

AWKWARDNESS
IN MARCEL PROUST'S
A LA RECHERCHE DU TEMPS PERDU

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the
University of Oxford

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Abstract

This thesis examines awkwardness between characters in Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. My research offers the first full-length study of awkwardness in literary fiction, and provides a new prism through which to analyse many major characters in Proust's novel, and, crucially, their interactions. While the word "awkwardness" poses translation challenges, my thesis identifies a rich lexicon of French terms used by Proust to denote various aspects of the phenomenon: through close analysis of passages containing these terms, a coherent vision of awkwardness and its importance in the *Recherche* emerges. Awkwardness occurs in very different types of relationship – family, social, friendship and love – because, Proust stresses, human interaction is rarely easy. This latter point is not a new argument, but by focusing directly on the feelings of awkwardness which arise, original insights can be made about the specific challenges of communication, cohesion and desire in the *Recherche*. I explore the degrees of togetherness and separation Proust depicts, and compare well-known scenes and neglected moments to their mutual illumination. We find that awkwardness is essential to the novel's depiction of society in a state of rapid flux – the consequence of accelerated social change is escalated awkwardness – and that uncomfortable encounters with other people develop the protagonist's relation with his own mind.

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Introduction

This thesis examines the awkwardness depicted in Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. What forms does awkwardness take, and how does it affect the relationships between characters in the novel? An exploration of these questions, my research provides a new account of family, friendship, sociality and love in the *Recherche*, as well as proposing the first ever book-length account of the topic of awkwardness in literature.

When “the word awkward” is typed into Google,¹ the first suggestion generated by this almighty search engine is that “the word awkward is overused”. Awkwardness has become a defining phenomenon for millennials, who hashtag their everyday anecdotes and snapshots ‘#awkward’, but it has a long history: even Shakespeare’s adolescents saw their lives in such terms, with Pericles’s daughter Marine describing how ‘time hath rooted out my parentage, / And to the world and awkward casualties / Bound me in servitude’.² The term may have become overused by anglophones, but this thesis argues for its importance in a text which doesn’t even use the word once, because the text in question is French. There is, therefore, a third question indirectly posed by my research: to what purpose can a conceptual term in one language be put to a literary text in another language which lacks an equivalent word?

¹ To clarify, I do indeed mean to indicate a google search for “the word awkward” rather than simply “awkward”.

² William Shakespeare, *Pericles: The Cambridge Dover Wilson Shakespeare*, ed. by John Dover Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 76.

The *Recherche* is littered with what can be described as awkward moments between characters: with gaffes, misunderstanding, strained conversation and uncomfortable silences. My thesis makes close analysis of these moments, to show how awkwardness functions as one of the driving forces of the novel, used by Proust not only to depict the conditions of his characters' society, but also to depict something of the human condition (to employ another overused term).

Although the subject of this thesis is quite different from anything that has been written previously about Proust's œuvre, it emerges at a moment when other scholars are also using a new language to discuss the novel's structure and tone. A recent collection of critical essays, *The Strange M. Proust* (2009), explores how the *Recherche* is 'at the same time classical and unusual, French and foreign, familiar and strange'.³ Containing a rich array of essays linked by the concept of strangeness, the book includes discussion of Proust's biography ('The Disquieting Strangeness of Marcel Proust') and the theme of Jewish identity ('Strange Jewishness: Essay on the Treatment of Jewish Identity in Proust'), as well as affording attention to Proust's style in Malcolm Bowie's fine essay 'Reading Proust Between the Lines'. The striking gap in this volume, and indeed in the field of Proust criticism more widely, is an extended discussion of the characters'

³ André Benhaïm (ed.), *The Strange M. Proust* (Oxford: Legenda, 2009), p. 143.

relationships with one another.⁴ This lack is problematic because, as Nabokov points out, a Proustian character ‘exists through the notions about it of other characters’.⁵ My thesis addresses this gap, by providing an analysis of intersubjectivity in the *Recherche*, through the awkwardness that is found in all types of relationship, whether between members of a family, social acquaintances, friends or lovers.

The chief danger of a thesis focusing on awkwardness in the *Recherche*, it might seem, is that it would fail to capture the emotional texture of the novel, which is constituted by a skein of different feelings; social and romantic jealousy, anxiety and obsession, disappointment and melancholy, aesthetic elevation and joy. Does my research reflect the novel’s range of emotions? Can awkwardness as a thesis subject adequately address the drama of the novel? In the first instance, the fact that my chapters are organised according to different types of relationship means that awkwardness is necessarily related to the other key emotions involved (i.e. anxiety in the case of family relations, and jealousy in the case of love). In the second instance, the characters I focus on (the protagonist, Gilberte, Charlus, Bloch, Saint-Loup, Swann, Odette and Albertine) are those involved in the novel’s most dramatic events, whether such events are personal (i.e. the surveillance, escape and death of

⁴ This is not to argue that scholars, and especially the greatest scholars, have failed to discuss relationality in the *Recherche*: the finest studies of the *Recherche*, whatever their focus or methodology, are interested in the novel’s characters and their relationships. But critical work which *focuses* on intersubjective experience is surprisingly uncommon, and where it does exist, focuses either on the protagonist’s confrontation with the world (e.g. Leo Bersani’s *Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013 [1965]), or on the social worlds as depicted in the novel (e.g. Vincent Descombes’s *Proust: Philosophie du roman* (Paris: Minuit, 1987), or on a particular type of relationship, like sexuality (e.g. Julius Rivers’s *Proust and the Art of Love: The Aesthetics of Sexuality in the Life, Times and Art of Marcel Proust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980) or the mother-son dynamic (e.g. Inge Crosman Wimmers’s *Proust and Emotion: The Importance of Affect in A la recherche du temps perdu* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

⁵ Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* (Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2003), p. 217.

Albertine) or public (i.e. Bloch and Saint-Loup's involvement in the Dreyfus Affair and the war).

Although awkwardness is not a “big” emotion like fear, or anger, my thesis demonstrates the value of paying attention to the quieter and more disquieting feelings that the Proustian character experiences: in this respect, the thesis takes inspiration from Sianne Ngai's 2005 monograph *Ugly Feelings*, a study of ‘minor and generally unprestigious feelings’, including irritation, paranoia and disgust, in works of literature and film.⁶ Ngai acknowledges that her own work was inspired, at least in part, by philosopher Sue Campbell's call for a study of feeling with a more idiosyncratic focus than those that ‘concentrate on analyzing the features of a handful of classic emotions’,⁷ and the work of both, though very different, can be considered as significant texts for Affect Theory, a rapidly developing field that houses a spectrum of theoretical positions and critical projects, united by a concern with the study of feeling.⁸ I, like Ngai and Campbell, do not lean theoretically on the distinction between affect and emotion, although further on in this Introduction

⁶ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 6. Ngai's project is quite different from my own, though, in so far as it is politically focused, ‘on the negative affects that read the predicaments posed by a general state of obstructed agency with respect to other human actors or to the social as such – a dilemma I take as charged with political meaning regardless of whether the obstruction is actual or fantasized, or whether the agency obstructed is individual or collective’ (p. 3).

⁷ Sue Campbell, *Interpreting the Personal: Expression and the Formation of Feelings* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 4.

⁸ While the field of Affect Theory is difficult to circumscribe, there is critical consensus that a watershed moment occurred with the publication of two essays in 1995, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank's ‘Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins’, *Critical Inquiry*, 21.2 (1995): 496-522, and Brian Massumi, ‘The Autonomy of Affect’, *Cultural Critique*, 31:2 (1995): 83-109. While these essays, and subsequent work by the authors, shaped two dominant directions for affect studies in the humanities – Tomkins's affect as the prime “interest” motivator that comes to put the drive in bodily drives, and Massumi's (or rather, Deleuze's) affect as an entire, vital, and modulating field of myriad becomes across human and nonhuman – today many nuanced critical angle exist. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, editors of *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), set out ‘as a set of necessarily brief and blurry snapshots, eight of the main orientations’ in their ‘Introduction’ (pp. 6-8).

I do highlight how awkwardness might destabilise the affect/emotion differentiation as argued for by Brian Massumi.

Affect and emotion were first distinguished in psychoanalysis for the practical purpose of “affect” denoting feeling described by the observing analyst, and “emotion” denoting feeling that belonged to the analysand’s “I”.⁹ Now, some affect theorists, notably Massumi and Lawrence Grossberg, argue for a stronger distinction, not only on the grounds that emotion requires a subject while affect does not, but further that ‘Unlike emotions, affective states are neither structured narratively nor organized in response to our interpretations of situations’.¹⁰ Even for projects little concerned with the affect/emotion distinction, the subjective-objective problematic is important to Affect Theory as a field in so far as today’s spotlight on emotion by literary critics can be seen as a reaction to its exclusion by theorists during the late twentieth-century, for whom the subjective dimension of feeling seemed to undercut its validity as an object of *materialist* inquiry. As Ngai summarises in her Introduction, the semiotic analyses that dominated literary studies in the 1970s and 1980s sidelined feeling because of ‘its perceived incompatibility with “concrete” social experience’, and the poststructuralist theories that dominated literary criticism in the 1980s and early 1990s sidelined feeling because of ‘its perceived incompatibility with poststructuralism’s skeptical

⁹ For a summary of the psychoanalytical origins of the emotion/affect split, see Donna M. Orange’s ‘Affect and Emotional Life’ in *Emotional Understanding: Studies in Psychoanalytic Epistemology* (New York: Guildford, 1995), p. 50.

¹⁰ Lawrence Grossberg, ‘Mapping Popular Culture’, *we gotta get out of this place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 69-87 (p. 81).

interrogation of the category of experience itself'.¹¹ Today, there is critical consensus that feelings are intrinsically linked with social institutions and practices, although they cannot be reduced to it, as demonstrated by research on the cultural histories of specific emotions by scholars in the 1990s.¹²

This thesis is not a cultural history of awkwardness, but as a study of the awkwardness depicted in *A la recherche*, a novel which explores the psychological effects of a society in rapid flux, my research makes a significant contribution to the study of emotions in modernist literature.¹³ Modernism, the early twentieth-century literary trend exemplified by writers such as William Faulkner, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and, of course, Proust, has been the subject of countless studies which examine its formal and thematic characteristics,¹⁴ and the crucial role of negative affect in modernist texts has been addressed, most recently through the

¹¹ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 25. See, further, Rei Tarada's *Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the 'Death of the Subject'* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

¹² Two notable works are Tom Lutz's *American Nervousness, 1903: An Anecdotal History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) and William Ian Miller's *Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

¹³ The Société d'études modernistes (French Society for Modernist Studies) organised a three-day conference on the subject of 'Modernist Emotions' in June 2016 at the Université Paris Ouest Nanterre: we can perhaps expect the proceedings of this conference to be published in 2017.

¹⁴ In his essay on 'Modernism', David Ellison acknowledges 'the various reasons which militate against the efforts a reader of critic might insert Proust's work into a given literary movement', but also explains that what unites 'works now occupying pride of place in the modernist canon – Joyce's *Ulysses*, Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and Proust's *Recherche* – [...] is a strong organizing tension underlying each book's narrative construction: on the one hand, each writer seeks to recreate a highly particularized imagined universe full of physical and psychological detail [...] but on the other, each of them points beyond the literary landscape itself to larger aesthetic and ethical concerns, endowing the narrative spaces they have created with a quasi-geological temporal layering'. See David Ellison, 'Modernism', in *Marcel Proust in Context*, ed. Adam Watt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 214-20 (p. 217). For a monograph-length study which situates Proust beside other European modernist writers, see Gerald Gillespie's *Proust, Mann, Joyce in the Modernist Context* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010 [2003]). Donald M. Brown's article 'Placing Proust: Before and After Modernism', *Poetics Today*, 16:2 (1995): 363-74, considers the extent to which Proust is best understood as a modernist, through a detailed review of two contrasting monographs on the subject: Antoine Compagnon's *Proust entre deux siècles* (Paris: Seuil, 1989) and Margaret E. Gray's, *Postmodern Proust* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).

prism of trauma.¹⁵ There is, however, a surprising dearth of critical work on the prevalence of awkwardness in this period, surprising because, as a famous title by Henry James captures, this was “the awkward age”.¹⁶ Although I do not argue that awkwardness only came into existence in the period described as Modernist, nor do I deny that writers in early centuries may have been interested in the phenomenon, my thesis does demonstrate that the uncertain social circumstances of Proust’s characters plays a crucial part in this feeling. My work also resonates with recent work on the cultural history of aesthetics, notably Hannah Freed-Thall’s 2015 monograph *Spoiled Distinctions: Aesthetics and the Ordinary in French Modernism*, which, through a discussion of Proust and subsequent writers, seeks to demonstrate ‘French modernism’s love affair with the ordinary, unsophisticated side of aesthetic experience’.¹⁷

The social upheavals experienced by modernist writers and the emergence of awkwardness as a theme has been gestured toward by critical essays on depictions of embarrassment in prose (though as I outline beneath, the two are distinct): Sylvia P. Jenkins’s ‘Goethe and Embarrassment’ (1978) examines the writer’s sensitivity to

¹⁵ In the introduction to her monograph, *Djuna Barnes and Affective Modernism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), Julie Taylor gives an excellent overview of the pairing of trauma and modernity, and provides brief summaries of significant monographs in this area, including Ariela Freedman’s, *Death, Men, and Modernism: Trauma and Narrative in British Fiction from Hardy to Woolf* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), Jonathan Flatley’s *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2008), and Madelyn Detloff’s *The Persistence of Modernism: Loss and Mourning in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁶ The publication of Henry James’s *The Awkward Age* in 1889-99 is telling, the title referring both to the difficulties of adolescence and the evolution of social expectations and mores in late nineteenth-century England.

¹⁷ Hannah Freed-Thall, *Spoiled Distinctions: Aesthetics and the Ordinary in French Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 1. This monograph contains, notably, a section entitled ‘Awkward’ (pp. 94-105), which argues for ‘a modernist aesthetics of awkwardness’ in the poetry of Francis Ponge (p. 96).

social indiscretion and the ensuing ‘awkward pause or silence’,¹⁸ and Michael Tilby’s ‘*Les Faux-Monnayeurs: A Novel About Embarrassment*’ discusses how Gide’s ‘vision of both bourgeois society and the emotional life of the individual is one that makes embarrassment a perceptual risk’.¹⁹ Both scholars refer to Christopher Rick’s 1974 monograph, *Keats and Embarrassment*, challenging his suggestion that embarrassment is a ‘narrowly English’ sentiment,²⁰ and this thesis is a sustained demonstration that the social circumstances in France at the turn of the nineteenth-century provided Proust with as much material for the subject as his anglo-saxon counterparts gained in Britain (and elsewhere). It is also, moreover, the proof that although *awkwardness* cannot be translated with a single French term, it is not only possible but deeply fruitful to take a conceptual term outside of the text’s language, to discuss a critical theme within the text. This thesis, therefore, brings something new not only to Proust scholars, but also to the study of French literature, because it proposes a new way of looking at a French text.

¹⁸ Sylvia P. Jenkins, ‘Goethe and Embarrassment’, in *Tradition and Creation: Essays in Honour Elizabeth Mary Wilkinson*, ed. by C. P. Magill, Brian Alan Rowley, and Christopher J. Smith (Leeds: Maney, 1978), pp. 101-15 (p. 101).

¹⁹ Michael Tilby, ‘*Les Faux-Monnayeurs: A Novel About Embarrassment*’, *French Studies*, 35.1 (1981): 45-59 (p. 46).

²⁰ Christopher Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 5. While Ricks contrasts the English propensity for embarrassment with the Gallic temperament and its expression in the French language (‘How can you trust a people whose very language does its best to conceal the existence of the blush? *Rougir* does not in itself offer an distinction between a blush and a flush’, p. 5), Tilby demonstrates how the French language has its own richness for the depiction of embarrassment, for example ‘the verb *gêner* is well suited to Gide’s particular concerns, for its semantic field, wider of course than that of the English verb ‘to embarrass’, embraces ideas of constraint’, p. 55.

1. The concept of awkwardness

Awkwardness is complex, and easier to experience and recognise than to define. There is no existing monograph to provide a sturdy theory of the phenomenon; a ninety-page work by Adam Kotsko, entitled *Awkwardness: An Essay* (2010),²¹ makes some interesting points, but its theoretical basis is flawed, as recently indicated by another academic:

As far as I can see, the analysis of awkwardness as something that spreads socially, [...] founded primarily on the violation, or absence, of social norms, simply does not capture the phenomenon. I think, too, that Kotsko implicitly recognizes this, and that this recognition underwrites his willingness to call “awkward” things that do not seem to fall under his official account at all.²²

While Kotsko does seem to undermine his own theory through the examples he gives, perhaps this points less to his failings as a theoretician than to the fact that awkwardness is so multifaceted a phenomenon that no single definition could be satisfactory. As I discuss in more detail below, the difficulty of circumscribing “awkward” is inscribed in the elasticity of the word itself, which can be used to denote a vast range of things: a physical movement, an atmosphere, a style of

²¹ Adam Kotsko, *Awkwardness: An Essay* (Hants: O Books, 2010).

²² Ben Wolfson, a member of the Philosophy Faculty at the University of California, Santa Barbara, wrote an essay in response to Kotsko, entitled ‘What is called awkwardness?’ (July 25, 2015). This essay is available for free access via the author’s profile on academia.edu (<https://independent.academia.edu/benwolfson>).

writing²³ or photography,²⁴ a political state,²⁵ or even a material object.²⁶ My thesis focuses on awkwardness as a personal feeling experienced by the characters in the *Recherche*, and as an aspect of their verbal and behavioral interactions with one another.

When Henri Bergson set out to investigate ‘Que signifie le rire?’, he suggested that the best way to proceed would be to aim at ‘quelque chose de plus souple qu’une définition théorique, – une connaissance pratique et intime, comme celle qui naît d’une longue camaraderie’.²⁷ Like Bergson, my analysis of awkwardness adapts itself to the phenomenon as it appears, rather than starting out with a narrow theoretical definition: after all, my project is not to provide a definition of awkwardness, but to examine its role in the relationships between Proust’s characters. At present I will instead deal with the etymology of *awkward* and the various ways it operates as an adjective in English, in order to introduce relevant French terms. Then, in order both to define the scope of my research, and to introduce the specificities of awkwardness as seen in the *Recherche*, I introduce three fundamentals of the phenomenon, which I categorise as looking (1a), being (1b), and speaking (1c). I then consider how awkwardness destabilises theories of

²³ Julia Kristeva describes ‘Une esthétique de la maladresse’ in the writings of Marguerite Duras, in *Soleil Noir: Dépression et mélancolie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), pp. 233-234. More recently, Antony Rowland published a monograph entitled *Holocaust Poetry: Awkward Poetics in the Work of Sylvia Plath, Geoffrey Hill, Tony Harrison and Ted Hughes* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005).

²⁴ See the popular website, <http://awkwardfamilyphotos.com>, which ‘receives millions of hits daily and submissions from around the world’.

