

Contre Bakhtin? The Problem of Poetry in Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*

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Of the countless commentaries devoted to *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Proust's own "Contre Sainte-Beuve" holds the unique distinction of having been written before the novel itself. At once a programmatic piece for a novel to come and a critique of biographical criticism, "Contre Sainte-Beuve" is an unfinished and heterogeneous text written, in some places, as a letter to the author's mother, in others as a series of literary *tableaux* and character sketches, and in others still as a collection of fragments and aphorisms on literature and criticism. Proust's essay has furnished later commentators with many critical vantage points from which to approach his last novel. If I follow a similar path in this article, it is not in order to measure the aesthetic achievement of *À la recherche du temps perdu* against its author's earlier opinions on novelistic discourse, and still less in order to determine how much these opinions are developed, altered, or abandoned during the protracted writing of the novel. Instead, I will consider those passages in "Contre Sainte-Beuve" in which Proust comments on the style of his two famous predecessors, Balzac and Flaubert, and thus implicitly situates his own apprenticeship in the history of the novelistic genre. After first interpreting Proust's "Contre Sainte-Beuve" with an eye toward Bakhtin, it will become possible to set these two twentieth-century thinkers, who lived as much at opposite ends of Europe as of European prose, in dialogue with one another on the question of poetry's place, not just in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, but in the art novel as a modernist genre.

By contrasting Balzac and Flaubert, Proust contributes several valuable insights on style in the French novel:

Style is so much the sign of the transformation to which the writer's thought subjects reality that, in Balzac, there is, properly speaking, no style. . . . In Flaubert's style, for example, all the elements of reality are converted into the one substance, whose vast surfaces have a monotonous shimmer. No impurity remains. The surfaces have become reflective. Everything is depicted in them, but as a reflection, without

this homogeneous substance being impaired. Whatever was different was absorbed. In Balzac, on the contrary, all the elements of a style to come, which does not yet exist, coexist, undigested, as yet untransformed. This style does not suggest, it does not reflect, it explains. It explains moreover with the help of the most arresting images which do not blend in with the rest, but which bring out his intended meaning, as it may be brought out in conversation, when one has an inspired conversation [*conversation géniale*], with no concern for the harmony of the whole or about not interjecting. (“Contre-Sainte Beuve” 62)¹

There have been many attempts in Proust scholarship to discover in this passage a model for Proust’s own writing in *À la recherche du temps perdu*. In *The Book to Come*, for example, Maurice Blanchot cites the observations on Flaubert in the above passage as if they expressed, in opposition to the remarks on Balzac, Proust’s “ideal.” This ideal, a form of ascetic aestheticism that painstakingly avoids “impure novelistic discourse,” is very much a poetic one: “Faithfulness to pure impressions—that is what Proust demands of the novel” (21). For Blanchot, Proust’s *Jean Santeuil* was a failed attempt to reach this ideal: “What is striking in the failure of this book is that, having sought to make us sensitive to ‘instants,’ he has portrayed them as scenes and, instead of surprising beings as they appear, he made them something quite the opposite, formal portraits” (21). In *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Blanchot argues, Proust finally discovered the style he had been searching for:

Proust has discovered his work’s law of growth, that demand for deepening, for spherical enlarging, that overabundance and, as he says, overnourishment that it requires and that allows him to introduce the most “impure” materials, those “truths relative to passions, to characters, to customs,” but which in reality he does not introduce as truths, stable and immobile assertions, but as that which never stops developing, progressing by a slow movement of envelopment.
(22)

Contrary to Blanchot, Gilles Deleuze, on the basis of the same passage from “Contre Sainte-Beuve,” identifies Proust’s art not with the style of Flaubert but with the non-style of Balzac: “Can we say that

Proust, too, has no style? Is it possible to say that Proust's sentence, inimitable or too readily imitable, in any case immediately recognizable, endowed with a syntax and a vocabulary which are extremely idiosyncratic, producing effects which must be designated by Proust's own name, are nonetheless without style?" (147). Deleuze answers his own question by displacing the problem of style in Proust to one of effects. As in Balzac, Proust's style is "explicative, it explicates with images. It is non-style, because it is identified with 'interpreting', pure and without subject, and multiplies the viewpoints toward the sentence, within the sentence" (147). Therefore, Proust's style, or rather his non-style, represents an explication of signs that "begins with two *different* objects, distant even if they are contiguous":

What is essential occurs when the sentence achieves a viewpoint proper to each of the two objects, but precisely a viewpoint which we must call proper to the object because the object is already dislocated by it, as if the viewpoint were divided into a thousand various noncommunicating viewpoints, so that, the same operation being performed for the other object, the viewpoints can be set within each other, setting up resonance among themselves. . . . (148)

These innumerable points of view are swept on by a style that is always in flux. What Proust achieves is not a unity of style, nor even the reflection of a unified essence, but a unity of effects: "This is the 'effect' of explicative style: in relation to two given objects, it produces partial objects . . . it produces effects of resonance and forced movements" (Deleuze 148).

