of *A la recherche* discovers how identity refracts in the signs through which it is communicated, causing fictional identities to emerge, but he also observes how difficult it is to control this process. He has a strong impulse to try out other's perspectives, take on different identities which he refers to as “ma disposition à me mettre à la place des autres et à recréer leur état d'esprit,”<sup>280</sup> but that cannot be fully satisfied in society because of how rigidly the roles people perform in “le théâtre du monde” are proscribed. He is driven towards literature, because it allows him to more fully indulge his desire for social mobility (not just upwards – his desire to experience the world from a different position in society), to experiment with many different speech styles, to perform many different roles in a context in which his public is more likely to have suspended their disbelief, to allow him to embody different identities.

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<sup>280</sup> O, 252.

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### Abbreviations:

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O: Proust, Marcel. *À l'Ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*. Paris : Éditions Gallimard, 1988.  
CG: Proust, Marcel. *Le Côté de Guermantes*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1988.  
SG: Proust, Marcel. *Sodome et Gomorrhe*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1988.  
P: Proust, Marcel. *La Prisonnière*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1988.  
AD: Proust, Marcel. *Albertine disparue*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1988.  
TR: Proust, Marcel. *Le temps retrouvé*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1988.  
CSB: Proust, Marcel. *Contre Sainte-Beuve précédé de Pastiches et Mélanges*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1971.

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