²⁵ See Stephen George, *An awkward partner: Britain in the European Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

²⁶ The sculptural work of the Polish artist Alina Szapocznikow was exhibited under the title ‘Awkward Objects’ in 2009, and Agatha Jakubowska (ed.) subsequently compiled a book of essays under the title, *Alina Szapocznikow: Awkward Objects* (Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2011).

²⁷ Henri Bergson, *Le rire* (Paris: Éditions Alcan, 1924 [1900]), pp. 9, 10.

affect, and affect as an augmentation or diminution in the body's capacity to act (1d).

Awkwardness is part of a group of adverbs: forward, backward, awkward. It is 'the wrong direction, in the wrong way'.²⁸ Curiously performative of its own meaning, the word contains this clash of being 'turned the wrong way' (*awk*) despite 'having a specified direction' (*-ward*). Etymologically, awkwardness denotes a physical phenomenon, but even in this sense it could be understood both as something objective (the difference between the right and wrong direction) or something more subjective (the skillfulness, or not, of movement: *clumsy* as synonym, *graceful* as antonym). The term, then, is indicative both of a tension between two opposing things (*clash, mismatch*) and the tension within a single thing (*spasm, paralysis*). Both of these ideas will be crucial to my analysis, because the awkwardness depicted in the *Recherche* arises from a clash between the individual and the world *and* the internal tensions felt within the individual.

Where awkwardness operates as an adjective, it becomes more complex still. It is applicable to composure ("it felt awkward"), interaction ("we had an awkward conversation") and even one's whole self ("why am I such an awkward person"). The same word can describe both the thing ("he is awkward") and its effect ("he makes me feel awkward"), in contrast to the way feelings and emotions are often grammatically divided in terms of cause and effect, i.e. "it was embarrassing, therefore I felt embarrassed". The notion of embarrassment (*la gêne*, in French) is raised because it is essential to highlight at this early point that it is not a synonym

²⁸ 'awkward, adv. and adj.', *OED Online*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, December 2015) <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/13971?redirectedFrom=awkward>> [accessed 15 December 2015].

for awkwardness, even if in some cases the words can be used interchangeably, and the feelings often overlap. For composure, “it felt awkward” could be rephrased as “it felt uncomfortable”, but not necessarily by “it felt embarrassing”. If “it was embarrassing”, the reasons for this embarrassment were probably quite evident, whereas if “it felt awkward”, the explanation is less tangible. Likewise, an “awkward conversation” suggests the exchange was not smooth, that it was tense or uneasy or even a little strange, but not necessarily that it was an “embarrassing conversation”, which suggests feelings of shame. For an individual, an “awkward person” is different from an “embarrassing person”. The former might be extremely shy, or difficult to please, or unskilled in social interaction, while the latter will be somebody who is prone to saying or doing the wrong thing, a buffoon, an idiot.

The French language does not have a single term for awkward. As a physical phenomenon, clumsy can be translated as *maladroit* or *gauche*, with both terms containing the idea of wrong direction. There are also fitting translations for the symbolic extension of awkwardness as a problem of movement or placement. An environment may cause an individual to feel uncomfortably *out of place* or *mal à l'aise*; an action or utterance may be *ill-fitting* or *déplacé*; an individual may be put in an awkward position or *être en porte-à-faux*. While the French language lacks one adjective that can be used to describe the awkwardness of composure, interaction and personality, there is a rich vocabulary which suggests different aspects of the phenomenon; a situation or interaction can be *délicat* or *difficile*; a person can be *étrange* or *peu commode*, and most of us are at risk of making the occasional blunder, that is *des gaffes* or *des maladroites*. The point is that while the

French language lacks an overarching term for awkwardness, French literature can depict the phenomenon through a myriad of terms: if French scholars have hitherto failed to comment on the lexicon of awkwardness with which the *Recherche* is teeming, the English term *awkward* provides a means of bringing these French terms together.

The *Recherche* is saturated with the lexicon of awkwardness that I have identified above, and this thesis offers close analysis of passages containing such vocabulary, as well as identifying moments of implied awkwardness in the text. The chapters are organised by types of relationship: Chapter One looks at family life, Chapter Two deals with social acquaintances, Chapter Three examines friendship, and Chapter Four focuses on romantic love. In each of the first three chapters, I choose to focus on one aspect of awkwardness as outlined in this introduction: Chapter One on perception ('Looking'), Chapter Two on identity ('Being') and Chapter Three on conversation ('Speaking'). The analysis of Chapter Four brings these different aspects together to focus on the idea of *l'acte maladroit*.

1a. Looking

Awkwardness can arise through what is seen (a subject watching something or someone else) or through the exchange of gazes (two subjects whose eyes meet), and in the *Recherche* it frequently occurs through both. In the first category, we might think of the protagonist when, awaking from a nap in the shadowed grass, he finds himself watching Mlle Vinteuil with her lover, unable to slip away because of the noise he will make. In the second, the protagonist's discomfort, when he feels himself being watched and looks up to see a stranger (in fact Charlus) staring at him, while nervously slapping the leg of his trousers with a switch. These important scenes, both without dialogue, contain a palpable awkwardness, and Chapter One of this thesis examines awkwardness as an ocular phenomenon. As Patrick O'Donovan points out, 'Though by no means incidental in the novel, looking and seeing have been relatively little analysed',²⁹ although two studies stand out: Gilles Deleuze's magnificent *Proust et les signes* (1964) analyses perceptual activity between characters in the *Recherche* in terms of signs and interpretation,³⁰ and Malcolm Bowie's equally accomplished *Proust Among the Stars* (1998) draws attention to the fundamentally desiring (as distinct from cognitive) impetus that drives and conditions many of the narrator's acts of looking.³¹ More recently, and in contrast to this thesis, Katja Haustein's article 'Proust's Emotional Cavities: Vision and Affect

²⁹ Patrick O'Donovan, 'A Contradictory Look at the Look: Resisting *Le Temps retrouvé*', in Adam Watt, ed., *Le Temps retrouvé Eighty Years After/80 ans après: Critical Essays / Essais critiques* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009): 167-80, p. 169.

³⁰ Gilles Deleuze's *Proust et les signes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964).

³¹ Malcolm Bowie, *Proust Among the Stars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

in *A la recherche du temps perdu*' (2009)³² examines the relation between vision and affect, but argues that what is produced (by the sight of Albertine sleeping and the grandmother dying) is an emotional cavity, that is, a complete absence of feeling.

While awkwardness is under-theorised, its link with ocular activity has been noticed. The online 'Urban Dictionary' has over 70 user-generated definitions for *awkward*, and the one with the most votes is this: 'passing a homeless person on your way to a coin star machine'.³³ When we unpack this definition, the significance of perception becomes clear. The hypothetical individual is on his way to the 'coin star machine', an American term for a machine into which one puts small change in exchange for banknotes. No interaction has occurred, but the suggestion is that when the individual sees the homeless person, he sees himself through the homeless person's eyes and this is awkward. He is involuntarily forced to imagine how fortunate he must appear, carrying heavy bags full of small change, while the homeless man spends his day accumulating just a few coins. It is important to clarify that this does not necessarily imply feelings of empathy or compassion: indeed, perhaps what makes the scenario awkward is that the man is forced to share the perspective of someone with whom he has no existing or likely emotional rapport.

³² Katja Hausteine, 'Proust's Emotional Cavities: Vision and Affect in *A la recherche du temps perdu*', *French Studies*, 63.2 (2009): 161-73.

³³ 'Awkward', *Urban Dictionary*, <<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=awkward>> [accessed 15 December 2015].

One of the most significant critical discussions of the strange feelings produced by the 'Le regard' is found in Sartre's *L'Être et le Néant* (1943).³⁴ While his project is a phenomenological investigation of consciousness, Sartre's analysis of the affective purport of looks, exchanged and avoided, has important imbrications with the awkwardness that this thesis identifies in the *Recherche*. Sartre argues that certain structures of feeling reveal certain structures of being: shame, for example, is necessarily shame of oneself before the Other. This feeling is catalysed through being seen:

Je viens de faire un geste maladroit ou vulgaire: ce geste colle à moi, je ne le juge ni ne le blâme, je le vis simplement, je le réalise sur le mode du pour-soi. Mais voici tout à coup que je lève la tête: *quelqu'un était là et m'a vu*. Je réalise tout à coup toute la vulgarité de mon geste et j'ai honte.³⁵

The difference between Sartre's description of shame and the Urban Dictionary notion of awkwardness is subtle but certain. The hypothetical individual carrying his bags of coins does not consider his action 'maladroit ou vulgaire': but when he crosses the homeless man, he becomes aware of the other's perspective and this is uncomfortable. It is important to stress that there are many moments in the *Recherche* where awkwardness occurs as part of a skein of negative feelings, including shame and embarrassment. Indeed, my argument is that part of what creates an atmosphere of awkwardness in the novel is the regular occurrence or risk of shameful and embarrassing feelings.

Another, quite different way in which the link between perception and awkwardness becomes clear, is when we consider the fact that awkward encounters are

³⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Être et le Néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), pp. 292 - 341.

³⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Être et le Néant*, p. 260 (emphasis mine).

fascinating, drawing the human gaze in a powerful way. Awkward scenes make us want to cover our eyes: and peek through our fingers. In his monograph, *Documentary's awkward turn: cringe comedy and media spectatorship* (2014), Jason Middleton identifies how 'Awkwardness is a defining principle of popular television comedies like *The Office*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm...*', but stresses that it is not just a mechanism for light entertainment: spectators of serious documentaries have welcomed the increasing employment of awkwardness by directors, as the proof of 'a more authentic reality in the representation'.³⁶ The suggestion is that if we "like" to watch awkward encounters between others, although it causes us to cringe, it is because we know that what we are watching is acutely real, awkwardness being difficult to feign. Both Middleton's focus on the medium of film, and his subscription to the idea that 'after the 1990s, awkwardness supersedes irony as a dominant cultural logic',³⁷ raise the question of how the phenomenon is employed in literature, as a non-visual medium, and specifically to literature reflecting the cultural concerns of *fin de siècle* France.

The social upheavals and aesthetic developments occurring in Proust's lifetime (1871-1922), and preceding it, created the conditions for the *Recherche* to be a novel in which perception and awkwardness would be so important. Here, I will turn briefly to one of Proust's predecessors and inspirations to highlight two points: the way the city of Paris was changing, and, relatedly, the way the novel would change. Charles Baudelaire's *Le Spleen de Paris* (1869), a collection of prose

³⁶ Jason Middleton, *Documentary's awkward turn: cringe comedy and media spectatorship* (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 126.

³⁷ Jason Middleton, *Documentary's awkward turn*, p. 6.

poems inspired by the modern urban environment, depict how the individual's perceptual possibilities were being adapted by the newly created street life during the process of Haussmanisation.³⁸ Many of the poems suggest how the effect of such expanded perception was as uncomfortable as it was exhilarating. In 'Les yeux des pauvres', the narrator taking a drink in a new café is confronted by the stares of a poor man and his children on the street outside. Although the scene is narrated in the first-person from the narrator's point of view, multiple perspectives demand to be seen and shared:

Les yeux du père disaient: 'Que c'est beau! que c'est beau! on dirait que tout l'or du pauvre monde est venu se porter sur ces murs.' - Les yeux du petit garçon: "Que c'est beau! que c'est beau! mais c'est une maison où peuvent seuls entrer les gens qui ne sont pas comme nous." - Quant aux yeux du plus petit, ils étaient trop fascinés pour exprimer autre chose qu'une joie stupide et profonde.³⁹

The power of the look is expressed through the voice(s) it is given, and even the baby's gaze produces, if not language, disturbing emotion.

If the link between Urban Dictionary's hypothetical man and Baudelaire's poem is the uncomfortable feelings produced by the gaze of the impoverished stranger, and thus highlights what we might term a "social" awkwardness, the link between Baudelaire's poem and Proust's *Recherche* is their placing emphasis on what can be described as an "existential" awkwardness as effected through the look. The bourgeois narrator is made uneasy by the eyes of the poor, but the story culminates in the more unsettling experience of him looking into his lover's eyes: hoping to find his own thoughts reflected there, he instead discovers an insensitivity

³⁸ For a thorough study of this subject, see Shelley Rice's *Parisian Views* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), especially the section entitled 'Eyes' in Chapter Two, pp. 32-37.

³⁹ Charles Baudelaire, 'Les yeux des pauvres' in *Petits Poèmes en Prose*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Michel Levy, (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1880 [1869]), IV, pp. 76.

bordering on cruelty. The woman's point of view also has its part in the narrative, and she is the only character to actually speak aloud, with voice rather than with eyes, and this with violence: 'Ces gens-là me sont insupportables avec leurs yeux ouverts comme des portes cochères!'.⁴⁰ The story becomes that of the awkwardness of having spent a day in perfect harmony with somebody, and suddenly being wrenched out of this fusional dynamic. Similarly, in the *Recherche*, the protagonist's own awkwardness is perpetuated by the regular experience (and perhaps ultimate truth) of discovering that other individuals, however well he seemed to have understood them, are alien. Indeed, it could be postulated that awkwardness is implicated in the separation anxiety that so many critics have discussed as the determining factor for all of the protagonist's subsequent relationships.⁴¹

The formal development of the novel in 19th century France also reflects a preoccupation with the theme of social and personal discomfort, specifically through a transition from third- to first-person narrator. In his monograph, *Bad Form: Social Mistakes and the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (2008), Kent Puckett makes a study of gaffes and *faux-pas* in the novels of Balzac and Flaubert, to show that where such social awkwardness is represented, there is 'an uneasy relation between a specifically omniscient narration and the literary character'.⁴² Puckett

⁴⁰ Charles Baudelaire, 'Les yeux des pauvres', p. 77.

⁴¹ For work of this sort, see the aforementioned Inge Crosman Wimmers's *Proust and Emotion* (2004), which examines separation anxiety through drawing on Affect Theory. Another study which explores the novel through this theme, but in this instance informed by Otto Rank's work on the origin and effects of separation anxiety, is Stephen Gilbert Brown's *The Gardens of Desire: Marcel Proust and the Fugitive Sublime* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).

⁴² Kent Puckett, *Bad Form: Social Mistakes and the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 7.

argues that it is at the site of the social mistake that omniscient narration becomes threatened, because ‘embarrassment is a feeling we can catch, and that contagiousness facilitates identifications between reader and writer as well as between narrator and character’.⁴³ This is developed further in the *Recherche*, which moves to a first-person narrative, but one which is extremely complex, denying us the protagonist-narrator’s name⁴⁴ and blurring the book that he plans to write with the book that we are reading. In the conclusion to this thesis, I say more about how the style of the *Recherche* (namely narrative and sentence structure) reinforce the theme of awkwardness, being the focus of my research. But clearly, if awkwardness as a phenomenon is produced by the way humans look at one another, then Proust’s use of a first-person “je”, whose insights are as profound as his errors are frequent,⁴⁵ is a way of bringing uncomfortable encounters to the surface of the text, by inscribing them as part of his subjective perspective, and thus often involving his participation in them. The mature narrator does not entirely escape the awkwardness

⁴³ Kent Puckett, *Bad Form*, p. 10.

⁴⁴ And, indeed, suggesting Marcel Proust’s own name (and by extension, biography). As Elisabeth Ladenson points out, in *Proust’s Lesbianism* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), ‘Proust is playing to – and with – a deep readerly need to name, and to read biographically. It is awkward, as I have had ample occasion to observe, to deprive oneself of the ability to name’, pp. 131-132. For a thorough analysis of the novel’s complexities of narrative voice, see Marcel Muller, *Les Voix narratives dans la ‘Recherche du temps perdu’* (Geneva: Droz, 1965) and, more recently, Brian Rogers’s chapter ‘Proust’s Narrator’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Proust*, ed. by Richard Bales (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 85-99. For a detailed genetic study of narrative voice in the novel, see Anthony R. Pugh’s *The Birth of ‘À la recherche du temps perdu’* (Lexington: French Forum, 1987), which address developments in the period 1908-9, and *The Growth of ‘À la recherche du temps perdu’* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), which deals with 1909-14.

⁴⁵ Gerard Genette, in *Figures III* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972), writes: ‘C’est en général le “point de vue du héros” qui commande le récit, avec ses restrictions de champ, ses ignorances momentanées, et même ce que le narrateur considère à part soi comme des erreurs de jeunesse, des naïvetés, des “illusions à perdre”’, pp. 214-215. For a consideration of ‘the erroneous, the erratic, and the errant’ in *A la recherche*, see the second section in the third chapter of Bowie’s *Freud, Proust and Lacan: theory as fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 71-76. Bowie also discusses the importance of the protagonist’s misreadings in his chapter on ‘Sex’ in *Proust Among the Stars*: ‘Getting things wrong, being deluded, refusing to see the error of one’s mental ways, will become a curriculum in its own right’, p. 221.

that his youthful counterpart suffers. As well as the encounters which make the protagonist uncomfortable (like the girls' sex at Montjouvain), there is also an awkwardness that is seen and felt in retrospect (like the fact that it wasn't a stranger staring at him in Balbec, but Charlus, and that Charlus is not just the eccentric uncle of his friend, but a secret homosexual). Indeed, the protagonist's 'apprentissage des signes',⁴⁶ as Deleuze puts it, makes perception itself a disconcerting experience, because signs produce powerful feelings without revealing their meaning. This is why the awkwardness in the *Recherche* is not only to be found in particular scenes and moments, but also underpins the novel throughout, as the protagonist tries to negotiate the world in which he finds himself, while concurrently the narrator reconsiders that which he has lived.

Chapter One examines the first world of every individual: their family life. The chapter makes three observations about awkwardness between family members; first, it arises when a child's perceptive capacities are sufficiently mature to guess at their parents' opinions, second, it intensifies when the child is exposed to and aware of sexuality, and third, it occurs in a new form when a death in the family makes looking difficult.

⁴⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Proust et les signes*, p. 11.