While Blanchot and Deleuze draw substantially different conclusions regarding Proust's style, it is possible to perceive similar interpretative patterns in their respective commentaries. Both, for instance, move from Proust's remarks on style in Flaubert and Balzac to new formulations of the relationship between novelistic style and essence in Proust's last novel. In Blanchot's reading of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, the essence that fills the space of the Proustian sphere is "imaginary duration," "the true substance of those mysterious flashes of luminosity" (22). In Deleuze's reading, "style is essentially metaphor," whose "essence is in itself difference" (47, 48). What is more significant for the purposes of this article is that both critics approach Proust's novel as an instance of monologic discourse. For Blanchot, the impure materials of novelistic discourse that Proust incorporates

into *À la recherche du temps perdu*—literary portraiture, philosophical digressions, etc.—enter the envelopment of a “sphere” that could only define the project of a narrator. This sphere lends a unity to the heterogeneous novelistic “impurities” in the novel and thus offers possibilities for a far more profound poeticization of the whole than Proust had been able to achieve in *Jean Santeuil*. For Deleuze, Proust’s non-style divides into a multiplicity of viewpoints on an essence that is difference, but these “thousand points of view” form “within the sentence” (147, 148). The multiplicity of viewpoints may give rise to a metaphorical and richly polysemic discourse, and it may be that style in Proust is “without subject” and “always a matter of essence” (148), but these multiple perspectives, however radically they revolutionize the relations between style and essence in Proust, belong to the dynamics of a unified narrative voice.

Thus while Blanchot and Deleuze persuasively and in very different ways move beyond the limits of a traditional poetics of style, they nevertheless remain preoccupied with the very poetic problem of style’s relation to essence and tend to limit their discussions to the narrator’s discourse. These questions regarding essence do, of course, profoundly respond to Proust’s own theoretical concerns in “Contre Sainte-Beuve” and elsewhere. Yet Blanchot and Deleuze address only one axis of novelistic discourse—the relation between the word and its object, while Proust is concerned also with the discursive axis that connects the word to other words. With Balzac, Proust is interested, at least in part, in the relationship between his predecessor’s non-style—one which brings out meanings as if in a “conversation géniale”—and his explanations about his fictional characters. Balzac’s explanations and their accompanying “images,” far from constituting the whole of his style, are the very things that interrupt, “within the sentence,” a style that has not yet formed: “Because he does not conceive of the sentence as being made from a special substance in which whatever forms the subject of a conversation, or of his own knowledge, should be swallowed up and no longer recognizable, to each word he appends the idea he has about it, the observation it inspires in him” (Proust, “Contre Sainte-Beuve” 63).

Balzac’s explanations and opinions are usually directed at his characters, of whom Proust writes that they are most often “real and no more than real” (61). Balzac evaluates the speech habits of his characters and even praises their “bon mots.” In a later note to “Contre,” for example, Proust analyzes a passage from a novella in

which the narrator praises and receives praise from characters who are all no more than the invention of their author, Balzac:

At times Balzac does not express the admiration that his least *mot* inspires in him directly. He entrusts the expression of this admiration to the characters on stage. There is a celebrated Balzac novella called *Autre étude de femme*. It comprises two stories which call for little by way of a cast, but almost all of Balzac's characters line up around the narrators. . . . Each [character] is given his line to speak, as in those dialogues of the dead where an entire age has to be represented. . . . De Marsay begins his story by explaining that the statesman is a sort of monster sang-froid. . . . And one after another [the novella's characters] come to say their piece. . . . Now this somewhat artificially convened audience is an excessively kind audience towards Balzac, as kind as Balzac himself whose mouth-piece it is. (77)

If Balzac's characters praise and comment on a story de Marsay tells, Balzac, as the narrator of de Marsay's narration, comments in turn on the success of de Marsay's story:

And so Balzac is unwilling to leave us in any doubt at all as to the success of all these *bon mots*. . . . Is Balzac seeking thereby to retrace for us the success de Marsay's story has had, the success which he, Balzac, had at that evening at which we were not present? Or is he quite simply giving way to the admiration excited in him by the clever touches of his own pen? (79)

Several generalizations can be hazarded here regarding Proust's reading of Balzac. First, the narrator in Balzac not only reports the speech of his characters but also responds to these characters as if they had an existence independent of his own narration. Secondly, although the narrator offers explanations and passes aesthetic judgment on the reported speech of his characters, and although the characters in turn praise the narrator, the voices of characters and narrator do not merge, nor do the former express the hidden intentions of the latter. Proust emphasizes the exemplary objectivity of reported speech in Balzac: "This same man who exhibits his own historical, artistic, etc., opinions so artlessly, conceals his deeper designs, allowing the truthfulness of his depiction of his characters' language to make its own

point, so subtly that it may go unremarked, with no attempt to draw attention to it" (64). Lastly, these explanations are not only responses to the voices of Balzac's characters, but are also oriented toward the response of his reader.

Regarding Proust's views on Flaubert, it is possible to examine, in contrast to Balzac and yet along the same axis of the narrative word's relation to the words of the characters, the novelistic techniques through which Flaubert is able to convert the disparate elements of a discursive heterogeneity into a unified style. Essential to this conversion is the Flaubertian sentence. As Proust writes in a later note to "Contre Sainte-Beuve," Flaubert is a "grammatical genius. . . . The revolution in vision, in which representation of the world which flows from—or is expressed by—his syntax, is as great perhaps as that of Kant shifting the centre of cognition of the world into the soul" (89). However, it is not in "Contre Sainte-Beuve," but in a 1920 article entitled "À propos du 'style' de Flaubert," that Proust elaborates on this "syntactical revolution." First, Flaubert exploits syntactical license for the purposes of rhythm: "The subjectivism of Flaubert expresses itself in a new use of tenses of verbs, prepositions and adverbs, the last two hardly ever having anything except a rhythmic value in his sentences" (264). Secondly, the sentences in Flaubert's novels belong to a poetry all Flaubert's own, for the more Flaubert "disengages his personality and becomes Flaubert" (263), the more all that is not Flaubert is eliminated from his novels. Indeed, it is in this gradual purging of foreign stylistic elements from his novels that Flaubert's achievement lies: "And no one who has once climbed on the great *Moving pavement* [Trottoir roulant] that are the pages of Flaubert, as they file continuously, monotonously, mournfully, endlessly past, can possibly fail to recognize that they are without precedent in our literature" (262; emphasis in the original). For Proust, this unity of style results in a new impressionistic relationship between words and their objects: "in *L'Éducation sentimentale* the revolution is complete; what up until Flaubert had been action has become impression" (263).

Reading a randomly selected page from *L'Éducation sentimentale*, Proust highlights Flaubert's prevalent use of the imperfective to depict events, a practice that extends even to "the human beings who, in this continuous, homogeneous vision, are not more than the things, but no less either, 'an illusion to be described'" (264). Even when the perfective interrupts this "everlasting imperfect," the perfective be-

comes “something indefinite that is prolonged” (265). Such use of the imperfective not only fosters a sense of monotony in the events that are being described, but also facilitates the development of a particular type of reported speech:

This everlasting imperfective, then, is comprised in part of the characters’ own words which Flaubert is in the habit of reporting in the indirect style so that they merge with the rest (“The State was to take over the Stock Exchange. Many other measures were right still. . . .’ all of which does not mean that Flaubert is thinking and affirming this, but Frédéric, La Vantaz or Sénécal are saying it and that Flaubert has determined to use as few quotation marks as possible). . . . (265)

For Proust, the continuity of style in Flaubert, far from being interrupted by the presence of words and intentions foreign to those of the narrator, depends precisely on the seamless inclusion of other voices within the narrator’s sentence. In a brief critical note, Proust points to another effect of homogenization, this one due to the presence of Flaubert’s voice in that of his characters: “‘Deep inside me I have always had the music of your voice and the splendour of your eyes,’ no doubt that is a little *too good* for a conversation between Frédéric and Mme Arnoux” (587; emphasis in the original).

With the preceding discussion in mind, it can be asked, once again, whose style—Balzac’s or Flaubert’s—provides a clearer model for Proust’s writing? A very preliminary answer might be “both and neither.” Proust tends to report the speech of his characters in *À la recherche du temps perdu* after the manner of Balzac, i.e., by preserving the integrity of the characters’ voices while providing endless explanations on their dialectal peculiarities; yet Proust’s sentence also attains a recognizable unity of style, one which is not reflective, as is Flaubert’s, but which depends, at least in part, on a similarly Flaubertian tendency to infuse sentences with rhythm and poetry.

As a silent interlocutor, Bakhtin has thus far guided my response to Proust’s “Contre Sainte-Beuve.” The distinction Bakhtin makes in his essay “Discourse in the Novel” between poetic and novelistic discourse will directly inform the following analysis of the organization of voices in *À la recherche du temps perdu*. It should be said from the start that Proust’s and Bakhtin’s visions of the novel are not easy to reconcile. Whereas for Proust “a writer is nothing more than a poet” (qtd. Milly 62), Bakhtin expresses little sympathy for poetry to

which he contrasts, generally in a polemical and mutually exclusive manner, novelistic discourse. Thus Bakhtin criticizes those novelists who remain “deaf to organic double-voicedness and to the internal dialogism of living and evolving discourse” (“Discourse” 327).² His preferred rhetorical technique for dealing with specific art novels is to demonstrate that they are, even despite their authors’ intentions, heteroglossic: “When an aesthete undertakes to write a novel, his aestheticism is not revealed in the novel’s formal construction, but exclusively in the fact that in the novel there is represented a speaking person who happens to be an ideologue for aestheticism” (333).³ Bakhtin offers “heteroglossic” readings of such an art novel as Pushkin’s novel-in-verse *Evgenii Onegin*; as for Turgenev, Bakhtin claims that while his language and style may appear pure and single-voiced, this “unitary language is very far from poetic absolutism” (315).⁴

Inasmuch as Proust attempts to create a unitary, distinctive, and poetic narrative voice, *À la recherche du temps perdu* can also be considered an art novel. Yet if the aesthete-narrator Marcel, particularly in “Le Temps retrouvé,” represents an ideologue for the poeticization of the novel, then it is no less true that the art novel, whether it fails or inadvertently succeeds in realizing the “the actual possibilities and tasks of the novel as a genre” (Bakhtin “Discourse” 327),⁵ fits poorly into Bakhtin’s history of a heroic and ever more triumphant heteroglossia. Proust’s novel, with its inexhaustible wealth of interpenetrating social and aesthetic languages, on the one hand, and its highly poeticized narrative voice, on the other, problematizes the simple antinomy of poetic and novelistic discourse found in Bakhtin. Proust’s novel is a *Kunstlerroman* written from the perspective of a writer who, after years of prodigal wanderings in the realms of high society, has at last succeeded, near death, in crafting a style and poetic language distinctly his own; yet his novel is also a comedy of manners in which the mores and dissimulating speech of high society are subjected to the most withering parody, and the narrator achieves, in his linguistic zeal, a veritable compendium of the social and linguistic dialectics of *La Belle Époque*—or “a physiology of chatter” (206), as Walter Benjamin aptly puts it.