1b. Being

Awkwardness arises through clashes of identity, whether an individual does not fit into a particular milieu because of who they are and how this is judged, or because they themselves are uncomfortable with the various and sometimes opposing aspects that constitute their identity. In the first category, we can think of the example of Swann who, ironically because he is such a socially skilled man and moves in the most exclusive circles, is despised and made to feel an outsider by the Verdurins. In the second, we might think of Swann's daughter, Gilberte, whose identity is conflicted because of the social difference between her parents and, later, the fact of having Jewish origins but being married to an aristocrat. Chapter Two of this thesis focuses on the Baron de Charlus, a character who causes awkwardness in every one of his social encounters, because of the way he handles his identity as a homosexual. Although much critical attention has been given to the theme of homosexuality in the *Recherche*,⁴⁷ and several essays devoted to Charlus,⁴⁸ the

⁴⁷ Most notably by Elisabeth Ladenson in the aforementioned *Proust's Lesbianism* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), as well as in her more recent chapter on 'Sexuality' in *Marcel Proust in Context*, ed. by Adam Watt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 115-22. The theme of homosexuality has been discussed with regards to a wide range of issues, including the subject of religion (see Naomi Diamant's 'Judaism, Homosexuality and Other Sign Systems in *A la recherche du temps perdu*', *Romanic Review*, 82.2 (1991): 179-92), the context of Victorianism (see Emily Eells's *Proust's Cup of Tea: Homoeroticism and Victorian Culture* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002)) and the social and formal dimensions of using the first person (see Michael Lucey's *Never Say I: Sexuality and the First Person in Colette, Gide, and Proust* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006)). For a study of the theme of homosexuality in modernist writers, including Proust, see Colleen Lamos's *Deviant Modernism: Sexual and textual errancy in T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁴⁸ Two such essays appear in a recent volume edited by Adam Watt, *Le Temps retrouvé Eighty Years After/ 80 ans après: Critical Essays / Essais critiques* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009): Sophie Duval's 'Une Question de vision: Charlus, roi Lear et célibataire de l'art', pp. 37-51, and Franc Schuerewegen's 'La Mémoire de Charlus', pp. 53-64. See, further, 'Charlus/Saint-Loup avec les hommes (Baron de Charlus et Robert de Saint-Loup, aristos et homosexuels)' which forms the final chapter of Jacques Dubois's *Figures du désir. Pour une critique amoureuse* (Brussels: Les Impressions nouvelles, 2011), and Elisabeth Ladenson's chapter 'Charlus, Bloch, Legrandin. La Trinité maudite' in *Swann, le centenaire*, ed. by Antoine Compagnon and Kazuyoshi Yoshikawa (Paris: Editions Hermann, 2013), pp. 357-71.

awkward feelings this character generates in his social acquaintances remains to be explored, especially in what have been described as the neglected volumes of the novel, *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, *La Prisonnière* and *La Fugitive*.

In the emerging theorisation of awkwardness as an affective phenomenon, an emphasis has been placed on the notion of identity, especially tensions of class, race and sexuality. In his *Awkwardness: An Essay* (2010), Adam Kotsko argues that the prevalence of this cultural phenomenon in the United States today is in fact the result of the events of the 1960s, which destabilised the normative social model. Kotsko draws attention to the civil rights movement, as upsetting the relationship between blacks and whites, and to the feminist movement, as disrupting expectations about marriage, family life, and coming of age.⁴⁹ Kotsko argues that awkward feelings can be the result of social rules being broken ('everyday awkwardness'), or, and more intensely, when the rules are in flux ('radical awkwardness'): 'The discomfort of radical awkwardness is therefore much greater than that of everyday awkwardness, because in place of seeing one's familiar ways of navigating the world flaunted, one feels deprived of them altogether'.⁵⁰ Approaching the phenomenon from a different perspective, Issa Rae, creator of *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* (2011),⁵¹ has written about the awkwardness generated not only by the interaction of different groups (black and white, male and female), but also by an individual failing to fit the profile of their racial or gender

⁴⁹ Adam Kotsko, *Awkwardness* (Hants: O Books, 2010), pp. 17-24.

⁵⁰ Adam Kotsko, *Awkwardness*, p. 7.

⁵¹ Originally an online comedy series in which she starred, Rae published an autobiography with the same title in 2015: *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* (New York: Atria Books, 2015).

group. Rae argues that black Americas are presumed to be ‘cool’, and highlights the difficulty of being an introverted, uncoordinated black woman.

As well as particular identities,⁵² the very notion of identity itself is susceptible to awkwardness. Mary Capello’s life-writing monograph, *Awkward: A Detour* (2007), sees its Italian-American author travelling to Italy and Russia to explore the ambiguous borders of identity, geographical and psychological. Capello examines the things that undermine or destabilise a person’s sense of identity: not only each individual’s complicated lineage, but the singularity of each person, ‘The awkwardness of individuality’: ‘I don’t like the sensation – who does? – of what might be the most fundamental awkwardness on earth: the gap between the sheer *fact* of being alive and not knowing how to live’.⁵³ A similar idea is raised by Christy Wampole in her essay ‘On Awkwardness’:

My point is that awkwardness comes with the territory of diversity. I don’t mean racial diversity or even cultural diversity, but rather, more comprehensively, the very basic diversity brought about by being a different human from someone else, that is to say, the atomization of the collective into individuals.⁵⁴

Thus identity is not just a cultural question (to what group am I aligned?), but an existential one (who and what am I?), and this is why awkwardness proves such a useful critical concept with which to examine the *Recherche*. The novel oscillates between a preoccupation with the tensions of a particular social moment and an

⁵² For an academic study of how particular racial and gender identities are negotiated in North America today, see the recent monograph by Michael Awkward(!): *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Positionality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

⁵³ Mary Capello, *Awkward: A Detour* (New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2007), p. 19.

⁵⁴ Christy Wampole, ‘On Awkwardness’, *Guernica*, June 18, 2015, Retrieved 1 October 2015, <https://www.guernicamag.com/daily/christy-wampole-on-awkwardness/>.

equally strong concern for understanding the alienation that is part of the structure of human experience.

Kotsko and Wampole focus on the cultural upheavals of 1960s America as the catalyst for today's preoccupation with awkwardness, but this thesis argues we must go further back, to the nineteenth-century *fin de siècle*, in order to see its beginnings. The discussion of post-Revolutionary France by certain literary critics suggests how this period of social crisis⁵⁵ catalysed a sort of existential awkwardness. Richard Terdiman, in *The Dialectics of Isolation: Self and Society in the French Novel from the Realists to Proust* (1976), argues that the novels of Proust's forerunners, Stendhal, Balzac and Flaubert, already show signs of the individual's sense of 'disorientation' faced by a 'devastatingly rapid alteration of social relations'.⁵⁶ I highlight Terdiman's use of the term *disorientation* because of its connection with *awkward*'s etymological significance: when the individual is disoriented, s/he does not know which way and how to move, because every step risks being in the wrong direction, in the wrong way. Terdiman argues that it is Proust who confronts the awkwardness of modern existence head on, through the

⁵⁵ For an extensive discussion of the societal tensions Proust lived through, and depicts, see Michael Sprinker's *History and Ideology in Proust: A la recherche du temps perdu and the Third French Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), a book which certainly achieves the author's goal of discussing the Proustian world in a manner more empirically rich than his forerunners, but with the result that characters are treated somewhat reductively as 'the carrier of certain values and as the site for historically significant ideological conflicts' (p.15). For a more recent and more subtle study of *A la recherche du temps perdu* as a novel in which antagonistic social attitudes are voiced and tested in ironic and ambivalent ways, see Edward J. Hughes's *Proust, Class, and Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁵⁶ Richard Terdiman, *The Dialectics of Isolation: Self and Society in the French Novel from the Realists to Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 17.

formal innovations in the *Recherche*, namely the depreciation of the event and the devaluation of suspense.⁵⁷

But Proust was also the first French novelist to write about homosexuality as openly and extensively as he did, and indeed to treat it as part of the modernist crisis of identity produced by social shifts. Michael Lucey's monograph, *The Misfit of the Family: Balzac and the Social Forms of Sexuality* (2003) calls attention to 'the relations that exist between large social changes and changes in the specific social forms that enable sexual interaction, including, in particular, same-sex interactions'.⁵⁸ The case of Charlus makes for a perfect example of how large social changes (i.e. the decline of the French aristocracy and the ascent of the bourgeoisie) created changes in specific social forms (i.e. the mix of classes in the salons) and in consequence enabled sexual interaction (i.e. Charlus's essentially public homosexual relationship with Morel). Lucey's use of the word *misfit* is also pertinent to this study, for although it is not a synonym for awkward, it provides a conceptual resonance. As I have already highlighted, the awkwardness of identity may be caused because different aspects of the individual's personality and identity do not fit together, or by an individual fitting badly in a certain social environment.

One of the best studies of homosexuality and the problem of identity is Jonathan Freedman's 2001 article 'Coming Out of the Jewish Closet with Marcel Proust'. Through an analysis of two particularly awkward identities in the

⁵⁷ The 'depreciation of the event and the devaluation of suspense' are by no means synonymous with psychological detachment on the narrator's part with regards to the observation of society. As Jacques Dubois argues in *Pour Albertine: Proust et le sens du social* (Paris: Seuil, 1997), the reader is presented with 'une sociologie amoureuse' (p. 22): that is, 'Si chez [Proust] la socialité se pense véritablement, c'est toujours en tant qu'objet de désir et qu'objet de rêverie' (p. 14).

⁵⁸ Michael Lucey, *The Misfit of the Family: Balzac and the Social Forms of Sexuality* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. xvii.

Recherche (“the Sodomite” and “the Jew”), Freedman’s project becomes an interrogation of the notion of identity itself. Engaging with the work of Hannah Arendt and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick on the subject of the novel’s ‘interplay between Jewish and sexually transgressive identities’,⁵⁹ Freedman argues ‘that the relation between these two forms of alterity at the moment of the fin de siècle and/or modernity might best be characterized not as an identity or even a dialogue but as a cross-roads, a space at which assimilating Jews (gay and straight) and gay men and women (Jewish and Gentile) encountered one another’.⁶⁰ Freedman’s image of a *cross-roads* provides another striking resonance with the concept of awkwardness. At the cross-roads, the individual is no longer certain of the right direction: indeed, the very notion of one single correct direction is undermined by what appears to be several ways of moving forward. Perhaps this is why, as Freeman points out, the reader cannot help but feel a certain empathy for Charlus, because if he ends up on what seems to be the road to social perdition, it is at least admirable that he took the path others feared.

Charlus is the only homosexual character who deals with the difficulty of his identity not by concealing it, but performing it, and this is part of why he creates such awkwardness in his social interactions. Freedman touches upon ‘Charlus’s sense of exclusion, isolation, [...] discomfiture’,⁶¹ and other critics have written about his social execution at the hands of Mme Verdurin when she feels humiliated

⁵⁹ Jonathan Freedman, ‘Coming out of the Jewish Closet with Marcel Proust’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 7:4 (2001): 521-51, p. 524.

⁶⁰ Jonathan Freedman, ‘Coming out of the Jewish Closet’, p. 541.

⁶¹ Jonathan Freedman, ‘Coming out of the Jewish Closet’, p. 534.

by him,⁶² but there has been a lack of attention afforded to the discomfiture felt by Charlus's interlocutors and acquaintances, who can neither exclude or embrace him. The Verdurins's devotees are both intrigued and repelled by Charlus, and this less because of the fact of his homosexual identity than because of the way he expresses it with force and, arguably, a certain flair. Although Charlus has serious aesthetic inclinations, as a provocateur of social awkwardness he also makes for a sort of embodiment of the camp aesthetic defined by Susan Sontag, which 'relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of "character"'.⁶³ Sontag describes the essence of camp as 'its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration',⁶⁴ and my analysis of Charlus looks at the way his exaggerated performance of homosexual identity causes the other characters to feel terribly awkward. But, as Sontag writes, if the excruciating is one of the tonalities of Camp, this discomfort (or rather torment) is part of its appeal: 'it's good *because* it's awful'.⁶⁵ Charlus's awkwardness exercises a certain attraction on his social acquaintances, because his performance is as compelling as it is uncomfortable. In contrast to a character like Bloch, whose attempts to hide his Jewish identity make him an awkward social performer (particularly in conversations, as I discuss in Chapter Three), Charlus seems to embrace the awkwardness involved in the social projection of his homosexuality.

⁶² See Martine Reid's 'Violences proustiennes: Charlus exécuté', in *Rivista di Letterature Moderne e Compare*, 53:1 (2000), pp. 47-57, and Guillaume Favre's 'L'Exécution de Charlus ou l'échec de l'éloquence mondaine', in *Versants: Revue Suisse des Littératures Romanes*, 51 (2006), pp. 129-51.

⁶³ Susan Sontag, 'Notes on Camp', in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 1961), p. 276.

⁶⁴ Susan Sontag, 'Notes on Camp', p. 277.

⁶⁵ Susan Sontag, 'Notes on Camp', p. 279, my emphasis.

Chapter Two examines the awkwardness Charlus creates, now deliberately, now inadvertently, in the course of his social relations. The chapter begins by observing how awkwardness is deliberately generated by Charlus as a defence tool, before shifting focus to other characters' reactions to him as a homosexual. My purpose is to draw out an important distinction made by Proust, between the awkwardness of holding a particular social identity (i.e. homosexual or Jew) and the awkwardness caused by the way a particular individual expresses, consciously and unconsciously, that identity.

1c. Speaking

Every character in the *Recherche* experiences a difficult conversation, to varying degrees of awkwardness. Sometimes, there is a subject to be avoided, whether the issue is inconsequential (we might think of Legrandin's attempts to avoid answering the protagonist's father, when asked if he knows anybody at Balbec) or of the gravest concern (the most striking example is when the Duchesse de Guermantes, late for a party, is told by Swann that he is about to die). Sometimes, there is a difficult subject to be brought up; either to allay certain suspicions (Swann and the protagonist must ask their respective lovers, Odette and Albertine, if they have had sex with other women) or, quite differently, as an act of love (the grandmother's attempts, for example, to help the protagonist acknowledge her mortality, and later, his mother's encouragement that he make the decision to marry or not). Chapter Three of this thesis analyses the awkward conversations which occur in the context of friendship, focusing on Saint-Loup and Bloch. Just one critical study has been made of the complex triangular dynamic the novel constructs between the protagonist and his two friends.⁶⁶ My chapter takes up this issue, through examining the awkwardness that marks their conversations.

While critical theories of awkwardness place emphasis on identity, clinical studies of the phenomenon suggest that it is most strongly implicated in human dialogue. Clinical psychologist Joshua W. Clegg published two studies about social awkwardness in 2012. In the first study, participants were placed into a scenario

⁶⁶ See Marcel Gutwirth's 'Le narrateur et son double', in *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, 71 (1971), pp. 921-935, which is divided in two parts: '1. Saint-Loup, ou l'amitié opportune' and '2. Bloch, jumeau indésirable'.

designed to generate awkwardness, namely an undirected conversation between the group.⁶⁷ In the second, participants were asked to share and discuss stories of awkward experiences from their personal and professional lives.⁶⁸ Both articles are illuminating. The first because it suggests that the very act of speaking can be uncomfortable, regardless of the subject, and the second because the range of awkward conversations reported suggest certain categories. Based on the examples in Clegg's study, conversations might be divided into those which are felt to be inherently awkward (like "meeting the parents" for the first time) and those which are perfectly routine until something goes wrong (the woman who asks her dinner companion about his brother, without knowing that he is recently deceased). Beyond any particular subject or context of conversation, the examples raised in the study suggest two particular catalysts for awkwardness: misunderstanding (the man who senses his girlfriend doesn't understand his joke) and linguistic lapses (the businesswoman who accidentally refers to herself in the third person during a meeting).

The notion of some conversations being inherently uncomfortable and others becoming uncomfortable when the conversation takes a wrong turn highlights the link between social codes and linguistic codes. Critics have written about Proust's treatment of conversation in the relation to the hollowness of salon parlance,⁶⁹ dialogue

⁶⁷ Joshua W. Clegg, 'Stranger situations: Examining a self-regulatory model of socially awkward encounters', *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 15: 693 (2012).

⁶⁸ Joshua W. Clegg, 'The Importance of Feeling Awkward: A Dialogical Narrative Phenomenology of Socially Awkward Situations', *Qualitative Research in Psychology* (Routledge, 2012).

⁶⁹ See Pierre V. Zima's *L'Ambivalence romanesque: Proust, Kafka, Musil* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002 [1980]) and Serge Gaubert's *Proust ou le Roman de la différence: L'individu et le monde social de 'Jean Santeuil' a 'La Recherche'* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1980).

in the modern novel as a reconciliation of high literature with popular voices,⁷⁰ eavesdropping and the overheard,⁷¹ and the importance of silence in the *Recherche*.⁷² But to avoid awkwardness, it is not as easy as simply avoiding certain topics in certain scenarios: to be accepted within a social group, the individual must adapt their way of speaking, finding what Mme Verdurin calls the ‘ton de la maison’ (I, 212). But linguistic patterns that have to be identified and learnt are liable to being used ineptly. A prime example is Odette’s attempt to appear noble by peppering her speech with English vocabulary, with the result being what Daniel Karlin describes as an anglomaniac ‘comedy of errors’, based on ‘words that are mistranslated or misapplied’, which create ‘moments of awkwardness, embarrassment, or incongruity’.⁷³ Nonetheless, Odette achieves a rapid rise in social status, as her voice adapts to her interlocutors. For Bloch, in reverse, the social codes of the epoch (i.e. the anti-semitism wrought by the Dreyfus Affair) condemn his voice to be judged ill-fitting for high-society, however hard he tries to adapt it. Touching on the awkwardness of Bloch’s predicament, Julia Kristeva argues that he is obliged to be a gaffeur, to speak awkwardly as a defence mechanism (‘Le jargon est la voie obligée de l’étranger en français’), even to the point of self-sabotage (‘le gaffeur ne manquera de se faire persécuter, très au-delà de ce que valent ses gaffes’).⁷⁴ Bloch

⁷⁰ Sarah Tribout-Joseph, *Proust and Joyce in Dialogue* (London: Legenda, 2008).

⁷¹ Ann Elizabeth Gaylin, *Eavesdropping in the novel from Austen to Proust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁷² Angelo Caranfa, *Proust: The Creative Silence* (London: Associated University Presses, 1990).

⁷³ Daniel Karlin, *Proust’s English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 50.

⁷⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Le temps sensible: Proust et l’expérience littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), p. 55.

eventually achieves success as a writer, rather than a speaker, by taking on a more French-sounding pen name, Jacques du Rozier.

In contrast to the awkwardness caused when social and linguistic codes are transgressed, the awkwardness caused by misunderstanding and linguistic “errors” has a more existential significance. Of course misunderstanding occurs when an individual is unfamiliar with the voice and vocabulary of their interlocutor, hence Charlus’s embarrassment when he mistakes Mme Verdurin’s question about her group of visitors (‘est-ce que vous en êtes?’) as an interrogation of his sexual predilections. More broadly, though, the *Recherche* suggests that miscomprehension is not just something that *can* occur in conversation, but one of the conditions of intersubjective communication itself. The protagonist realises as early as the second volume that talking to Gilberte is pointless. While every individual imagines, when he or she speaks, that it is his or her own ears and mind listening, the words themselves reach the intended recipient in a distorted form, as though having passed through the curtain of a waterfall. A similar conclusion is reached by the narrator of Baudelaire’s ‘Les yeux des pauvres’: ‘Tant il est difficile de s’entendre, mon cher ange, et tant la pensée est incommunicable, même entre gens qui s’aiment!’⁷⁵ Just as Baudelaire uses the cultural catalyst of a new café to induce the narrator’s latent existential discomfort, so too does the *Recherche*’s protagonist develop his notion of the fundamental awkwardness of communication through his experience of specific cultural developments. The protagonist’s first telephone call, for example, and the perturbing experience of having his grandmother’s voice isolated from her

⁷⁵ Charles Baudelaire, ‘Les yeux des pauvres’, p. 77.

face, becomes the catalyst for his increasing sense of alienation from her, even when they are reunited in the flesh.

Making a linguistic “mistake” is so closely associated with the theories of Sigmund Freud that the “Freudian slip” has become a common term in English (or, in French, *lapsus révélateur*). For Freud, “mistakes” in speech – unintended words or pronunciations – are expressions of the unconscious, a symptom of restrained or repressed impulses and intentions.⁷⁶ Proust had not been exposed to the writings of Freud, yet their work shows fascinating imbrications,⁷⁷ and one such point of connection is their interest in ‘the “accidental” emergence of the unconscious in errors, slips, symptoms, mannerisms and jokes’.⁷⁸ In *Figures II* (1969), Gérard Genette presents an invaluable account of the ‘accidents de langage’ and ‘allusion involontaire’ made by characters in the *Recherche*,⁷⁹ but what remains to be developed is the effect of (or, and I discuss this below, “affect” beneath) such slips, and its crucial role in the evolution of the characters’ relationships.

Chapter Three of this thesis examines conversational awkwardness in the context of the protagonist’s friendship with Bloch and Saint-Loup, with friendship being, as Alison Finch notes, ‘one area which remains to be explored’⁸⁰. Duncan Large’s article ‘Proust on Nietzsche: The Question of Friendship’ makes

⁷⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, tr. Alan Tyson (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1965).

⁷⁷ See Malcolm Bowie’s *Freud, Proust and Lacan: theory as fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) and Jean-Yves Tadié’s, *Le lac inconnu: entre Proust and Freud* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012).

⁷⁸ Malcolm Bowie, *Freud, Proust and Lacan: theory as fiction*, p. 69.

⁷⁹ Gérard Genette, *Figures II* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), p. 272.

⁸⁰ Alison Finch, ‘Love, Sexuality and Friendship’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Proust*, ed. by Richard Bales (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 177.

comparative analysis of the two writers' 'ambivalence about the value of friendship' and identifies in both a 'distrust of [...] language as a vehicle for adequate self-expression'⁸¹. This chapter makes comparative analysis of the protagonist's ambivalence about two specific friendships, demonstrating that although Bloch causes moments of uneasiness because of his propensity for gaffes and grandiloquence, ultimately it is Saint-Loup who causes the protagonist a more disquieting awkwardness, because of his equivocation and deceit.

⁸¹ Duncan Large, 'Proust on Nietzsche: The Question of Friendship', *Modern Language Review*, 88.3 (1993): 612-24, p. 616.

1d. Acting

In English, we lack a term for an action that will involve awkwardness: in French, at least in Proust's French, this action is described as 'l'acte maladroit' (IV, 40).⁸² So far in this Introduction, awkwardness has been considered as something that is experienced as a feeling or emotion, but I wish here to consider how awkwardness is implicated in action, in preparation for the fourth chapter of my thesis, which examines the awkwardness involved in the act of kissing in the *Recherche*.

I have already mentioned the distinctions made by some theorists between emotion and affect. For Massumi, notably, feeling is a sensation that can be labelled, that has been checked against previous experiences – an infant lacks feelings, because it has neither language nor biography – and emotion is the projection/expression of a feeling, which may be genuine or feigned.⁸³ Affect is, less evidently, the ability to affect and be affected: 'a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act'.⁸⁴ Massumi builds on this early definition, inspired by Deleuze and Guattari, in his own book, *Parables for the Virtual* (2002). First, affect is prepersonal because it is prior to and/or outside of consciousness: 'One's "sense of aliveness" is a continuous,

⁸² All references will be to the new Pleiade edition of the text, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. Jean-Yves Tadié, 4 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1987-89), and incorporated in the text in the form (I, 234).

⁸³ Eric Shouse provides an incisive summary of the distinction, in Massumi's thought, between feeling and emotion on the one hand, and affect on the other, in 'Feeling, Emotion, Affect', *M/C Journal*, 8.6 (2005). 23 Sep. 2015 <<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0512/03-shouse.php>> [accessed 15 December 2015].

⁸⁴ Brian Massumi, 'Notes on the Translation and Acknowledgements', in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. by Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. xvi.

nonconscious self-perception'.⁸⁵ Second, affect is prepersonal because it cannot be fully realised in language, because sensations which can be labelled are rather feelings: '[But] Affect contaminates empirical space through language'.⁸⁶ Third, if affect is distinct from consciousness and language, it is necessarily bodily: 'what we think of as "free," "higher" functions, such as volition, are apparently being performed by *autonomie*, bodily reactions occurring in the brain but outside consciousness, and between brain and finger but prior to action and expression'.⁸⁷ Fourth, affect implies an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act: as Shouse elucidates, 'Affect is the body's way of preparing itself for action in a given circumstance by adding a quantitative dimension of intensity to the quality of an experience'.⁸⁸

If feelings are personal and biographical, emotions are social, and affects are prepersonal, it would seem that awkwardness is best described as a personal feeling, because it can be labelled: "I feel awkward". It is a personal feeling because a single social environment or encounter might cause one individual to feel awkward and another to feel at ease. But awkwardness does not fit perfectly into the category of feeling according to these two criteria. First, on label-ability, many if not most languages lack an equivalent term for awkwardness, a term which captures all of its possibilities and subtleties. Even in English, 'I feel awkward' requires more clarification

⁸⁵ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 36.

⁸⁶ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, p. 62.

⁸⁷ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, p. 29.

⁸⁸ Eric Shouse, 'Feeling, Emotion, Affect', *M/C Journal*, 8.6 (2005). 23 Sep. 2015 <<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0512/03-shouse.php>> [accessed 15 December 2015].

than ‘I feel sad’. In a certain way, when the individual says they feel awkward, they are saying that their feelings are difficult to label. Perhaps this is why, as a 2014 article in *The New Yorker* points out, Americans ‘have a near-infinite vocabulary for gradations of awkwardness’, including, ‘Awktoberfest (awkwardness that seems to last a whole month), Awk and Pshaw (a reference to “shock and awe”), and, perhaps inevitably, Awkschwitz (awkwardness worthy of comparison to the Holocaust)’.⁸⁹ It seems that part of feeling awkward involves the desire for a term or language that would capture the strength and uniqueness of its influence. For this reason, and to deal with the second criteria of personal feeling, the biographical significance with awkwardness is also less definitive than in a “feeling feeling” such as sadness or joy. Each individual possesses a distinct set of previous sensations from which to draw when interpreting and labelling their feelings: but when an individual “feels” awkward, this indicates a disorientation, that is, one’s personal biography does not provide an adequate guide with which to navigate the experience.

My thesis does not argue that awkwardness is prior to and/or outside of consciousness, but we will frequently observe how it is implicated in the body’s capacity to act, and this especially in Chapter Four, which explores the awkward actions undertaken by the protagonist in his pursuit of Albertine. The motif of the awkward kiss is identified in three different scenes, and close analysis of the protagonist’s feelings as expressed in these passages shows that awkwardness is as significant to intimate interactions as it is to the social scenes which have been analysed throughout.

⁸⁹ Elif Batuman, ‘The Awkward Age’, *New Yorker*, 9 September 2014, <<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/awkward-age>> [accessed 14 December 2015].

1. Looking at Family Life

The introduction to this thesis offered a brief overview of the link between the act of seeing and the feeling of awkwardness. I made the distinction between the act of seeing something unsettling and the act of being unsettled because of someone else's gaze, and established that both can occur in a social environment or a more intimate setting. This chapter concerns itself with family relations, which involve a peculiar mixture of intimacy and sociality, and specifically with the awkward feelings produced by the act of looking in the context of child development and family life.

A number of critics have devoted attention to the novel's concern with the relational structure between subject and object as determined by the act of looking, often referred to as "the gaze", and have noted its unsettling effect for the characters involved. Such work is distinct from, although connected to, critical work on "the visual" in Proust, and specifically the ways in which the visual troubles the protagonist's powers of interpretation.¹ Scholars writing on the unsettling gaze in the *Recherche* have already touched on its importance in the depiction of family life. This is not surprising when we recall that the concept of the gaze was popularised by the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and bound up with his theory of the mirror phase (*le stade du miroir*), according to which an infant's confrontation with an external image of the body (reflected in a mirror, or represented to the infant through the mother or primary caregiver) produces a psychic response that gives rise to the mental representation of an

¹ The most influential work on the subject of the difficulty of interpreting visual signs is Gilles Deleuze's *Proust et les signes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964). But see, also, a recent collection of critical essays on the role of images, vision, and visual culture in the *Recherche*: Nathalie Aubert, ed., *Proust and the Visual* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013).

“I”.² Several critics have drawn on Lacan’s work to discuss the theme of family in the novel, but two in particular stand out; Michel Erman, who devotes attention to the protagonist’s family in *L’œil de Proust* (1988), a monograph which provides a psychoanalytic reading of the eye and the gaze in the *Recherche*, and Marianna Hirsch, who introduces her essay ‘All in the Family: Familiarity and Estrangement According to Marcel Proust’ (1999) as ‘a discussion with, [although] not a wholesale endorsement of, something like a Lacanian theory of the gaze’.³

The problem of drawing on psychoanalytic theories of the gaze when examining Proust’s representation of family life is that the interpretation inevitably becomes that of the protagonist’s repressed incestuous urges,⁴ or of the novel’s elaboration of a semiotics of desire that can be characterised as gay.⁵ Although the theme of homosexuality is crucial to the *Recherche*, it is important to recall that when the first volume of the novel was published in 1913, readers were presented with a text which was, essentially, an ‘ironic and sensitive evocation of a provincial family, of the everyday details of domestic life, as well as the waves of feeling that darken and

² One of Jacques Lacan’s earliest contributions, see ‘Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je, telle qu’elle nous est révélée dans l’expérience psychanalytique’, in *Revue française de psychanalyse*, 13:4 (1949): 449-55. For a summary of the mirror phase longer than my own, but still brief, see the entry ‘Stade du miroir’ in Jean Laplanche and Jean-Baptiste Pontalis, *Vocabulaire de la Psychanalyse* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1973), p. 452.

³ This essay appears in Marianne Hirsch, ed., *The Familial Gaze* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999), p. 224.

⁴ As well as Erman (1988), see Serge Doubrovsky’s alternative Oedipal reading, that the protagonist manifests uncovered aggression towards his mother and wishes her dead, in Serge Doubrovsky, *La Place de la Madeleine* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1974), p. 36.

⁵ As well as Hirsch (1999), see Kaja Silverman’s *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

illuminate by turns the heart of a child'.⁶ As such, part one of this chapter (1.1 Children) re-examines the depiction of family life in the first volume of the novel, providing an explanation for the awkwardness involved in “the gaze” between family members. My argument is that the *drame du coucher* depicts the difficult moment in infancy when the child starts to experience ambivalent feelings about the way he is seen by his family: both literally, in the looks exchanged between the protagonist and his parents, and metaphorically, in terms of the judgements the protagonist believes his parents to make on his character. Part two of this chapter (1.2 Sex) addresses the relationship between the family’s experience of sexuality and the awkwardness of the gaze, but rather than making oedipal or queer readings, I look at the way the novel depicts adults’ discomfort with children when the topic of sex arises. While it is generally agreed that the discussion of sex is an uncomfortable one for families, my concern is to draw attention to the fact that because adults refuse to discuss sex with children, the awkwardness that is inherent to the subject becomes manifested in the gaze between them.

The other body of scholarship dealing with the gaze in the *Recherche* is composed of critics who place emphasis on the notion of the photographic image and “camera eye” effect of Proust’s writing. Although this area of criticism has become

⁶ ‘Lucien Maury on Swann’, entry 21 in *Marcel Proust: The Critical Heritage* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2005 (1989)), p. 95. Furthermore, as pointed out by Alison Finch, ‘Proust is writing in the wake of a century-and-a-half of writers who emphasise the importance of all childhood impressions, from Rousseau in the eighteenth century to Balzac, Dickens and George Eliot in the nineteenth’: see ‘Love, sexuality and friendship’, in Richard Bales, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Proust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 173.

particularly saturated in the last two decades,⁷ its origins can be traced back to the much earlier work of Walter Benjamin.⁸ As Miriam Bratu Hansen explains in her article ‘Benjamin’s Aura’ (2008), ‘Rather than following the psychoanalytic route (which he was not unaware of), Benjamin locates the unsettling force of the auratic return of the gaze in an anthropologically and mythopoetically conceived prehistory’.⁹ Although the work inspired by Benjamin avoids imposing psychoanalytic theories on the *Recherche*, it also tends to discuss the novel’s aesthetics rather than its characters. Where critics do discuss the photographic gaze as part of character development and interaction, the interpretations can feel stretched: Mieke Bal, for example, describes Saint-Loup as ‘the most “photographic” character’ and links this to ‘the narrator’s need to keep both his and Robert’s homosexuality a secret’.¹⁰ Two articles which do deal with family relations and the (photographic) gaze devote particular attention to the protagonist and his grandmother: Sara Danius analyses the ‘uncanny’ telephone call between them and the grandmother’s subsequent ‘alienation before his gaze’,¹¹ and Katja Haustein discusses the ‘mutual estrangement’ and ‘complete absence of feeling’ created by the

⁷ Three important studies from the 1990s are; Stephen C. Infantino, *Photographic Vision in Proust* (New York: P. Lang, 1991), Gilberte Brassai, *Marcel Proust sous l’emprise de la photographie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), and Mieke Bal, *The Mottled Screen: Reading Proust Visually* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). More recently, and drawing on Georges Poulet, Frank Wegner, and Gérard Genette, Áine Larkin’s monograph *Proust Writing Photography: Fixing the Fugitive in À la recherche du temps perdu* (Oxford: Legenda, 2011) analyses Proust’s formal and stylistic use of photographic motifs around the themes of perception, memory, lineage and love.

⁸ See ‘On some motifs in Baudelaire’ (pp. 155-200) and ‘The Image of Proust’ (pp. 201-16) in Walter Benjamin’s *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), trans. by Harry Zohn. The other crucial text which informs today’s scholarship on the photographic image in Proust is Siegfried Kracauer’s *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

⁹ Miriam Bratu Hansen, ‘Benjamin’s Aura’, *Critical Inquiry* 34 (2008), p. 345.

¹⁰ Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, eds., *Looking In: The Art of Viewing* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 199.

¹¹ Sara Danius, ‘Orpheus and the Machine: Proust as Theorist of Technological Change, and the Case of Joyce’ in Harold Bloom, ed., *Marcel Proust* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), pp. 124, 127.

protagonist's photographic observation of his grandmother's decline and death.¹² In the third part of this chapter (1.3 Death), I provide a new reading of the protagonist's relationship with his grandmother, contesting Haustein's suggestion that an emotional void is produced between them by a blocked mutual gaze, and arguing rather that the grandmother's decease is marked by awkward feelings and looks of fascination.

¹² Katja Haustein, 'Proust's Emotional Cavities: Vision and Affect in *A la recherche du temps perdu*', *French Studies*, 63.2 (2009), p. 164. Although it is not strictly about death, for a broader discussion on the relation between the gaze and the "ghostly", see Thomas Baldwin, *Picture as Spectre in Diderot, Proust and Deleuze* (Oxford: Legenda, 2011).

1.1 Children

The philosophical work of Sartre on the emotional effects of ‘Le regard’ in *L’Être et le Néant* (1943) was raised in the introduction to this thesis, specifically the fact of being seen and the ensuing sense of shame. But in his novel-autobiography, *Les Mots* (1963), Sartre presents a more literary account of the link between “the gaze” and negative emotions, and specifically how this is part of childhood experience. Indeed, it is possible to see one scene in particular as the depiction of a formative moment occurring prior to adolescence, in which the child becomes uncomfortable about the way he is looked at by his family. This “look” is both, and inseparably, literal (the act of their gaze upon his face) and metaphorical (their general perception of his character) and the child’s anxiety may be justified or misplaced. The point is, distinct from the shame the child feels about a particular aspect of himself, there is a general sense of ‘uneasiness’¹³ that emerges at this time, and is occasioned by the gaze of its parents.

Sartre describes how, until a certain age, the child’s conception of himself is inseparable from the gaze of his doting family: ‘Ma vérité, mon caractère et mon nom étaient aux mains des adultes; j’avais appris à me voir par leurs yeux [...] Absents, ils laissaient derrière eux leur regard, mêlé à la lumière’.¹⁴ Then, one day, the look in their eyes appears to change, and the child is forced to try and understand this. In Sartre’s case, the unlikely formative moment occurs with a haircut. At the age of seven, the boy’s grandfather brings him home from the coiffeur: his mother takes one look at her

¹³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Words* (New York: George Braziller, 1964), trans. Bernard Frechtman, p. 105.

¹⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Les Mots* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995 [1964]), p. 70

son's head, deprived of its ringlets, then shuts herself up in the bedroom to cry. Although the reason for this disconcerting reaction is beyond the child's comprehension ('Je ne l'appris qu'à douze ans, brutalement...') it is from this moment that he begins to feel awkward about the way he is looked at: 'Mais je me sentais mal dans ma peau. Les amis de ma famille me jetaient des regards soucieux ou perplexes que je surprénais souvent'.¹⁵ If today the expression "mal dans ma peau" or "uncomfortable in my own skin" is taken as the expression of a shyness, resulting from a lack of self-confidence, this isn't quite the case for Sartre's hero. Indeed, he resolves to be a better performer, even as '[s]on public devenait de jour en jour plus difficile': 'je m'appliquais à plaire'.¹⁶

There is also a certain theatricality to the famous bedtime scene depicted in *Du Côté de Chez Swann*,¹⁷ not only as seen from the perspective of the mature narrator, who refers back to it as 'le théâtre et le drame de mon couche' (I, 44), but also in the eyes of the young protagonist, who, quite aware that he is "making a scene", describes sending a note to his mother at the dinner table as being as awkward as for 'le portier d'un théâtre de remettre une lettre à un acteur pendant qu'il est en scène' (I, 28). The theatricality of the scene has led some critics to read it as a melodramatic 'conflict between virtue and villainy',¹⁸ but the *drame du coucher* can also be understood as an account of the protagonist's preoccupation with the way he is seen by his family. Such a reading provides a balance, and link, between those critics who have discussed the

¹⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Les Mots* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995 [1964]), p. 89.

¹⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Les Mots*, p. 89, 90.

¹⁷ Paola Gagliardi wrote an (unpublished) thesis on this scene, entitled *Le drame du coucher: analyse d'un épisode d'À la recherche du temps perdu de Marcel Proust*, (Zürich, 1992).