Drawing on Bakhtin’s “Discourse in the Novel” and Proust’s reading of Flaubert and Balzac, I would like to pose a question, to which the remainder of this essay will fashion a tentative answer: How does the poetic voice of the narrator in *À la recherche du temps perdu* adapt itself to the plurality of represented voices in the novel’s diegetic

space? The answer should begin with the famed Proustian sentence. The following passage from Julia Kristeva's *Time and Sense* offers a good introduction to this subject:

As diverse as Proust's sentences may be, Proust lovers and specialists agree that there is something that could be called a "Proustian sentence," recognizable by its halting quality, its length, its endless yet discreet murmur, as well as its subordinate clauses that put our memory to the test, and its musical alliterations that compensate for our failure to comprehend its logical ramifications. Literary critics . . . have studied Proust's style and, more particularly, its strange syntactic qualities (which are quite uncharacteristic of French and are thought closer to Latin, since the components of Proust's sentences are separated by unusual distances) that crystallize the aesthetic of "involuntary memory." (279)

To this list of characteristics could be added the dense metaphoricity that entangles Proust's syntax and the endlessly recurring pronoun "je." Unlike the unreliable and shifting narrators of Gogol, or the stylistically protean narrators of Joyce, Proust's narrator has a relatively unvarying voice. Apropos of one particular sentence early in the novel, Kristeva writes: "[Its] complexity, which is similar to the musical unfolding of a phrase of Vinteuil, is not a secondary effect of Proust's development but the writer's hallmark from the very beginning of his work" (280). A further "Bakhtinian" gauge of this voice's unity lies in the fact that its very stylistic uniqueness makes it easy fodder for parody. As Proust himself suggests in cases of "Flaubert-poisoning," "I cannot recommend authors too strongly to the purgative and exorcising merits of pastiche" (268).

It is within the context of this long-standing critical debate surrounding the "Proustian sentence" that I would like to analyze the second paragraph of *À la recherche du temps perdu*:

"J'appuyais tendrement mes joues contre les belles joues de l'oreiller qui, pleines et fraîches, sont comme les joues de notre enfance. Je frottai une allumette pour regarder ma montre. Bientôt minuit. C'est l'instant où le malade qui a été obligé de partir en voyage et a dû coucher dans un hôtel inconnu, réveillé par une crise, se réjouit en apercevant sous la porte une

raie de jour. Quel bonheur, c'est déjà le matin! Dans un moment les domestiques seront levés, il pourra sonner, on viendra lui porter secours. L'espérance d'être soulagé lui donne du courage pour souffrir. Justement il a cru entendre des pas; les pas se rapprochent, puis s'éloignent. Et la raie de jour qui était sous sa porte a disparu. C'est minuit; on vient d'éteindre le gaz; le dernier domestique est parti et il faudra rester toute la nuit à souffrir sans remède. (14)⁶

Although the sentences in this passage, because of their relative shortness, can be said to be atypical for Proust, some of the syntactical and figurative aspects of the narrator's poetic style can be discerned in them. In the first sentence, for example, correspondences arise first between Marcel's youthful cheeks and the cheeks of the pillow and, then, between the cheeks of this pillow and those of "our childhood." Metonymy links two pairs of cheeks: those of the young Marcel come into contact with a pillow, whose soft surfaces become in turn metaphorical "cheeks." The pillow's cheeks are then compared with the cheeks of childhood; thus the same image returns, along a path of contiguity, from the young Marcel to childhood, that is, to literal, human cheeks.

From the fourth sentence on, another metonymic link is established, this time between different events in the life of a single person. Proust juxtaposes the time at which young Marcel goes to bed and the moment when an invalid, "in a strange hotel," awakes and mistakenly thinks that it is morning. All of the remaining sentences in the paragraph develop this juxtaposition between the midnight of the young Marcel and the midnight of the invalid to form a kind of extended metaphor—a veiled epic simile, which makes no explicit comparison between its two terms. For those rereading the novel, the invalid in this passage represents not just a general type; he is also Marcel, or, more precisely—several later Marceles, for the entire metaphor foreshadows not just Marcel's first night at Balbec in "À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs" but, less directly, his visit to Saint-Loup at Doncières in "Le Côté de Guermantes" and his second visit to Balbec in "Sodome et Gomorrhe." A whole textual weave of hidden metonymic resonances in the life of Marcel—remembrances of times still to be narrated—underlies the ostensible generality of this extended metaphor.

The poetry of this passage is unmistakably Proust's. The rela-

tionship in traditional poetics between tenor and vehicle is relativized in the first metaphor as the figurative cheeks of the pillow become themselves a vehicle in the comparison with the literal cheeks of childhood. The second, extended, metaphor unravels within a series of hidden textual associations that similarly renders tenor and vehicle interchangeable. The “invalid” is presented as a general type, but he is also an avatar of the hero Marcel. Thus the tenors of Proust’s metaphors are not at the service of a hierarchically superior or more literal vehicle. On the contrary, two images—neither of which takes precedence—enter into a series of resonances and dissonances with each other, and thus imitate, through their play of difference and likeness, Marcel’s shifting experiences with time.

The paragraph also typifies the kind of narrative voice that speaks throughout Proust’s novel. While the fourth sentence, whose “c(e)” has its antecedent in the “minuit” of the preceding one, might have been more recognizably Proustian had it introduced a subordinate clause within a much longer syntactic chain, many of the effects of the following extended metaphor are highly distinctive of *la phrase proustienne*. Indeed, one can argue, along with Deleuze, that syntactical details are less important than the unity of effects produced by Proust’s poetic language. At first, it appears that the “minuit” of the young Marcel is somehow being compared with the “matin” of the invalid, and this confusion will not be fully resolved until the “c’est minuit” that opens the final sentence of the paragraph. Even after the original tension of this confusion is spent, the extended metaphor continues—as if in a *dénouement* following the invalid’s tragic realization that it is “minuit”—through a series of images concerning the last activities that the servants perform before they themselves retire for the night. Lastly, following the long arc of a narrative syntax that cannot possibly be countenanced by the reader on a first reading, the invalid of this paragraph enters into metonymic relations with a series of later neurasthenic Marceles who suffer insomnia on their first nights in strange hotels.