¹⁸ Jack Murray, 'Melodrama in Proust', *Contemporary Literature*, 21:4 (1980), p. 576.

drama of in terms of ‘good and evil’ and ‘the idea of the fall’,¹⁹ and those who have focused upon the protagonist’s ‘separation anxiety’ and ‘feeling of exclusion’.²⁰ The conflict in the scene is one of opposing perspectives: or, more precisely, the protagonist does not battle against his parents, but struggles with their perception of him. The *drame du coucher* occurs in a period during which the protagonist frequently incites his parents’ disapproval and discipline, hence his foreboding on the particular evening in question: ‘en effet pour bien moins que cela on ne m’adressait plus la parole pendant plusieurs jours’ (I, 35). The parents’ “silent treatment” is part of the reason why the protagonist becomes concerned with understanding his misdemeanors from their point of view (‘celles dont je comprends maintenant que leur caractère commun est qu’on y tombe en cédant à une impulsion nerveuse’ (I, 33), the mature narrator explains). But this creates a vicious spiral, wherein the protagonist tries to imagine himself from his parents’ standpoint, but attains only an exaggerated version of their perspective: then, reasoning that they cannot have a worse image of him, he abandons himself to the very behaviour they so worry about.

The extreme terms with which the protagonist describes his own behaviour – with comparisons to a madman and a criminal – suggest that he is preoccupied with, although mistaken about, the way his parents see him. The protagonist plans to kiss his mother with the same attention as ‘des maniaques qui s’efforcent de ne pas penser à autre chose pendant qu’ils ferment une porte’ (I, 23); alone in his bedroom, he decides to try ‘une ruse de condamné’ and send a letter downstairs to her (I, 28). The precocity

¹⁹ John Porter Houston, *The shape and style of Proust's novel* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1982), p. 40.

²⁰ Inge Crosman Wimmers, *Proust and Emotion*, p. 39.

of these images is striking, and especially because they belong to the young protagonist's voice, rather than the mature narrator. The narrator does interject to make analogies of his own, comparing the mother's reply to the letter ('Il n'y a pas de réponse' (I, 31)) with experiences from his adult life ('que depuis j'ai si souvent entendu des concierges de "palaces" ou des valets de pied de tripots, rapporter à quelque pauvre fille qui s'étonne' (I, 31)). The sophistication of the protagonist's images – a madman with a specific obsession, a criminal with a plan – are the product, presumably, of a vivid imagination spurred into exaggeration by the kind of language his family use to describe. His father will say quite openly: 'cet enfant est idiot, il deviendra affreux' (I, 406), the protagonist's mother tells him that he behaves 'comme un fou!' (I, 35), and even his kindly grandmother alludes to some sort of defect on his part: 'ce petit qui a tant besoin de prendre des forces et de la volonté' (I, 11). The protagonist builds an image of himself from their perspective, based on these words, and indeed because of their lack of clarity about what exactly they deem to be his faults: 'je comprends maintenant', explains the narrator, 'que leur caractère commun est qu'on y tombe en cédant à une impulsion nerveuse. Mais alors on ne prononçait pas ce mot' (I, 33). The result is that the protagonist has a distorted self-image, perpetuated by his tendency to "read into" the minds of other adults. Giving Françoise the letter for his mother, for example, the protagonist senses her disdain in 'un air résigné qui semblait signifier: "C'est-il pas malheureux pour des parents d'avoir un enfant pareil!"' (I, 29). He also imagines Swann's reaction to the letter, and how this will humiliate his mother: 'mon petit mot allait, la fâchant sans doute (et doublement parce que ce manège me rendrait ridicule aux yeux de Swann)' (I, 29).

Without disregarding the ‘emotional structure of the deep despair felt through separation anxiety’,²¹ as Wimmers puts it, it is important to recognise that the scene ends not in continued separation but in unexpected proximity, which is, however, of little comfort to the protagonist. My argument is that on the evening of the *drame du coucher*, the vicious spiral described in the paragraphs above above is finally broken when the protagonist attains a more accurate comprehension of his parents and himself from their point of view: but rather than this creating a smoother relationship between them, there is a new awkwardness. After all his brooding about an impending punishment, a definitive separation – ‘on ne me laisserait plus rester à la maison, on me mettrait au collège le lendemain, c’était certain’ (I, 33) – the protagonist is in fact met with mercy from his father, who insists the mother stay with her son, and the child realises that ‘[il] n’avait probablement pas deviné jusqu’ici combien j’étais malheureux tous les soirs, ce que ma mère et ma grand’mère savaient bien’ (I, 37). However, this insight does not make the protagonist feel less awkward with his father – to the contrary, he is rendered physically immobile in parallel to the emotional impasse he feels himself caught in, wanting to thank his father but knowing this would embarrass him: ‘On ne pouvait pas remercier mon père; on l’eût agacé par ce qu’il appelait des sensibleries. Je restai sans oser faire un mouvement’ (I, 36). Likewise, the protagonist wants to show his parents that he understands that they are trying to encourage his independence, but realises that if he expresses this now he will seem all the more strange: ‘Si j’avais osé maintenant, j’aurais dit à maman: “Non je ne veux pas, ne couche pas ici”’ (I, 38).

²¹ Inge Crosman Wimmers, *Proust and Emotion*, p. 39.

The way the *drame du coucher* comes to an end reinforces the theme of the child's shifting capacities of perception, which increasingly encompass modes of self-perception through the other, and the strange mixture of intimacy and awkwardness this produces. The protagonist, having realised the strain his behaviour places on his mother, cannot but help sobbing once more, while also noticing the effect of his tears on his mother:

je vis maman qui jamais ne se laissait aller à aucun attendrissement avec moi, être tout d'un coup gagnée par le mien et essayer de retenir une envie de pleurer. Comme elle sentit que je m'en étais aperçu, elle me dit en riant: "Voilà mon petit jaunet, mon petit serin, qui va rendre sa maman aussi bêtasse que lui, pour peu que cela continue". (I, 38)

This concatenation of looks and feeling – the protagonist notices his mother's sadness, she realises that her sadness has been noticed, and he sees that she has realised that he has noticed her sadness – contrasts sharply with the protagonist's way of looking at his mother earlier in the scene. There, the protagonist's assiduous gaze was fixed upon his mother, but as an object to be fixed: 'Je ne quittais pas ma mère des yeux [...] comme un peintre qui ne peut obtenir que de courtes séances de pose' (I, 27). By the end of the evening, the protagonist now sees his mother as a thinking, feeling self. It is this capacity to recognise other people's emotions which, as we will see throughout the thesis, is a crucial part of the protagonist's maturation and intellectual development, but which, as we see in the rest of this chapter, is also the catalyst for awkward moments as he learns to manage his own.

1.2 Sex

In the (anti-)climax of the *drame du coucher* we saw the protagonist achieve a comprehension of his mother's feelings through their mutually-exchanged gaze, but only after he made exaggerated guesses about his parents' point of view based on a naive interpretation of their words. The protagonist makes a comparable mistake once again in *Du Côté de Chez Swann*, and now to devastating effect, during his afternoon with Uncle Adolphe, whose lover, the *dame en rose*, is present. Failing to take the cue from Uncle Adolphe's pointed look that this encounter should remain between them, the protagonist recounts the experience to his family, unaware that they will find it scandalous. While I agree that 'what this early episode demonstrates is the regular collision of familial piety and illegal pleasure',²² the difference between this episode and those occurring later in the novel is that here it is the protagonist's naivety which produces an awkward situation for the family. It is only in the second volume of the novel, *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, that the protagonist becomes aware of how uneasy adults feel about a child's exposure to sexuality, and the difference between what adults say and what they might be thinking.

My argument is based on a comparison of the story of Uncle Adolphe in the first volume, with two scenes from the second volume which have received next to no

²² Edward J. Hughes, 'Proust and Social Spaces, in Richard Bales, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Proust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 162. Two critical studies have devoted attention to the ways that Proust and other nineteenth and twentieth-century novelists adapted their presentations of the family in order to incorporate alternative sexualities, see; Michael Lucey's *The Misfit of the Family: Balzac and the Social Forms of Sexuality* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2003), for a vivid analysis of the interrelation of family structures, historical change, and sexuality as seen in Balzac's novels; and Barry McCrea's *In the Company of Strangers: Family and Narrative in Dickens, Conan Doyle, Joyce, and Proust* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2011), which shows how the stylistic experiments marking the modern novel are underpinned by a reconception of family based on the formal narrative potential of queerness.

commentary and have never been placed side-by-side, despite their striking parallels. In one, the protagonist and Norpois discuss the Swanns, and in the other the protagonist and Swann discuss Norpois: and at this point in the novel, Uncle Adolphe's *dame en rose* has transformed herself from a courtesan into the wife of none other than Swann. In both conversations, the protagonist manifests a new ability to distinguish between his interlocutors' words and a look in their eyes which might "say" something else. However, this does not allow the protagonist to avoid awkwardness when the topic of sex arises: instead, these conversations become uncomfortable when the adults realise that their private thoughts have been glimpsed by a child. The point, then, is that although the child protagonist's misunderstandings – with his parents, with Adolphe – result in gaffes, *gaucherie* and embarrassment, the adolescent protagonist's capacity to perceive the other's point of view through their eyes, rather than their words, produces something better described as awkwardness.

The protagonist cannot be entirely blamed for his failure to understand the compromising situation resulting from having made an unannounced visit to Uncle Adolphe, and having encountered his mistress. The parents regularly gossip about the protagonist's uncle: 'Souvent, à un nom d'actrice qui venait dans la conversation, j'entendais mon père dire à ma mère, en souriant: "Une amie de ton oncle"' (I, 74). Because of the smile that passes between them, the protagonist may presume that although there are certain rules about which days the family can visit Adolphe ('les autres jours, venaient des femmes avec lesquelles sa famille n'aurait pas pu se rencontrer', the narrator explains), there is nothing too serious to worry about. Nonetheless, when he arrives at the house, the protagonist notes that 'Le valet de

chambre [...] en me voyant parut embarrassé' (I, 75) and once inside, his uncle's 'air un peu gêné par ma présence' (I, 76). Moreover, the protagonist is himself embarrassed by the presence of the *dame en rose*: 'L'incertitude où j'étais s'il fallait lui dire madame ou mademoiselle me fit rougir et, n'osant pas trop tourner les yeux de son côté de peur d'avoir à lui parler, j'allai embrasser mon oncle' (I, 75). But the attention he is paid by this woman turns the protagonist's embarrassment into excitement as the scene goes on. She has two strategies to make him feel, not exactly at ease, but certainly less embarrassed. First, she makes every effort to suggest her familiarity with the protagonist's family, commenting on how he resembles his mother and recalling a time she met his father. Although the protagonist knows his father well enough to realise that the *dame en rose* must be exaggerating the warm greeting she received from him, and although the thought of his father's coldness makes the protagonist feel 'gêné' (I, 77), ultimately her tactic works. The protagonist forgets his initial uncertainty and the shame that came with it,²³ and is sufficiently emboldened to kiss the lady's hand. His desire to do so is produced by the woman's second strategy, which is that of flirtation. Complimenting the protagonist ('Comme il est gentil!' (I, 75)) and suggesting outright that he has 'un petit œil pour les femmes' (I, 77), the directness with which the *dame en rose* makes allusion to sexuality actually helps the protagonist to overcome his initial embarrassment to see and be seen by this young woman, in her pink dress and pearl necklace, and sucking provocatively on a tangerine.

I have already referred to Sartre's discussion of 'Le regard' in *L'Être et le Néant*, and the link he makes between being seen and feeling ashamed. But Sartre also suggests

²³ For an account of uncertainty, averted eyes, shame and the blush, see Volume II of Silvan S. Tomkins's, *Affect Imagery Consciousness: The Complete Edition* (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2008).

that when the individual feels himself looked at, this can produce feelings of pride: ‘En un mot il y a deux attitudes authentiques: celle par laquelle je reconnais autrui comme le sujet par qui je viens à l’objectivité – c’est la honte; celle par laquelle je me saisis comme le projet libre par qui autrui vient à être-autrui – c’est l’orgueil’.²⁴ Sartre insists that pride does not exclude original shame, and indeed that the two feelings have an ambiguous overlap. In the case of the protagonist, we see a clear transition from his initial embarrassment to a sense of self-importance, and this because of his consciousness of the woman’s insistent gaze, which we can infer from her compliment on his ‘beaux yeux’ (I, 75). In fact, even before the protagonist enters the room, he overhears her plea that she should see him: ‘Je voudrais le voir rien qu’un instant, ce gosse’ (I, 75). But pride is blinding, and so although Uncle Adolphe tries to warn the protagonist against speaking of the afternoon to his parents, the two speak at cross-purposes:

Éperdu d’amour pour la dame en rose, je couvris de baisers fous les joues pleines de tabac de mon vieil oncle, et tandis qu’avec assez d’embarras il me laissait entendre sans oser me le dire ouvertement qu’il aimerait autant que je ne parlasse pas de cette visite à mes parents, je lui disais, les larmes aux yeux, que le souvenir de sa bonté était en moi si fort que je trouverais bien un jour le moyen de lui témoigner ma reconnaissance. (I, 78)

Presumably, Uncle Adolphe’s embarrassed way of letting the protagonist know he’d prefer they keep the afternoon a secret is achieved by a mixture of coded language and meaningful looks. He cannot be explicit because the woman is present, and even if she was absent the right words would be difficult to find. However, the protagonist is literally blinded (if his ‘larmes aux yeux’ are to be taken as more than hyperbole), as well as being imperceptive to the point being made, because he is distracted by a happy

²⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L’Être et le Néant*, p. 330

sense of self-importance. As such, it is inaccurate to say, as one critic does, that the protagonist ‘betrays his uncle’s trust by disregarding his uncle’s request not to speak of the encounter to his parents’.²⁵ In fact, the protagonist never quite understood his uncle was requesting rather than suggesting. The reason he cannot refrain from telling his parents about the encounter is because he is overwhelmed with a new sense of self which must be expressed: he is compelled to give them ‘une idée assez nette de la nouvelle importance dont j’étais doué’ (I, 78).

Unfortunately, inevitably, the protagonist’s parents are quite horrified to learn he has spent an afternoon with a *demi-mondaine*, and at the shamelessness with which he recounts, ‘dans les moindres détails’ (I, 78), the pleasure he has taken in it. And so the story concludes with the protagonist’s diminished sense of self, his remorse and grief to have brought the wrath of the family upon his uncle in the form of ‘des explications violentes’ (I, 79).²⁶ Before I go on to explore the difference between the protagonist’s naivety here (‘je ne pouvais supposer que mes parents trouveraient du mal dans une visite où je n’en trouvais pas’, he laments (I, 78)), with the perspicacity he manifests in the next volume of the novel, I want to draw attention to the excruciating final exchange between the protagonist and his uncle:

Quelques jours après, croisant dehors mon oncle qui passait en voiture découverte, je ressentis la douleur, la reconnaissance, le remords que j’aurais voulu lui exprimer. À côté de leur immensité, je trouvai qu’un coup de chapeau serait mesquin et pourrait faire supposer à mon oncle que je ne me croyais pas tenu envers lui à plus qu’à une banale politesse. Je résolus de m’abstenir de ce geste insuffisant et je détournai la tête. Mon oncle pensa que

²⁵ Herbert Morris, *Artists in Evil: An Essay on Evil and Redemption in Marcel Proust’s In Search of Lost Time*, p. 75.

²⁶ Edward Hughes helpfully highlights that the parents’ dispute with Adolphe operates, alongside other episodes in Combray, as a strand in the theme of *l’autorité bourgeoise*: see Edward Hughes, ‘La Représentation du monde social dans Combray’, in *Marcel Proust Aujourd’hui*, 3 (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2005): 63-80.

je suivais en cela des ordres de mes parents, il ne le leur pardonna pas, et il est mort bien des années après sans qu'aucun de nous l'ait jamais revu. (I, 79)

This is an extraordinary moment of awkwardness, quite distinct from the embarrassed feelings of the protagonist in the story of the afternoon visit itself. There, he turned his head away from the *dame en rose* as a means to escape meeting her gaze: now, he looks away from his uncle as a gesture, an attempt to communicate his regret (albeit one which has quite the opposite to its intended effect). A conclusion which can be drawn, considering that this is quite evidently an awkward moment, is that awkwardness is linked to sadness – ‘la douleur’, ‘le remords’. This provides a means of distinguishing it from embarrassment, which, as observed in the scene with the *dame en rose*, occurs more markedly in situations of equivocality, rather than in moments of grief.

Although the protagonist’s conversations with Norpois and Swann in *À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* are not characterised by grief, they are connected to disappointment and regret. These unprivileged scenes not only show how the protagonist is developing the capacity to distinguish between the spoken and the thought by paying attention to the other’s gaze, but also how he attempts to navigate conversations with adults, notably about romance.

The protagonist’s first meeting with his father’s friend, M. de Norpois, when the family receive the Ambassador to dinner, does not go very smoothly. The protagonist feels ill at ease in the presence of this guest, conscious that his father both takes Norpois’s opinion very seriously (“Hé bien! je ne l’aurais pas cru, le père Norpois n’est pas du tout opposé à l’idée que tu fasses de la littérature”, m’avait dit mon père’ (I, 432)), and wants Norpois to approve of his son (‘– Hé bien, as-tu été content de ta

matinée? me dit mon père tandis qu'on passait à table, pour me faire briller en pensant que mon enthousiasme me ferait bien juger par M. de Norpois' (I, 447-48)). To a certain extent, Norpois has been invited to "inspect" the protagonist, to assess the adolescent's aesthetic sensitivity and literary talent, and Norpois's characterisation as judge is enhanced by repeated references to his penetrating eyes. Not only does Norpois unsettle his interlocutor by looking at them with a gaze that is, the narrator emphasises, internationally renowned ('fixant sur [le protagoniste] ce regard clair dont Bismarck admirait la pénétration' (I, 464)), even the way he looks at inanimate objects has the capacity to fluster the family: 'Ma mère comptait beaucoup sur la salade d'ananas et de truffes. Mais l'Ambassadeur après avoir exercé un instant sur le mets la pénétration de son regard d'observateur la mangea en restant entouré de discrétion diplomatique et ne nous livra pas sa pensée' (I, 451). Although there is something distinctly comical about the parents failed attempts to please Norpois and make their son shine – perhaps especially when the mother comments that her son is fond of Bergotte, only to elicit a response of 'Mon Dieu' (I, 464) from Norpois²⁷ – the protagonist himself is strained by an enormous sense of pressure, as evidenced by his use of the term 'mon interrogatoire' (I, 448). Nonetheless, and indeed perhaps because the protagonist is conscious that he is expected to please, we see him exhibit a certain self-restraint, an attempt to smoothe his interaction with Norpois. He controls his overwhelming desire to ask if the Ambassador is acquainted with Gilberte Swann, waiting strategically: 'pour faire cette question d'un moment où, comme on passait au salon, je pouvais dissimuler plus facilement mon émotion' (I, 467). The protagonist has understood that if he asks

²⁷ For a discussion of Norpois's criticisms of the protagonist's literary efforts and taste for Bergotte, see Adam Watt, *Reading in Proust's A la recherche*, pp. 50-51 and 80-81.

the question while Norpois is looking into his eyes, regardless of how innocuously he phrases the question, his motives will be detected. His strategy of asking the question while they are moving into another room, and thus not looking at each other, is effective, albeit briefly: the conversation becomes distinctly more relaxed, with Norpois confiding that he finds Odette's beauty supreme, while also alluding to the fact that he has understood the protagonist's romantic interest in Gilberte ('si je peux dire cela sans blesser en vous un sentiment trop vif' (I, 467)). However, this moment of complicity, as the subjects of women and romance are touched upon, is fleeting, and in fact becomes the catalyst for the protagonist's most awkward moment with Norpois, in an exchange which not only concludes the episode (the subsequent paragraph begins 'Quand M. de Norpois fut parti' (I, 470)) but also creates a delay in the protagonist's relationship with Gilberte and the Swanns.