What bears emphasizing here is that these metaphorical and syntactical features of the narrator’s voice belong to the characteristics of what Bakhtin calls “the poetic word.” On the issue of metaphor Bakhtin is unambiguous:

The poetic word is a trope, requiring a precise feeling for the two meanings contained in it.

But no matter how one understands the interrela-

tionship of meanings in a poetic symbol (a trope), this interrelationship is never of the dialogic sort; it is impossible under any conditions or at any time to imagine a trope (say, a metaphor) being unfolded into the two exchanges of a dialogue, that is, two meanings parceled out between two separate voices. For this reason the dual meaning (or multiple meaning) of the symbol never brings in its wake dual accents. On the contrary, one voice, a single-accent system, is fully sufficient to express poetic ambiguity. It is possible to interpret the interrelationships of different meanings in a symbol logically (as the relationship of a part or an individual to the whole, as for example a proper noun that has become a symbol, or the relationship of the concrete to the abstract and so on); one may grasp this relationship philosophically and ontologically, as a special kind of representational relationship, or as a relationship between essence and appearance and so forth, or one may shift into the foreground the emotional and evaluative dimension of such relationship—but all these types of relationships between various meanings do not and cannot go beyond the boundaries of the relationship between a word and its object, or the boundaries of various aspects in the object. The entire event is played out between the word and its object; all of the play of the poetic symbol is in that space. A symbol cannot presuppose any fundamental relationship to another's word, to another's voice. The polysemy of the poetic symbol presupposes the unity of a voice with which it is identical, and it presupposes that such a voice is completely alone within its own discourse. (328)⁷

Leaving aside the marked polemical accents of this passage, is there much here, besides, perhaps, Bakhtin's preference for the words "symbol" over "metaphor" or "object" over "sensation," that really clashes with Proust's own statements on the relations between essence and metaphor? As Marcel writes in "Le Temps retrouvé":

But truth will be attained by [the writer] only when he takes two different objects, states the connexion between them—a connexion analogous in the world of

art to the unique connexion which in the world of science is provided by the law of causality—and encloses them in the necessary links of a well-wrought style; truth—and life too—can be attained by us only when, by comparing a quality common to two sensations, we succeed in extracting their common essence and in reuniting them to each other, liberated from the contingencies of time, within a metaphor. (246)

What is remarkable, even paradoxical from a “Bakhtinian” perspective, is that the very essence that Proust’s endless metaphors seek to extract should be unearthed not only within the hidden commonality between two objects, nor only within the resemblance that lies between the immediate impressions of these objects and those reminiscences of past impressions that these later ones involuntarily recall, nor only within those “sensations” which it is the author’s task to interpret “as signs of so many laws and ideas” (6 234), but also within the laws that govern social intercourse, within the play of deception and desire in the language of those who love and of those who are loved, and within the transfigured relations between the ever-evolving first-person hero and the shifting perceptions he has of other characters. In Proust, human interaction is of the essence. It is no less remarkable that Proust’s celebrated *mémoire involontaire*, which functions as an archetypal source of poetic inspiration in the novel, should not just have become the endless self-reflexive object of his poetry or of his philosophical meditations, nor simply have called forth a series of past impressions to which the poet’s supple and silent language would strive, perhaps in vain, to give expression, but should have also resurrected a whole babel of voices long since forgotten, voices which might have even disappeared forever but for that muse of memory Madeleine, voices which the aging narrator records and to which he can only now, at long last, fashion his artistic response.

Without having “applied” Bakhtin to Proust, Deleuze and Kristeva have reached similar conclusions concerning the muted dialogic relations in Proust’s sentences and metaphors. To return to the extended metaphor of the invalid in the passage cited above, it is clear that at least two points of view are being contrasted on the subject of “minuit.” These two points of view cannot enter dialogic relations; in Deleuze’s terms, they are “noncommunicating.” The young Marcel falls asleep after having checked his watch at midnight, but he does not perceive the invalid who in his insomnia awakes at that very same

time of night. Neither do the invalid Marcells at Balbec and Doncières remember, in their insomnia, their younger self. Only through the voice of the older narrator Marcel can all his prior selves be placed into relations of analogy. This older narrator, moreover, does not set these prior selves in a dialogue with one another. Dialogue and metaphor are irreconcilable. For Bakhtin, writing on Socrates, “truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction” (*Problems* 110).⁸ For Proust, truth in literature belongs to metaphor. And for Deleuze, writing on a Proust who has abandoned the great Greek theme of “dialogue” and who has replaced “conversation with silent interpretation,” dialogue serves only to conceal truth: “In the language of signs . . . there is no truth except in what is done in order to deceive, in the meanders of what conceals the truth, in the fragments of a deception and a disaster” (94, 96, 100).

Kristeva similarly attempts to unravel the intricate web of relations between multiple selves, polyphony, and metaphor in Proust: “The divergence of metaphors, sentences, and characters is balanced in an elegant indifference, as in a Watteau painting. Proust’s detachment provides a space for the neutralized polyphony of a multiplied *I*—the perverse and nonchalant *I* of the imaginary” (311). The words “indifference,” “detachment,” and “nonchalant,” by suggesting attitudes toward other voices rather than the habit of “monologizing” them, help to understand Kristeva’s paradox of a “neutralized polyphony.” The multiple selves of the Proustian *I* do not communicate with one another as so many voices brought together from different times and places; nor do these multiple selves engage one another as contending voices within what might be called, following Bakhtin, the “inescapable *perpetuum mobile* of the dialogized self-consciousness” (*Problems* 230).⁹ These multiplying selves have been resurrected as so many discrete past selves through the involuntary memory of the narrator, and their diverging experiences are set into relation with one another only through the narrator’s metaphors.

And yet these multiplying selves do enter dialogue with one another at times, inasmuch as any polyphony, no matter how neutralized, implies at least a minimal residuum of communication. Formally, there are two kinds of *I* in the novel. On the one hand, there is the narrated *I* of past Marcells, from the youthful hero of the novel’s opening pages to the aging Marcel who attends the new Princesse de Guermantes’ soirée at the close of “Le Temps retrouvé.” On the

other hand, there is the narrating *I*, whose voice, despite the protracted writing of the novel, remains remarkably consistent over thousands of pages. While this first-person narrator often engages in dialogue with his characters and with his former selves, he very infrequently submits his own views or his own writing to the judgment of others. This one-way dialogue is very often tinged with ironic or parodic shades. To turn once again to the second paragraph of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, it is clear that the words “Quel bonheur! c’est déjà le matin!” belong not to the narrator but to the invalid (despite the absence of tell-tale punctuation). This invalid does not know what the narrator knows, namely, that it is in fact midnight and not morning; this surplus of knowledge makes for the ironic distance between the two *I*s of Marcel. A few lines down, the narrator’s voice merges with that of the invalid: “L’espérance d’être soulagé lui donne du courage du souffrir.” The pronoun “lui” indicates that it is the narrator who is speaking, but the phrase “courage du souffrir” expresses a conventionally romantic sentiment more typical of the speech of a youthful Marcel, a sentiment which is somewhat exaggerated and out of place considering the relative mildness of this invalid’s probable ailment—neurasthenia.

Inasmuch as Bakhtin focuses on dialogue in novelistic discourse and Proust on the syntax of indirect discourse, the two arrive at contradictory conclusions concerning the viability of a unified poetic style in the presence of multiple voices. Bakhtin writes that “such a combining of languages and styles into a higher unity is unknown to traditional stylistics; it has no method for approaching the distinctive social dialogue among languages that is present in the novel. Thus stylistic analysis is not oriented toward the novel as a whole, but only toward one or another of its subordinated stylistic unities” (“Discourse” 263).¹⁰ In his study of Flaubert’s sentence Proust, by contrast, argues that the use of the imperfective to report indirect speech enables Flaubert to preserve the monotonous and homogeneous stylistic unity of his sentence. In short, there can either be no traditional stylistic unity within a sentence that contains two distinct voices, or Flaubert’s sentence incorporates a heterogeneity of voices into the seamless syntax of a unified style. There is no need to arbitrate here between Bakhtin and Proust. What is at stake is not so much the views of any one literary critic as the “anonymous destinies of artistic discourse itself” (Bakhtin, “Discourse” 259).¹¹ If Bakhtin has shown the ways by which poetic discourse and poetic genres are “novelized” during peri-

ods in which polyphony and heteroglossia flourish, then Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* illustrates the extent to which poetry can also invade the novel without monologizing it. Indeed, Proust's novel belongs to a tradition of art novels within a larger historical shift toward heteroglossia—a tradition that stretches from *Madame Bovary* to *Finnigans Wake* and within which poetry and prose interpenetrate and enrich each other.

Far from losing himself in the intricacies of his own poetry, Proust in *À la recherche du temps perdu* demonstrates a profound commitment to novelistic discourse. This is nowhere clearer than in the narrator's pervasive use of parody. Parody, as Bakhtin has stressed, is always directed toward other discourses, other images of language. Proust very often directs his parody at the reported speech of his characters and of his younger selves. If the narrator parodies these voices, then, like Balzac, he does not distort their reported speech under the weight of his own intentions. Leo Spitzer, for example, has noted the objectivity of reported speech in Proust:

While he does not renounce the dramatic effect of comments expressed directly, without the mitigating factor of narrative, he likes to transpose speech into reported form—for it is of course necessary that the author not commit himself to the comments of others; by introducing “he said,” or something analogous to this, he defers all responsibility to his character. The result is thus what is called “style indirect libre.” (434)

Expanding on Spitzer's observations, it can be argued that even as the narrative voice parodies other voices, it remains detached from what is being reported. The narrator's detachment, so aristocratic in its alternating mockery and condescension toward his characters' speech habits, is very different from that in Flaubert. Unlike Flaubert, whose narrator at times almost entirely gives over his voice to the intentions and language of his characters, the narrator in Proust does not permit other voices to overshadow or upstage his own, and he seldom relinquishes the responsibility of narration to other voices. For this reason, *style indirect libre* is less frequent in Proust than in Flaubert.