The awkwardness with Norpois occurs because the protagonist loses control of the expression of his emotion, and when he realises this from the changed look in Norpois's eyes. Having been told by Norpois that he will let Mme and Mlle Swann know of the protagonist's admiration for them, the protagonist is so overcome with affection and gratitude for the Ambassador that he can barely contain its physical expression: 'j'eus peine à me retenir de ne pas embrasser ses douces mains blanches et fripées [...] J'en ébauchai presque le geste que je me crus seul à avoir remarqué' (I, 468). If the protagonist's physically awkward gesture surprises Norpois,²⁸ it is his

²⁸ For Norpois did indeed notice it, as the protagonist later finds out, much to his embarrassment: 'Pourtant quelques années plus tard, dans une maison où M. de Norpois, qui se trouvait en visite, me semblait le plus solide appui que j'y pusse rencontrer, parce qu'il était l'ami de mon père, indulgent, porté à nous vouloir du bien à tous, d'ailleurs habitué par sa profession et ses origines à la discrétion, quand, une fois l'Ambassadeur parti, on me raconta qu'il avait fait allusion à une soirée d'autrefois dans laquelle il avait "vu le moment où j'allais lui baiser les mains", je ne rougis pas seulement jusqu'aux oreilles...' (I, 469).

awkwardly expressed speech of thanks which makes Norpois uneasy, and the protagonist notices this immediately:

[...] dès le début de mon remerciement, d'une ardeur réfrigérante, j'avais vu passer sur le visage de l'Ambassadeur une expression d'hésitation et de mécontentement, et dans ses yeux ce regard vertical, étroit et oblique (comme, dans le dessin en perspective d'un solide, la ligne fuyante d'une de ses faces), regard qui s'adresse à cet interlocuteur invisible qu'on a en soi-même, au moment où on lui dit quelque chose que l'autre interlocuteur, le Monsieur avec qui on parlait jusqu'ici – moi dans la circonstance – ne doit pas entendre. (I, 470)

In the process of expressing his gratitude, the protagonist realises that his 'ardeur' is 'réfrigérante'. Again, this provides a way of distinguishing awkwardness from embarrassment: where the latter produces the hot blush of shame, the former creates a coldness between interlocutors. At the core of the awkwardness is a clash: between the feeling Norpois intended to display on his face (neutrality, as always) and his realisation that that the protagonist has in fact seen something else in his eyes. So although the protagonist has become better at distinguishing what an adult says from what they might be thinking, his failure to control his own gaze – which displays exactly what he is thinking – alerts the adult to the fact that their private thoughts have been detected.

A similar awkwardness occurs in a subsequent conversation between the protagonist and Swann. Like Norpois, although for quite different reasons, Swann is characterised by a discretion that makes other people find it hard to know what he is thinking. He systematically refuses to express his opinions, much to the frustration of his wife. But in this scene, Odette having described Norpois as 'ennuyeux comme la pluie' (I, 552), Swann wants to establish a complicity with the protagonist, by convincing him that Norpois 'est quelqu'un d'assez curieux, d'assez curieux comme "amant"' (I, 552). Swann is conscious that the conversation is risqué – he checks that

Gilberte cannot hear them speaking – but considering that he is speaking about Norpois’s distant past, and this to a young man who can pose no threat, the delicacy of the subject is an enjoyable one. With a certain relish, Swann divulges the story of Norpois’s weekly visits to Paris, even when he was stationed in Rome, to visit the mistress with whom he was madly in love. However, because Swann speaks so rarely with spontaneity, he is carried off in the wrong direction by his own words, transitions from speaking about Norpois’s past (‘Quand il était secrétaire à Rome...’), to speaking in the hypothetical (‘Moi je serais devenu fou...’) and the theoretical (‘Pour les gens nerveux il faudrait toujours qu’ils aimassent, comme disent les gens du peuple, “au-dessous d’eux” afin qu’une question d’intérêt mît la femme qu’ils aiment à leur discrétion.’ (I, 553)).

The complicity of gossip is suddenly turned into an awkward silence: not because of Swann’s words *per se*, but rather because, yet again, the protagonist “reads into” what has been said, but fails to conceal his own thoughts, and then sees that he has been seen:

À ce moment Swann s’aperçut de l’application que je pouvais faire de cette maxime à lui et à Odette. Et comme même chez les êtres supérieurs, au moment où ils semblent planer avec vous au-dessus de la vie, l’amour-propre reste mesquin, il fut pris d’une mauvaise humeur contre moi. Mais cela ne se manifesta que par l’inquiétude de son regard. Il ne me dit rien au moment même. (I, 553)

Although we are told that it is Swann who becomes anxious that the protagonist might be applying the commentary on Norpois to Swann’s own tortured love affair with Odette, there is an implicit suggestion in the ‘s’aperçut’ that the catalyst for this anxiety is a telling expression glimpsed on the protagonist’s face. Like Norpois, Swann cannot conceal his displeasure at the turn the conversation has taken, and this is likewise

manifested in his gaze: ‘l’inquiétude de son regard’. It is curious that the narrator stresses that ‘Il ne me dit rien *au moment même*’, as though at some later point Swann will confront the protagonist, and perhaps provide his personal account of the torrid, twisted love affair with Odette.²⁹

However, the narrator stresses the difficulty of recovering from awkwardness, and indeed the danger that the individuals who experience it during the course of a conversation might never speak again, in an intriguing analogy between the protagonist’s conversation with Swann, and the story of Racine’s conversation with King Louis XIV. As recounted in Saint-Simon’s *Mémoires*, Racine is dining with the King when he mentions another playwright, Scarron: but as soon as the name leaves his mouth, Racine remembers that the King’s wife used to be married to this very Scarron. Although the *Recherche* does not quote directly from it, when we turn to Saint-Simon’s account we see once again how awkwardness manifests in strained silences and turned eyes: ‘[Racine] demeura le plus confondu des trois, sans plus oser lever les yeux ni ouvrir la bouche’.³⁰ We see also that awkwardness is implicated not only in what is said, but in the fact that individuals are able to “see” the unspoken thoughts of the other, and this psychological seeing is indeed often effected through the eyes. This explains why the King subsequently refuses the presence of Racine – ‘il ne parlèrent à Racine ni même le regardèrent’³¹ – because even if they didn’t speak to one another, being in the same space would involve an exchange of eyes, and this would risk triggering a

²⁹ Perhaps this could account for the mysterious omniscience of ‘Un Amour de Swann’: that is to say, that the ‘Il ne me dit rien *au moment même*’ hints at a later occasion in which Swann does tell the protagonist about his courtship of Odette (although the reader is never given this conversation), and this is how the narrator is able to write ‘Un Amour de Swann’ from Swann’s point of view.

³⁰ Louis de Rouvroy, duc de Saint-Simon, *Mémoires tome 2 1701-1707* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), p. 45.

³¹ Saint-Simon, *Mémoires tome 2 1701-1707*, p. 45

renewed surge of awkwardness. The final point that I wish to draw out regarding the use of the Racine story, is that it confirms awkwardness is not a modern invention, and, moreover, it proves that humans have taken interest in “that awkward moment when...” long before websites and films of that title existed.³² Indeed, the narrator of the *Recherche* stresses that this is not just an obscure story he has read as a fan of Saint-Simon, but ‘un récit d’ailleurs controuvé mais dont la matière se répète tous les jours dans la vie de Paris’ (I, 553). So although in the second volume of the *Recherche* the protagonist is, as we have seen, finding it difficult to negotiate conversations with adults, and especially where the subject of sexuality or romance is involved, the narrator of the *Recherche* is able to use these awkward moments, recollected from his adolescence, as the material for his book.

³² A myriad of websites exist where internet users can read, or indeed contribute, examples (real or imaginary) of “that awkward moment when”. In 2014, a comedy film entitled *That Awkward Moment* (Dir. Tom Gormican) was released, and gained a box office figure of \$40.5 million.

1.3 Death

To return to the protagonist's interactions with his own family members, we can say that he is most obviously marked by the relationship he has with his grandmother, and particularly the experience of watching her become ill and die. In this final part of the chapter, I examine the awkward feelings surrounding her death, and the way that this awkwardness is both created and felt through the gaze. If initially it sounds odd to place the word awkward next to the word death, and especially because the death of the grandmother is one of the most poignant aspects of the *Recherche*, the point of this chapter is to establish the forms of awkwardness which occur around the dying, and to demonstrate that it is the awkward feelings which make the scenes so moving. Writing on the theme of death in the *Recherche*, Malcolm Bowie draws attention to the spectrum of emotion felt by the protagonist in his confrontations with human mortality: 'the plain incontrovertible fact of death draws forth from the narrator responses that vary from stoic resignation at one extreme to an indignant *danse macabre* at the other'.³³ My analysis develops Bowie's comment, by showing that awkwardness is the link between the different responses on this spectrum, and counters Katja Haustein's argument that as the protagonist watches his grandmother die, he is struck by 'a complete absence of feeling'.³⁴

The awkwardness that reaches its nadir in the final moments of the grandmother's life begins with the appearance of her illness in the novel's third volume, *Le Côté de Guermantes*. I stress the word *appearance* because of the striking emphasis

³³ Malcolm Bowie, *Proust Among the Stars*, p. 273.

³⁴ Katja Haustein, 'Proust's Emotional Cavities', p. 164.

placed on the protagonist's visual impressions on the day the grandmother has her first stroke. When the protagonist, moodily averting his eyes while waiting for his grandmother to apologise for her slowness, finally looks up at her, he is struck by the awful impression that there is something wrong:

enfin levant les yeux vers elle, je vis que, tout en marchant auprès de moi, elle tenait la tête tournée de l'autre côté. Je craignais qu'elle n'eût encore mal au cœur. Je la regardai mieux et fus frappé de sa démarche saccadée. Son chapeau était de travers, son manteau sale, elle avait l'aspect désordonné et mécontent, la figure rouge et préoccupée d'une personne qui vient d'être bousculée par une voiture ou qu'on a retirée d'un fossé. (II, 607)

As the protagonist first looks at ('je vis'), then scrutinises ('Je la regardai mieux'), his grandmother's appearance, he is struck by a mixture of panic and awkwardness. His panic is conveyed through the accumulation of detail, with what he sees becoming increasingly cause for concern; she is avoiding his eyes; worse, her hat is askew and her coat is dirty; and worst of all, she looks worried and confused. But combined with the panic any grandson would feel to realise that his grandmother is feeling quite unwell, there is also the suggestion of something distinctly awkward for him, to see her in such a state. This awkwardness is conveyed through the physical aspects of the interaction, the simile used for the grandmother's strained facial expression, and the protagonist's subsequent attempts to try and smooth things over. The protagonist has told us that they are walking together and that his grandmother has her face turned away from him: therefore, in order for him to look more carefully at her as he says he does, the protagonist is presumably obliged to switch sides, or bring their walk to a halt. After performing the necessary awkward movement, and now looking at his grandmother's face, the protagonist describes it with an analogy which suggests his sense of awkwardness. The hypothetical person who 'vient d'être bousculée par une voiture' or

‘qu’on a retirée d’un fossé’ is, normally, a stranger: and in the same way that it is more difficult to comfort a stranger than a loved one, the protagonist finds that the unexpected sight of his grandmother’s fragility makes him feel awkward about taking care of her. Finally, the protagonist’s mixture of anxiety and uneasiness is manifested in his concern that she should not see, in his eyes, this feeling: he determines to ‘n’avoir pas l’air de prendre trop au sérieux son malaise’ (II, 608). But although the protagonist has learned the *need* to dissimulate the feelings that are animated in his eyes, he is still unable to achieve this, and the scene ends with the grandmother’s sad smile and the protagonist’s pained realisation, not only that she has had a stroke, but that she has seen that he has realised this: ‘Elle avait compris qu’il n’y avait pas à me cacher ce que j’avais deviné tout de suite : qu’elle venait d’avoir une petite attaque’ (II, 608).

As the grandmother’s condition worsens and she is confined to what will be her death-bed, the family watch on with horror as she decomposes before them, even as she is still living. But again, although these scenes are marked by the family’s profound feelings of grief, which cannot but affect the reader also, there are also elements of awkwardness which accompany the mood of distress. In part, this is caused by Françoise, the servant who is effectively part of the family, and who cannot refrain from staring at the grandmother with ‘un regard ébahi, indiscret et de mauvais augure’ (II, 615). Françoise’s stares infuriate the protagonist, but he understands that if the bourgeoisie’s rule is to avoid staring, Françoise’s ‘manque d’éducation’ means that she has never been taught to ‘dissimuler l’impression, voire l’effroi douloureux causé en [elle] par la vue d’un changement physique qu’il serait plus délicat de ne pas paraître remarquer’ (II, 615). I am not suggesting that Françoise’s gaucherie in this moment is as

straightforwardly comedic as in other parts of the novel, in which so often her idea of social codes clashes with that of the family to the deliberate provocation of the reader's mirth. Nonetheless, there is *something* which, if not funny, might produce a certain awkward laughter, in Françoise's 'manque de la pudeur' and 'l'intérêt qu'elle éprouve à voir la chair qui souffre' (II, 615). Similarly, the narrator punctuates the descriptions of the family's grief with the awkward visits of well-wishers, who have the same instinct as Françoise to want to look at the grandmother as she suffers (and perhaps the family's suffering too), but who hide this somewhat better. The narrator describes with a dry humour Bergotte's daily visits: 'Il arrivait à la maison comme il fût allé au café, pour qu'on ne lui parlât pas, pour qu'il pût – bien rarement – parler, de sorte qu'on aurait pu en somme trouver un signe qu'il fût ému de notre chagrin ou prît plaisir à se trouver avec moi' (II, 624). The protagonist is more obviously annoyed by the Duc de Guermantes, who comes just once, but at the worst possible time, and is so blinded by self-importance that he cannot help but look pleased with himself: 'il trouvait tellement que l'honneur était pour elle qu'il ne pouvait s'empêcher de sourire tout en faisant une figure de circonstance' (II, 633). But again, for the reader at least, the Duc de Guermantes's inappropriate comportment brings an element of awkward humour to the depiction of the grandmother's death.

At a certain moment, though, the gravity of the scene intensifies, in parallel with the grandmother's final moments of life and her transformation from an elderly woman into 'une espèce de bête qui se serait affublée de ses cheveux et couchée dans ses draps' (II, 631-2). Katja Haustein has made a detailed and in many ways incisive study of these scenes, and my analysis of them will operate in conversation with hers. As part

of her argument for the grandmother's death as an episode of blocked gazes and blocked emotions, Haustein draws attention to the grandmother's steady decline in eyesight, at one point so weakened that the protagonist observes his grandmother 'glissant à l'abîme [...] l'œil égaré, incapable de plus faire face à l'assaut des images que ne réussissait plus à porter sa prunelle' (II, 612). Haustein argues that 'From the beginning this process of increasing blindness is closely linked to the control and repression of emotion', and it is quite true that the grandmother 'seeks to render her suffering invisible to others'.³⁵ But there are also flares of feeling and activity on the grandmother's part, notably in her attempt to jump from the bedroom window:

Nous n'eûmes que le temps de saisir ma grand'mère, elle soutint contre ma mère une lutte presque brutale, puis vaincue, rassise de force dans un fauteuil, elle cessa de vouloir, de regretter, son visage redevint impassible et elle se mit à enlever soigneusement les poils de fourrure qu'avait laissés sur sa chemise de nuit un manteau qu'on avait jeté sur elle. (II, 629)

Although this moment is fleeting, and the grandmother's face becomes once again 'impassible', it is nonetheless a forceful punctuation, and one which is not reflected in Haustein's insistence on the photographic immobility of the scene: 'a whole network of gazes, framing the grandmother's deathbed'.³⁶ Indeed, a photograph would be quite incapable of capturing the sudden movements depicted here, 'le temps de saisir' and 'lutte'. That the physicality involved is 'presque brutal', as the family wrestle the grandmother away from the window and into her armchair, suggests anything but blocked emotion, and even when the grandmother is safely placed into an armchair, the description of her quietly picking at the hairs emphasises the poignancy of the moment

³⁵ Katja Haustein, 'Proust's Emotional Cavities', p. 165.

³⁶ Katja Haustein, 'Proust's Emotional Cavities', p. 166.

as the family watch on in awkward silence, perhaps catching their breath after the struggle, perhaps unable to speak because of the hopelessness which has been laid bare.

It is this sense of awkwardness that persists, I want to argue, when the grandmother is no longer able to focus her gaze on the family, and while they look at her. Haustein argues that we are presented with ‘The narrator’s indifferent and unreturned gaze at the grandmother as spectacle [...] [in] the passages describing her agony as well as the event of her death’.³⁷ But while his gaze is indeed unreturned, the notion that his gaze is ‘indifferent’ is contestable. Although the protagonist, looking into his grandmother’s eyes, is struck by a sense that this is not the woman he knew – ‘Son regard changea tout à fait, souvent inquiet, plaintif, hagard, ce n’était plus son regard d’autrefois, c’était le regard maussade d’une vieille femme qui radote’ (II, 629) – the analogy he uses suggests feeling on his part. Although it is his grandmother’s look that he describes as ‘maussade’, surely this is, at least in part, a projection of his own gloominess. Likewise, when the grandmother is being treated with leeches, and the protagonist explains that ‘[il] savai[t] quel dégoût [sa] grand’mère avait de voir certaines bêtes’ (II, 630), it seems plausible that this is also his way of expressing the repulsion he feels, not only to see the ‘bêtes’ crawling on his grandmother’s skin, but also to see his grandmother herself transformed into ‘une espèce de bête’ (II, 631). If the protagonist does not avow his disgust openly, and indeed if he refrains altogether from expressing any emotion, this does not mean that ‘the affectionate gazes have become hollow and emotions such as empathy, grief, and compassion run empty’.³⁸ Rather, the protagonist’s affectionate gaze has been problematised by the horrific spectacle of

³⁷ Katja Haustein, ‘Proust’s Emotional Cavities’, p. 165.

³⁸ Katja Haustein, ‘Proust’s Emotional Cavities’, p. 166.

death, and the circumstances make it difficult for him to consciously express the pain it causes him.

The protagonist is conscious that his suffering is being observed by those around him, and he feels uncomfortable about this. In a striking scene which has been neglected by Haustein and other critics, we see the protagonist become quite taken with emotion – but then, seeing that he is being observed, he feels awkward about this. The observer in question is the grandmother’s brother-in-law, a monk who has come to conduct the last rites, and who seems ‘Accablé de tristesse’ (II, 635) as he prays for her. The protagonist explains the awkwardness that occurs between the two men:

...la vue de la tristesse de ce prêtre me fit mal, et je le regardai. Il parut surpris de ma pitié et il se produisit alors quelque chose de singulier. Il joignit ses mains sur sa figure comme un homme absorbé dans une méditation douloureuse, mais, comprenant que j’allais détourner de lui les yeux, je vis qu’il avait laissé un petit écart entre ses doigts. Et, au moment où mes regards le quittaient, j’aperçus son œil aigu qui avait profité de cet abri de ses mains pour observer si ma douleur était sincère. Il était embusqué là comme dans l’ombre d’un confessionnal. Il s’aperçut que je le voyais et aussitôt clôtura hermétiquement le grillage qu’il avait laissé entr’ouvert. Je l’ai revu plus tard, et jamais entre nous il ne fut question de cette minute. Il fut tacitement convenu que je n’avais pas remarqué qu’il m’épiait. (II, 635)

Ironically, both men end up calling into question the sincerity of the other’s grief. The monk, perhaps because the protagonist has thus far kept his emotion in check, is surprised to see the protagonist looking at him with such feeling. If the monk then sets up a “test”, in which he will be able to observe the protagonist without being himself observed, this may spring less from a judgmental spirit than it does a genuine curiosity to watch the protagonist’s grief. The awkwardness between the men is produced when they catch one another’s gazes: the protagonist sees that he is being spied on (‘j’aperçus son œil aigu’), and the monk sees that he has been caught out (‘Il s’aperçut que je le voyais’). By showing how carefully scrutinised the grieving protagonist is, and the

awkward moment in which he realises this, the narrator offers us a suggestion about why it is that the protagonist refrains from expressing his emotion until later, and only in private.

This chapter has provided an analysis of formative moments in the protagonist's childhood and adolescence, from the first three volumes of the *Recherche*. The link between these different moments was the protagonist's experience of looking at and being looked at by various members of his family, and other connected adults. For the protagonist and his relatives, the gazes they exchange are marked by an awkwardness which takes different forms, but which often has its crux in the distinction between what is thought and what is expressed. As a younger child, the protagonist fixes his stare to his mother, and forms exaggerated ideas of his parents' mindset: but then a crucial moment comes in which they exchange gazes – and with this, share their feelings. As an adolescent, the protagonist becomes aware of and enticed by sexuality, but he is not aware that this is something he should keep from his parents, just as he must become aware of the necessity to hide certain thoughts from his eyes when talking to any adult. As a young man, the protagonist has learned to control the expression of his feelings, which is how he manages to behave rather admirably in the circumstances of his grandmother's death. Above all, we have observed that both the banal and exceptional moments in family life are likely to contain awkwardness, because awkward feelings can spring up as easily with joy as with despair, and especially with the affective and epistemological power of the gaze.

Long before Proust conceived the *Recherche*, he wrote a melodramatic short story which contains the very points that have linked together this chapter: the family, sex and death, coupled with the act of the gaze and the power of awkwardness. In ‘La Confession d’une jeune fille’ (1896), a young woman, torn between devotion to her family and desire for her lover, is one day caught by her mother *in flagrante delicto*. The heroine’s description of the look they exchange – ‘en face de moi je vis [...] sur le balcon, devant la fenêtre, je vis ma mère qui me regardait hébétée’³⁹ – is followed by a transformation of the excruciating emotional awkwardness into a fatal physical awkwardness: dazed and disoriented, the mother loses her footing on the balcony, falls, and dies. The first three volumes of the *Recherche* see Proust developing his interest in the uncomfortable confrontations which occur in family life, albeit less dramatically than in ‘La Confession d’une jeune fille’. The scenes I have analysed in this chapter depict the “drama” of gazes and feelings, moments of tension between family members, and this from an adolescent perspective, with the protagonist awkwardly straddling the innocence of his childhood and the complexities of adulthood. In the chapter that follows, my focus shifts from family relations to social interaction, echoing the protagonist’s own experience of becoming increasingly enmeshed in Parisian high society from the third volume of the novel. How is awkwardness part of social experience? Why do certain individuals cause particular awkwardness? What tone does Proust achieve through the social awkwardness he depicts? Chapter Two will attempt to answer these questions, by focusing on the character of Charlus.

³⁹ Marcel Proust, ‘La Confession d’une jeune fille’ in *Jean Santeuil précédé de Les Plaisirs et les jours*, ed. by Pierre Clarac and Yves Sandre (Paris: Gallimard, 1971) p. 95.

2. Being out of the Closet

In the introduction to this thesis, I highlighted critical work on the link between awkwardness and identity, and suggested a distinction between the awkward feelings produced by a confrontation of individuals with different social identities, and the individual's own sense of awkwardness faced with the difficulty of being one coherent self. Palamède de Guermantes – that is the Baron de Charlus, Prince des Laumes, Duke of Brabant, Squire of Montargis, Prince d'Oloron, of Carency, Viareggio and of the Dunes, or 'Mémé' to his family – is one of the most complex characters in Proust's œuvre. Described by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as 'the prodigal gift that keeps *opening itself* to the wonder and pleasure of the reader',¹ this chapter makes fresh observations about Charlus, by examining the awkwardness he causes other characters to feel.

Scholarship dealing with Charlus has, since Deleuze,² usually been focused through two prisms: his effect on the protagonist, and his effect on the reader. In the first category, Charlus is discussed as part of the protagonist's process of apprenticeship – that is, how the protagonist is initiated into the secret of homosexuality,³ and into the workings of aristocratic society.⁴ In the second, attention is drawn to the troublingly comedic elements of Charlus as a character, with notable work by David Ellison, who

¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (California: University of California Press, 1990), p. 223.

² Deleuze describes Charlus as 'un énorme signe clignotant, grosse boîte optique et vocale; celui qui écoute Charlus ou qui rencontre son regard se trouve devant un secret à découvrir, un mystère à pénétrer, à interpréter', *Proust et les signes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964), p. 207.

³ Joshua Landy describes how 'all of a sudden every last mystery of the Baron de Charlus's behaviour finds a perfect explanation in his hitherto concealed homosexuality', in *Philosophy as Fiction: Self, Deception, and Knowledge in Proust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 145.

⁴ Peter Smith argues that 'Charlus replaces Swann as the guide of the Narrator's Life during his time in the Faubourg', in 'Proust as a Novelist', *Cambridge Quarterly*, 21.1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 34.

draws on psychoanalytic theory to discuss ‘the problematic relation of sexually motivated comedy to the generation of literary significance in the *Recherche*’,⁵ and Marcel Muller, who discusses the relation between the theme of cruelty and Proust’s use of pastiche: ‘Cruauté égale pastiche [...] Le fond même de la cruauté est de n’avoir pas de fond’.⁶ Kosofsky Sedgwick’s ground-breaking study of Charlus, in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), found of way of reconciling these two poles of critical interest, by identifying ‘Proust’s presenting *the spectacle of the closet as the truth of the homosexual*’,⁷ and the title of my chapter is a distinct nod to her work. But although Kosofsky Sedgwick deals marvelously with so many of the issues raised by Charlus’s character, through her focus on the concept of “coming out”, once again scant attention is given to the feelings produced by him – deliberately and inadvertently – in his social acquaintances. This chapter examines the awkwardness felt by various characters in response to Charlus: it is a study of reactions to his identity, and more broadly an affective study of social relationality.

Part one of this chapter (2.1 Strategy) examines Charlus’s use of awkwardness as a social strategy. While critics have commented on Charlus’s awkward attempts to seduce the protagonist (the disconcerting stares in Balbec, and the invitation to his home in *Le Côté de Guermantes*),⁸ I probe Charlus’s interactions with other characters,

⁵ David Ellison’s ‘Comedy and Significance in Proust’s *Recherche*: Freud and the Baron de Charlus’, *MLN*, 98.4 (1983), p. 661. Ellison discusses ‘the force of Proustian comedy, which is rapid, efficacious, and often anarchical in its *unsettling effect*’, p. 658, emphasis mine.

⁶ See Marcel Muller’s ‘Charlus dans le métro ou pastiche et cruauté chez Proust’, *Cahiers Marcel Proust* 9 (*Etudes Proustiennes* 3), Bersani, Jacques, Raimon, Michel and Tadié, Jean-Yves, eds., (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), p. 18.

⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 231.

⁸ For excellent close readings of these scenes, see the aforementioned piece by David Ellison, ‘Comedy and Significance in Proust’s *Recherche*: Freud and the Baron de Charlus’, p. 657-74.

following the protagonist's discovery (and the narrator's revelation) of his homosexuality, at the beginning of *Sodome et Gomorrhe*. My argument is that Charlus deliberately makes his social acquaintances feel awkward, not merely to display his superiority, but also as a means of concealing his homosexuality. I develop this argument through close readings of Charlus's interactions during two social events in the novel's fourth volume; the Princesse de Guermantes's party in Paris, and the Verdurins's reception at La Raspelière. I examine the tactics Charlus employs to cause other individuals to feel uncomfortable about their social, racial and sexual identities, and in so doing I make observations about the phenomenon of awkwardness itself, both in terms of individual comportment (laughter, physicality) and the broader cultural context (the role of the salon in the shift of power from the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie).

Part two of this chapter (2.2 Mentality) interrogates why exactly Charlus's social acquaintances feel so awkward in his presence, once they have learned of his homosexuality. Although the first wave of Proust scholarship was characterised by critics' uneasy feelings in reaction to Charlus as the embodiment of "perversity" – exemplified in the comment of one reviewer, that 'Charlus is wonderfully drawn, a triumph of art, if you like, but *c'est plus fort que moi*, I simply cannot stomach him'⁹ – surprisingly little attention has been given to a comparable uneasiness felt by Charlus's social peers, as depicted in the novel. Early critics were too preoccupied with the moral implications of Charlus's character for the reader, some condemning Proust for the

⁹ Entry 95, 'Unsigned review of *La Prisonnière*, 1924', in Leighton Hodson, ed., *Marcel Proust: the Critical Heritage* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 281.

‘regrettable’, ‘revolting’ Charlus episodes,¹⁰ some praising his ‘generous sympathy and understanding for even the monstrosities which humanity produces’.¹¹ Later, critics took great interest (and a sort of delight) in Charlus’s more shocking moments, especially his sado-masochistic flagellation in ‘La Prisonnière’: Brown argues that ‘This brothel scene is not merely an affirmation of Charlus’s vice and cruelty, but of his creativity and noble lineage’.¹² But at both ends of the critical spectrum, and in much interesting work between, there is an absence of comment on the novel’s depiction of Charlus’s mind (rather than his sexual practices) as something which both attracts and repels the Verdurin devotees: I demonstrate that it is the conflict between these two forces which produces their awkward feelings towards him. I then focus on two particular members of the group, to analyse how their reactions to Charlus are determined by their own identities: Cottard (as a doctor, a specialist of the body) and Bichot (as an academic, a specialist of the mind).

Part three of this chapter (2.3 Empathy) focuses on the protagonist’s feelings, during the dramatic scene in which the Verdurins persuade Morel to reject Charlus, and the latter is publicly disgraced. This section of the novel has received a fair amount of attention from critics, but usually from sociological¹³ and socio-linguistic

¹⁰ See the editor’s ‘Introduction’ in *Marcel Proust: the Critical Heritage*, pp. 28, 29.

¹¹ Entry 140, ‘Edmund Wilson: assessment and placing of Proust in recent literary history, 1931’, in *Marcel Proust: the Critical Heritage*, p. 407.

¹² Stephen Gilbert Brown, *The Garden of Desire: Marcel Proust and the Fugitive Sublime* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), p. 69.

¹³ See Martine Reid, ‘Violences proustiennes: Charlus exécuté’, *Rivista di Letterature Moderne e Compare*, 53:1 (2000), pp. 47-57, and Laurence Teyssandier, ‘M. de Charlus entre passé et modernité’, in *Proust face à l’héritage du XIXe siècle: tradition et métamorphose* (Paris: Presse Sorbonne Nouvelle), pp. 239-251.

perspectives,¹⁴ which privilege the narrator's point of view *on* the scene, and neglect the protagonist's vivid affective response *within* it. While other scholars have paid closer attention to the spectrum of emotion in the scene, there is a tendency to universalise: Marcel Gutwirth speaks of a "universelle dégradation" in the novel, and argues that 'c'est à Charlus qu'il est dévolu d'incorporer, de *nourrir de son propre corps* le mal, l'injustice aveugle de la vie'.¹⁵ While I do not seek to deny or negate the fact that Charlus's "execution" is a socially symbolic event, representing the decline of the aristocracy (and showing the precariousness of being a homosexual even as the bourgeois salon nurtured dandyism), it is also a personally significant event for the protagonist. My analysis explores why the protagonist feels empathetic towards Charlus, and why empathy can involve a strong sense of awkwardness. The significance of this finding is the new light it sheds on what might be described as the central concern of the *Recherche*, the tension between the self and the other. Meanwhile, the significance of the chapter as a study of Charlus's character is that instead of focusing on how Proust has crafted him,¹⁶ we discover how Charlus affects those around him.

¹⁴ See Guillaume Favre, 'L'Exécution de Charlus ou l'échec de l'éloquence mondaine', *Versants: Revue Suisse des Littératures Romanes*, 51 (2006): 129-151, and Geneviève Henrot, 'Déviations discursives: Portrait de Charlus en haut-parleur', *Bulletin d'Informations Proustiennes*, 32 (2001): 121 - 36.

¹⁵ Marcel M. Gutwirth, 'Le Portrait de Charlus dans l'oeuvre de Proust', *Romanic Review*, 40:3 (1949), p. 180.

¹⁶ Such is the purpose of an article by Clarice Fisher, 'Character as a Way of Knowing in *A la recherche du temps perdu*: The Baron de Charlus', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 20: 3 (1974): 407-18.

2.1 Identity

In this first part of the chapter, I analyse Charlus's manner of interaction during the two social events which structure the novel's fourth volume, *Sodome et Gomorrhe*. At the first, a party hosted by his relative the Princesse de Guermantes, we observe Charlus in the world he knows well, amongst the aristocratic elite of Paris. In the second, a dinner thrown by the Verdurins, we see Charlus venture into bourgeois society for the first time, in accompaniment of his lover Morel, his presence welcomed by the Verdurins, who are trying to elevate the social status of their salon. In both scenes, Charlus deliberately behaves in such a way as to make his interlocutors feel uncomfortable: 'il ne doit pas être commode tous les jours' (III, 323), observes Cottard from the first (or, as one English translation renders it, 'I bet he's an awkward customer'¹⁷). My argument is that in these moments Charlus is not only exercising his insolence to mark his social superiority, but also deliberately provoking unease so as to mask the detection of his homosexuality: the awkwardness Charlus causes other characters to feel about their identity provides a distraction from his own.

At the Princesse de Guermantes's reception, we see Charlus's most confident – and most successful – social performance of the entire novel. As a member of the host family, Charlus occupies one of the privileged places at the party, and 'Plus intelligent que les autres Guermantes' (III, 53), he uses it to achieve certain goals through specific

¹⁷ *In Search Of Lost Time, Vol 4: Sodom And Gomorrah*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, Terence Kilmartin and D. J. Enright (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 383. A variation on this expression, that of a 'weird customer', is used by the same translators for Albertine's description of Bloch as 'cet ostrogoth-là' (II, 234): see *In Search Of Lost Time, Vol 2: Within A Budding Grove*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, Terence Kilmartin and D. J. Enright (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 531.

strategies. While critics have referred to ‘the aristocratic pride and egotism’¹⁸ Charlus manifests on occasions like this one, there has been little study of the relationship between Charlus’s demonstrations of pride and the feelings of other characters. In the analysis that follows, I show how Charlus, aware that his fellow guests feel socially anxious to be at such a prestigious event, acts in such a way as to make particular individuals feel uncomfortable there. Further, we see that he does this so as to divert any attention from rumours about him, and therefore to be at liberty to pursue the young men who attract his attention.

The social anxiety of the guests, which Charlus is able to manipulate to his advantage, is first established in the text through the protagonist’s own apprehension. He feels uneasy about attending the party, both because he is unsure whether he is in fact invited, and, conversely, because having gained an invitation without the help of Charlus, he fears the Baron’s wrath.¹⁹ His predicament is awkward, in the sense that there is no easy way to resolve his misgivings: he cannot confirm whether or not he is welcome without turning up (at the risk of being sent away), and even if his presence has been requested by the Princesse de Guermantes, Charlus, not having been the conduit, will consider his presence illegitimate (and may publicly say so). Although the protagonist’s anxiety subsides as the party goes on, a maxim invoked by the narrator

¹⁸ Hollie Markland Harder, ‘Proust’s human comedy’, in Richard Bales, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Proust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 141.

¹⁹ Edward Hughes discusses this point of tension between the protagonist and Charlus as part of ‘un désir plus général de la part du Narrateur de déstabiliser l’ordre hiérarchique. Or, Proust démontre que la protection d’un tel ordre est un principe à l’œuvre dans toutes les classes sociales [...] la *Recherche* dépeint une société en pleine transformation. Dans un sens très concret, le roman marque l’effondrement d’un ordre social, dans la mesure où la Guerre de 1914-1918 accélère la fin de l’ancienne aristocratie et l’avènement au pouvoir de la bourgeoisie’. See Edward Hughes, ‘La Représentation du monde social dans Combray’, *Marcel Proust Aujourd’hui*, 3 (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2005): 63-80.

early on suggests that however smoothly the social event proceeds, the protagonist's uneasiness will resurface: 'On s'inquiète, et c'est parfois longtemps après l'heure du danger, oubliée grâce à la distraction, que l'on se souvient de son inquiétude' (III, 35). While 'inquiétude' was not part of the French lexicon of awkwardness proposed in the introduction to this thesis,²⁰ it is closely connected to it, especially in the context of social interaction. In the previous chapter, the analysis of characters' gazes included Swann's 'mauvaise humeur' (I, 553) towards the protagonist as expressed in 'l'inquiétude de son regard' (I, 553), and the grandmother's deterioration as manifested in the changed look in her eyes, 'souvent inquiet, plaintif, hagard' (II, 629). Here, in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, we are presented with the mental act – s'inquiéter – and its accompanying sensation (inquiétude), and my suggestion is that "to worry" about a social event is connected to the anticipation of the feelings of awkwardness which may occur during it. Such is the case for the protagonist: his initial concern is assuaged when the Princesse greets him with exceptional warmth, there is no humiliation to be feared, and yet he spends the evening "on edge" – not worried, but uncomfortable.