More commonly, Proust's narrator makes direct observations, in the explicative manner of Balzac, on the dialectal peculiarities of his characters' speech. The result is a parody that does not tarnish the poetic luster of the narrator's own voice but takes place within the reported speech of the characters themselves. Having highlighted an

amusing linguistic quirk, the narrator then reports a character's speech, either directly or indirectly, and allows this speech to parody itself; in other words, Proust loads certain dialectal patterns with his own mocking intentions and thus parodically rigs his victim's speech in advance. This is particularly true of characters who misuse or mispronounce French words—foreigners (Prince von Faffenheim, Princess Sherbatoff, Bloch, etc.) or those not belonging to the aristocracy (Morel, the lift-boy, Bloch again, etc.). Of the linguistically hapless director of the Grand-Hôtel at Balbec, for example, the narrator writes that “the more new languages he learned the worse he spoke the others.” Thereupon follows the director's directly reported speech, which continues to be carefully sectioned off from the narrator's voice by the use of quotation marks and parentheses:

“I hope,” he said, “that you will not interpolate this as a want of discourtesy. I was worried about giving a room of which you are unworthy, but I did it in connexion with the noise, because that room will have anyone above your head to disturb your trepan” (tympan). “And do not worry, I shall have the windows closed, so that they don't bang. Upon that point, I am intolerable” (this last word expressing not his own thought, which was that he would always be found inexorable in that respect, but, quite possibly, the thoughts of his underlings). (4 174)

For sophisticated or aristocratic speakers of French Proust tends to reserve more subtle forms of *logomachia* than the linguistic slapstick of this passage. He is interested not only in what a word says about a character—as Spitzer, for example, argues (436)—but also in the ways in which language speaks through characters. For Proust, the word that has its source in other words, and is, thus, not in communion with essence, is always inauthentic to a greater or lesser degree. Apropos of La Duchesse de Guermantes's speech habits, the narrator states, “it is very rarely that any of us has the courage of his own originality and does not apply himself diligently to resembling the most approved models” (3 571). If the words of others are to have any value, they must not be unconsciously repeated, or accepted at face value; instead, they must undergo the rigors of interpretation and be measured against the evidence of reality: “the words themselves did not enlighten me unless they were interpreted in the same way as a rush of blood to the cheeks of a person who is embarrassed, or as a

sudden silence" (5 93).

In his interpretation of the speech habits of others, Proust's narrator is quick to point out the derivative nature of their words. He is rather indulgent when noting regional peculiarities and rather mocking when exposing *bon mots* as fashionable clichés. Thus he expresses a certain fondness for the local Combray color which involuntarily marks Françoise's speech and which La Duchesse de Guermantes has self-consciously incorporated into her polished salon style. By contrast, Saint-Loup is ridiculed along with his lover Rachel (whose speech the former unreflectingly imitates) for their much repeated "c'est *bien*":

But what most surprised me was that the expressions peculiar to Robert (which in any case had probably come to him from literary men whom she knew) were used by her to him and by him to her as though they had been a necessary form of speech, and without any conception of the pointlessness of an originality that is universal. (3 187).

Whether the narrator delights in regional color or ridicules fashionable trends in the speech of others, the result is the same: the revelation that the languages characters speak do not originate from them.

The situation is even more complex when the narrator grapples with those literary languages that are indeed original and authentic. In "Le Temps retrouvé," Proust devotes his novel's most extended fragment of reported speech to a parodic, and, at the same time, almost reverentially precise, pastiche of the Goncourt brothers. Yet it is Bergotte's style with which Marcel wrestles most. Bergotte influences not just the style of the young Marcel, as both M. de Norpois and the narrator point out, but the speech habits of many French youths:

Younger men who were beginning to repudiate him and disclaimed any intellectual affinity with him nevertheless displayed it willy-nilly by employing the same adverbs, the same prepositions that he incessantly repeated, by constructing their sentences in the same way, speaking in the same quiescent, subdued tone, in reaction against the eloquent and facile language of an earlier generation. Perhaps these young men—we shall come across some of whom this may be said—had never known Bergotte. But his way of thinking, inocu-

lated into them, had led them to those alterations of syntax and accentuation which bear a necessary relation to originality of mind. (2 149)

Bergotte's style has left its mark on the French language through grammatical innovations that are not generally perceived by the very people through whom these innovations continue to be spoken. Language precedes the speaking subject. The subject need not remain bound to the tutelage of predecessors, however. Aspiring poets must drink deeply of past literary models, yet—through such purgatives as pastiche—they must also eventually master and overcome them so as to create their own original word in the shared experience of a national language.

The aging narrator parodies not just the derivative languages of his younger selves, but also the literary genres through which his hero Marcel comes of age. Romance genres are parodied as a young Marcel steals a kiss from his mother away from his rival Swann, as yet another Marcel struggles to overcome an infatuation for Gilberte, as a third attempts haplessly to seduce Albertine, and as a fourth stalks La Duchesse de Guermantes on the streets of Paris. The master plot of the *Künstlerroman*, in which the hero's apprenticeship leads him to his genuine artistic self, is also parodied: Marcel repeatedly fails to maintain any self-discipline in his writing, long foregoing the start of his literary career in favor of adventures in love and high society, i.e., in those enchanted realms that are the very stuff of novels.

Proust turns Bakhtin's oppositions on their head. It is not Proust's novel that parodies the pretensions of its own narrator's lofty poetic voice; on the contrary, a detached and poetic narrator parodies the world of the novel. The narrator may parody the poetry of his earlier selves, but his own exalted vision of literature and his finely wrought style lie, for the most part, beyond the scope of his parodic vision. Indeed, as the hero Marcel moves closer in time to the narrator, the parodic accents that arise in the clash of their two voices gradually diminish. The two time lines—the time of Marcel's story and the time of the narrator's writing—almost converge near the end of "Le Temps retrouvé." Most of the opinions on contemporary literature expressed in this last volume belong, in fact, to the interior monologue of a Marcel still a few years younger than the narrator. This interior monologue is sometimes reported directly, within quotation marks, and sometimes reported indirectly; yet the sense that there are two Marceles speaking is minimized, since their visions of literature

now almost perfectly coincide.

Whereas parody functions so often in *À la recherche du temps perdu* as the narrator's one-way dialogue with so many voices of a time long lost, Proust's narrator, unlike Balzac's, seldom adopts a conversational tone with the reader. Neither the narrator nor the novel's various Marcel-heroes enter genuine dialogues with other characters (Marcel's final conversation with a dying Swann is a notable exception). Critics such as Deleuze, Kristeva, Genette, Bataille, and Beckett have commented on the non-communicative nature of Proust's narrator.¹² The silence of the narrator-hero is indeed the silence of poetry, and Proust's novel intersects in many significant ways with a broader European tradition—epitomized by Mallarmé, one of Proust's real-life Bergottes—within which the poet listens to and mimics the silence of being. The narrator's silence need not be analyzed solely in terms of the poetic word's relation to essence, however; silence in Proust also reflects a response, or rather the principled withholding of a response, to the words of others:

For there is a closer analogy between the instinctive life of the public and the talent of a great writer, which is simply an instinct religiously listened to in the midst of a silence imposed upon all other voices, an instinct made perfect and understood, than between this same talent and the superficial verbiage and changing criteria of the established judges of literature. (6 251)

Proust had already articulated this thought as a maxim (and perhaps even more poetically) in “Contre Sainte-Beuve”: “Do not forget: books are the creation of solitude and the *children of silence*. The children of silence can have nothing in common with the children of speech, those thoughts born of the wish to say something, to censure, to give an opinion, that is of an obscure idea” (98; emphasis in the original).

If the world-weary narrator retreats from the world of the novel in which he has lived to the silence of his writer's den, then it is not to the four walls of this room, nor to his approaching death—to that “funeral gate” (6 442)—to which his fading energies and the fruits of his mature poetry are devoted, but to the recording and interpreting of that “superficial verbiage” from which he has so belatedly secluded himself and to the posterity of those characters who live and die in the manifold *mondanités* that make up his novel. Proust's narrator may only rarely parody his own language or his own vision of literature, yet

there can be heard so often within his voice those subtle parodic accents—which seem born in the chasm between his epochal poetry and the banality of those languages with which it engages, over thousands of pages, in a hidden, discreet, and indirect dialogue—that lend his voice its peculiar and wondrous vibrancy. Detached and indifferent, haughty and scornful, critical and interpretative, indulgent and enchanted—these are some of the many poses the narrator assumes before that grand chorus of voices upon which his poetry feeds.

Notes

1. All citations refer to translations of French and Russian texts—except in the case of the Jean Milly's and Leo Spitzer's works, where the translations are mine.
2. “глух к органической двуголосости и внутренней диалогичности живого становящегося слова” (140).
3. “когда эстет беретя за роман, то его эстетизм проявляется вовсе не в формальном построении романа,—а в том, что в романе изображается говорящий человек—идеолог эстетизма” (146).
4. “этот единый язык и у Тургенева очень далек от поэтического абсолютизма” (129).
5. “действительных возможностей и задач романного жанра” (140).
6. “I would lay my cheeks gently against the comfortable cheeks of my pillow, as plump and blooming as the cheeks of babyhood. I would strike a match to look at my watch. Nearly midnight. The hour when an invalid, who has been obliged to set out on a journey and to sleep in a strange hotel, awakened by a sudden spasm, sees with glad relief a streak of daylight showing under his door. Thank God, it is morning! The servants will be about in a minute: he can ring, and someone will come to look after him. The thought of being assuaged gives him the strength to endure his pain. He is certain he heard footsteps: they come nearer, and then die away. The ray of the light beneath his door is extinguished. It is midnight; someone has just turned down the gas; the last servant has gone to bed, and he must lie all night in agony with no one to bring him relief” (13). In the English translation, this is the third paragraph of the novel.
7. “Поэтическое слово—троп, требующий отчетливого ощущения в нем двух смыслов.

Но как ни понимать взаимоотношение смыслов в поэтическом символе (тропе),—это взаимоотношение, во всяком случае, не диалогического рода, и никогда и ни при каких условиях нельзя себе представить троп (например, метафору) развернутым в две реплики диалога, то есть оба смысла разделенными между двумя разными голосами. Поэтому-то двусмысленность (или многосмысленность) символа никогда не влечет за собой двуакцентности его. Напротив, поэтическая двусмысленность довлест одному голосу и одной акцентной системе. Можно истолковать взаимоотношения смыслов в символе логически (как отношение единичного или индивидуального к общему,— например, имя собственное, ставшее символом; как отношение конкретного к абстрактному и т. п.); можно понимать его философски-онтологически, как особое отношение репрезентации или отношение явления и сущности и т. п.,

можно выдвигать на первый план эмоционально-ценностную сторону этого взаимоотношения,—все эти типы взаимоотношения между смыслами не выходят и не могут выйти за пределы отношения слова к своему предмету и к различным моментам этого предмета. Между словом и предметом разрывывается все событие, вся игра поэтического символа. Символ не может предполагать существенного отношения к чужому слову, к чужому голосу. Многозначность поэтического символа предполагает единство и себя-тождественность голоса и его полное одиночество в своем слове” (141).

8. “Истина не рождается и не находится в голове отдельного человека, она рождается между людьми, совместно ищущими истину, в процессе их диалогического общения” (146).
9. «безысходный *perpetuum mobile* диалогизованного самосознания» (309).
10. “Традиционная стилистика не знает такого рода сочетания языков и стилей в высшее единство, у нее нет подхода к своеобразному социальному диалогу языков в романе. Поэтому-то стилистический анализ ориентируется не на целое романа, а лишь на то или иное подчиненное стилистическое единство его” (76).
11. “безымянных судеб художественного слова” (73).
12. See Genette 223-294, Bataille 156-175, Beckett 46, 47.

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