The narrator will, throughout the party, alert the reader to the fact that every guest has something to feel uneasy about in this social environment. We are shown the predicaments of major characters like Swann, whose social life is already delicate because his wife and daughter are unwelcome at such events, and who must now negotiate the anti-semitic atmosphere created by the Dreyfus Affair. But we are also introduced to minor characters, solely, it seems, to underscore that each has their own

²⁰ The terms put forward in the introduction were: maladroit, gauche, mal à l'aise, déplacé, être en porte-à-faux, délicat, difficile, étrange, peu commode, des gaffes and des maladresses. I also made reference to la gêne (that is, embarrassment) which although distinct from awkwardness, overlaps with it.

cause for awkwardness. Professor E..., for example, who doesn't know anyone at the party and is forced to wander perpetually from room to room, and Mme de Gallardon, who is the cousin of the Duchesse de Guermantes, but finds herself shunned, and so pretends not to have seen her relative even when they are standing beside each other. Indeed, even within the Guermantes family itself, this social occasion is not easy to navigate. The relationship between the Duc and Duchesse de Guermantes is 'déjà assez compliquée' (III, 82), and their interactions with certain guests who are present – the Duc's former and current mistresses, and a male musician with whom the Duchesse is acquainted – require careful handling by all parties. Perhaps most strikingly of all, the hosts themselves are unable to escape the awkwardness that comes with the territory of socialising. The Prince de Guermantes, who has secretly become a Dreyfusard, wants to use the opportunity of the party to speak with Swann, but this sparks the rumor that the Prince instructs Swann 'de ne plus avoir à se montrer chez lui' (III, 75): meanwhile the Princesse de Guermantes, who is not-so-secretly in love with her cousin-by-marriage, Charlus, is avoided by him in her own home. As every character's difficulty at this party is touched on by the narrator, we can establish that social awkwardness is not determined by the social hierarchy: for individuals at every rung of the ladder, participating in such events is fraught with the risk of clumsy or disagreeable moments. Although the *Recherche* is clearly concerned with tensions of class in French society at the end of the nineteenth-century and the beginning of the twentieth, it is important to note that, as in this scene, Proust depicts the tension of "being together" which occurs in any and every social gathering, because group coherence is necessarily thwarted by personal preoccupations.

Charlus exploits the pervasive anxiety of such social events, by causing particular individuals to feel uncomfortable, and often for reasons or in ways which they would not have been able to predict. Certainly, with the protagonist (and just as he feared), Charlus's rudeness takes aim at the legitimacy of his presence: “‘C'est gentil de vous voir ici”, me dit-il, en me tendant la main [...] “C'est gentil, reprit-il, mais c'est surtout bien drôle.” Et il se mit à pousser des éclats de rire’ (III, 58). But in a strategy that is quite distinct from such displays of self-importance, Charlus singles out certain victims for his insinuations and vituperation, for the purpose of causing a general distraction from his own questionable reputation, which in turn allows him to feel more comfortable about approaching the young men at the party. Formerly, the key element in Charlus's social strategy – that is, in the concealment of his homosexuality even as he uses dinners and parties to seek out potential lovers – was to veto the invitations of certain guests, for reasons he would not specify beyond their being ‘une personne impossible à recevoir’ (III, 53). This may have worked for twenty years, but Charlus notices his relatives paying less and less attention to his dictates and as such he is forced to ‘faire la part du feu’ (III, 54). Obligated to be in the presence of those he would prefer to avoid – some because they are the objects of his contempt, others because of what they might know of his sexual predilections – Charlus deals with this by singling out individuals whom he can embarrass about their social comportment, or even their very identity. Charlus's only anxiety is that he may be exposed as a homosexual, evidenced by the exercise of a rare discretion on his part (and especially on his favourite topic) when M. de Vaugoubert smiles at him, to indicate another potential “invert” in the room. He insists: ‘Je n'en sais absolument rien, je vous prie de garder vos curiosités

pour vous-même' (III, 74). Likewise, when he senses that Mme de Gallardon is making an allusion to his secret by the knowing manner with which she presents her nephew, Charlus responds with a coldness not only directed at her, but purposely displayed to the whole room: 'il ajouta sans même regarder le jeune homme "Bonsoir, Monsieur", d'un air bourru et d'une voix si violemment impolie, que tout le monde en fut stupéfait' (III, 53). But distinct from Charlus's aggressive awkwardness with those who risk exposing his homosexuality, we also see him take aim at other individuals, whom he deliberately renders uncomfortable as part of his social performance and private desires.

Charlus's manipulation of Mme de Surgis, in order to conceal his erotic interest in her sons and gain an introduction to them, turns on his capacity to make her feel uneasy about them, rather than about him. In one way, Mme de Surgis is an easy target: her attendance at the party being, as the Duc de Guermantes's mistress, already somewhat awkward, because of the presence of his former mistress and indeed his wife. Then again, because Mme de Surgis is close to the Duc de Guermantes, who is in turn close to his brother Charlus, there is the distinct possibility that she is in on the secret of Charlus's homosexuality. The impossibility of knowing who knows what is part of why Charlus's position in society is so awkward, in the sense that he must tread carefully, because he doesn't know where the minefields are. But this also makes him particularly alert, not only to the social dangers for himself, but also to those of other people, and thus better able to exploit them. We see Charlus use sophisticated tactics to make Mme de Surgis feel socially awkward, and specifically to feel embarrassed about her sons. These tactics are made possible by the fact that, in the first instance, Charlus feigns ignorance that the young men have any relation to Mme de Surgis:

« Comme ces deux jeunes gens ont un air étrange ! Regardez cette curieuse passion du jeu, marquise », dit M. de Charlus, en désignant à Mme de Surgis ses deux fils, comme s'il ignorait absolument qui ils étaient, « ce doivent être deux Orientaux, ils ont certains traits caractéristiques, ce sont peut-être des Turcs », ajouta-t-il, à la fois pour confirmer encore sa feinte innocence, témoigner d'une vague antipathie, qui, quand elle ferait place ensuite à l'amabilité, prouverait que celle-ci s'adresserait seulement à la qualité de fils de Mme de Surgis, n'ayant commencé que quand le baron avait appris qui ils étaient. (III, 95)

Combined with the shame Mme de Surgis is caused to feel by the insinuation of her sons' racial impurity (and, by extension, her own sexual impurity),²¹ a shame made manifest in her blush, there is also the awkwardness created by Charlus's more ambiguous comments, that the men have 'un air *étrange*' and a '*curieuse passion du jeu*'. Such 'vague antipathie' is more difficult for Mme de Surgis to combat than the more straightforward question as to whether or not the men are French, which is clarified by her confession that 'Ce sont mes fils' (III, 95). Charlus is conscious that his comments may have made Mme de Surgis feel too awkward to make an introduction: "Mais je ne les connais pas", ajouta-t-il, craignant d'être allé un peu loin dans l'expression de l'antipathie et d'avoir paralysé ainsi chez la marquise l'intention de lui faire faire leur connaissance' (III, 95). The term 'paralysé' was one I put forward in the introduction to this thesis: if physical awkwardness involves being turned the wrong way, the feeling of awkwardness involves being paralysed in one's social interactions. Yet this paralysis on Mme de Surgis's part – because social etiquette requires that she present her sons to Charlus, but the antipathy he has expressed makes such a move feel clumsy – is to Charlus's advantage. Because she feels so awkward, he can now

²¹ Furthermore, by proposing that the men are 'deux Orientaux [...] peut-être des Turcs', Charlus may be hinting at their effeminacy or alluding to a homoeroticism between them: this was a period in history, after all, in which Europeans frequently projected such notions onto men in the Orient (see Edward Said's *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1978). For a discussion of Charlus, homosexuality and the Orient, see Margaret Topping's 'The Proustian Harem', *The Modern Language Review*, 97:2 (2002): 300-11.

manipulate her more easily, placing her in the position he wants: one of relief and gratitude at the attention he now pays to her sons, rather than one of suspicion.

In order to retain his control over Mme de Surgis, Charlus must continue to make her feel a certain degree of awkwardness. To do so, where at first he made her feel uncomfortably “other” (vicariously, through her sons), now he changes approach, making her feel uncomfortably complicit in his attacks on other people. Having placed Mme de Surgis in a position of psychological awkwardness, Charlus is now able to physically place her to his advantage. He suggests that she leave the room with him (and the protagonist) to take some fresh air, and not only does this allow him to conceal his interest in her sons (‘De cette façon, il se donnait l’air, après les avoir amorcés, de ne pas tenir aux deux jeunes gens’ (III, 98)), but also to place their mother at a distance, so he can later return to the room and speak to them alone. But Charlus is also concerned with consolidating Mme de Surgis’s loyalty to him, and as such he places her by his side in the garden to trap her into being the earpiece for his attacks on other guests. Indeed, he profits from their positioning in an alcove to humiliate someone else nearby who cannot escape: ‘la baie était si étroite que Mme de Saint-Euverte, quand elle voulut, derrière nous, continuer de quêter ses invités du lendemain, se trouva prise et ne put facilement se dégager, moment précieux dont M. de Charlus [...] se garda bien de ne pas profiter’ (III, 98). In the exchange which follows, M. de Charlus makes Mme de Surgis feel extremely awkward, by the way he implicates her in his humiliation of Mme de Saint-Euverte.

The seediness which Charlus ascribes to Mme de Saint-Euverte, with her in earshot, is part of what makes the scene so awkward. Of course Charlus holds her in contempt, as a society lady who has fallen out of fashion, and enjoys expressing this through his wit, because as a Guermantes he is beyond reproach, but my suggestion is that Charlus also uses his attacks to transfer the uneasiness he feels about his own secret life onto someone else. The evidence for this is in found in the way that Charlus focuses on her moral rather than her social disgrace, through the use of language which has a decidedly scatological motif.²² He compares attending Mme de Saint-Euverte's forthcoming party with having 'la colique' (III, 99), describes her house as 'un formidable tonneau de vidange' (III, 99) and says that when the woman herself opens her mouth to speak he finds himself saying: 'Oh! mon Dieu, on a crevé ma fosse d'aisances' (III, 99). He uses her very name to make a pun which alludes to a salacious past – 'qui n'avaient certainement rien de "saint", mais devaient être très "vertes", si l'on en croit la cuisse restée légère de la vénérable gambadeuse' (III, 99)²³ – which is a particularly masterful form of slander, because if his other comments can be forgotten, her name cannot.

Mme de Saint-Euverte shows herself to be remarkably emotionally robust in the face of Charlus's tirade (even saying to the protagonist just afterwards, 'À tout péché miséricorde' (III, 100)), but the encounter is quite disturbing for the protagonist and Mme de Surgis. The protagonist describes his outrage, 'indigné de l'abominable petit

²² For an extended discussion of how 'There is, in Proust, an elaborate and deeply contradictory set of protocols to ensure that queer sexuality is brought into discourse [...] via a complicated set of figural detours', see Michael Lucey's 'Proust's Queer Metalepses', in *MLN*, 116:4 (2001): 795-815 (p. 796).

²³ An allusion to the expression "des vertes et des pas mûres", which Proust himself may be indicating in his choice of name for the Verdurins (phonetically, *Vert-durin*).

discours que venait de tenir M. de Charlus' (III, 100), but he cannot give expression to it, the heat of his rage turns into a necessary coldness, such that we see him focus on his own contempt towards Mme de Saint-Euverte: 'je trouvais stupide qu'elle eût l'air de se croire ou de vouloir faire croire que personne n'était, en effet, aussi chic qu'elle' (III, 100). For Mme de Surgis the exchange is all the more awkward still, because if Mme de Saint-Euverte is physically 'immobilisée' (III, 98), she is socially trapped, caught between Mme de Saint-Euverte (whose friendly greeting she acknowledges) and Charlus (whose gaze she feels, even in the corner of her eye). Like the protagonist, Mme de Surgis is annoyed by Charlus's diatribe, but her sense of awkwardness is greater still, when Charlus asks her outright: 'Est-ce que vous allez vous croter là?' (III, 99). Unable to answer the question, because she is indeed planning to attend but doesn't want Charlus to know, she responds with such awkwardness that the text cannot even fully represent it:

Car voulant feindre de n'y pas aller, vis-à-vis du baron, et sachant qu'elle donnerait des jours de sa propre vie plutôt que de manquer la matinée Saint-Euverte, elle s'en tira par une moyenne, c'est-à-dire l'incertitude. Cette incertitude prit une forme si bêtement dilettante et si mesquinement couturière, que M. de Charlus, ne craignant pas d'offenser Mme de Surgis, à laquelle pourtant il désirait plaire, se mit à rire pour lui montrer que "ça ne prenait pas". (III, 99)

We are told that her wavering takes a form that is clumsily amateurish and sordidly material, but we are not told whether this material form is a physical gesture, a facial expression or the utterance of a sound. In this way, its awkwardness is perfectly described by the text, precisely because it escapes clarity of description. It also reinforces the suggestion I made in the introduction to this thesis, that while awkwardness occurs in the course of social exchange, it may be considered as

something closer to affect than feeling or emotion. A feeling like embarrassment can be labelled, and is expressed interpersonally through the symptom of a blush, but here we see that a phenomenon which is somewhat ineffable, and can only be gestured towards in an unlikely combination of different terms, like ‘bêtement dilettante’ and ‘mesquinement couturière’. As for the effect of this awkwardness on the characters’ social relationships, in this scene Charlus’s deliberate provocation of it is a way of asserting his power (only he can laugh, because he created it), and this not only to mark his social superiority but also to detract attention from his homosexuality, which is the only threat to this power. But in the next communal event of *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, Charlus’s strategy of creating awkwardness marks the beginning of his demise, because he is not attuned to the social codes governing the Verdurin salon, and therefore he has less control.

Charlus attends the Verdurins’ dinner at La Raspelière, not because he has any interest in the hosts, but to accompany and watch over his new lover, Morel. With no interest in fitting in with the group, Charlus expressly performs this un-interest, much to the uneasiness of the Verdurins and their guests. The Verdurins occupy an equivocal position in society at this point in the novel, and quite aside from the presence of Charlus, the evening risks being marked by awkwardness, not least because of where it takes place: La Raspelière is not owned by the Verdurins, but rented by them from the Cambremers, who they have invited for the evening. Like many aristocrats at the time, the Cambremers are obliged to generate money from their assets, and the Verdurins, as wealthy bourgeois snobs, are only too pleased to be able to take up residence in such

properties.²⁴ The tensions produced by such an arrangement are not only those of time – the practical clash of past and present, the question as to how long this can be sustained for – but also of space: the house is, proverbially speaking, not big enough for both the Cambremers and the Verdurins. For both parties to be there at the same time is necessarily uncomfortable. M. de Cambremer has a profound sense of attachment to La Raspelière – ‘Je me retrouve’ (III, 309), he exclaims upon arrival – and yet the Verdurins have made so many modifications to its interior that he can no longer see it simply as home, but his home with ‘tout boulevers[é]’ (III, 309). Meanwhile, Mme Verdurin is ‘piquée’ (III, 310) that M. de Cambremer should dare to speak with such nostalgia about a place which, with the modifications she has made to furniture and furnishings, has been transformed into the representation of her domestic ideal. The tension between the two parties spills over into an awkwardness for others lodged on the property, like the gardener, ‘qui considérait les Cambremer comme ses seuls maîtres et gémissait sous le joug des Verdurin’ (III, 309).²⁵ The other reason that the success of this particular evening is less than certain for the Verdurins is because of the new guests that are coming to see them at this new location. Although the Verdurin “clan” is a curious melting pot of waifs and strays, individuals whose personal circumstances allow them to subscribe to Mme Verdurin’s maxim that ‘C’est [...] si ennuyeux les familles, on n’aspire qu’à en sortir’ (III, 301), it is governed by rules and sustained by tyranny. Although the Verdurins want to elevate their social status by receiving members of the

²⁴ For an article devoted to the social tensions depicted in the gathering at La Raspelière, see Jacques Dubois, ‘Charlus à la Raspelière: un jeu de barres social’, *Fabula.org*, Retrieved 1 October 2015: <http://www.fabula.org/compagnon/proust/dubois.php>.

²⁵ We can also note that, while Charlus does not comment on the Verdurins’s occupation of La Raspelière, elsewhere in the novel he protests the purchase or rental of aristocratic domains by the bourgeoisie, although he specifically laments this being done by “up-start” Jews (II, 1104-05).

nobility, the attendance of newcomers, unschooled in the salon's philosophy and codes, poses risks to the coherence of the group.

But above all, it is the presence of Charlus that intensifies the tension of the evening, because he acts impertinently throughout, with a view to making it known that he is not one of them, and nor would he want to be. At the Guermantes's party he focused on making other guests feel uncomfortable to be there, but at La Raspelière Charlus's insolence is directed at the hosts themselves. He causes them awkwardness by implying, and sometimes even announcing outright, that the Verdurins' grasp on social comportment is inept and their pride misplaced. Charlus seizes upon the mistakes that a less awkward guest would allow to pass without comment: moreover, he uses these mistakes to suggest his hosts' broader social inadequacy. When M. Verdurin explains why the Cambremers were given the most prestigious seats at the dinner table, Charlus not only reels off his list of titles, to show his hosts how ignorant they are of his prestige, but also takes the opportunity to suggest their wider ignorance of high society: 'Mais voyons! Cela n'a aucune importance, ici! [...] J'ai tout de suite vu que vous n'aviez pas l'habitude' (III, 332). If Charlus's words were not stinging enough, they are accompanied with 'un petit rire' and a 'fin sourire' (III, 332) which leaves M. Verdurin 'blessé' (III, 333). The awkwardness of this moment is suggested through the use of the adjectives 'petit' and 'fin': Charlus's smile and laughter are carefully controlled by him, they are not merely the unconscious expression of his amusement, but also his way of displaying M. Verdurin's absurdity to him.

If we interrogate the essence of laughter itself, we can observe that the phenomenon is the product of something that can be aptly described as awkwardness. Henri Bergson, in *Le rire* (1900), argues that the origins of laughter lie in a tension between two forces: society's pressure on the individual to conform to its codes of conduct, and society's concurrent requirement that the individual adapt itself as these codes transform. When an individual displays an 'inélasticité'²⁶ – because he falls to the ground, has a permanent grimace, or makes a recurring hand movement – this causes us to laugh. Thus laughter points to 'une certaine raideur du corps, de l'esprit et du caractère, que la société voudrait encore éliminer pour obtenir de ses membres la plus grande élasticité et la plus haute sociabilité possibles. Cette raideur est le comique, et le rire en est le châtement'.²⁷ Now, Charlus plays a clever game during his evening at La Raspelière, because although it is he who is consistently and deliberately stiff in his comportment, he combines pointed smiles and carefully chosen words to make his hosts feel the awkwardness as though it is theirs. Even though Charlus does not forcibly direct the Verdurins onto a conversational path filled with stumbling blocks (as, for example, when he put the deliberately awkward question to Mme de Surgis about attending Mme de Saint-Euverte's party), he encourages them in the wrong direction. When Mme Verdurin tries, clumsily, to establish a complicity with Charlus, by asking if he can recommend an impoverished nobleman to employ as her concierge, he delays the "punchline" that is his response in order to intensify its asperity:

²⁶ Henri Bergson, *Le Rire*, p. 6

²⁷ Henri Bergson, *Le Rire*, p. 6

— Mais si... mais si..., répondit M. de Charlus en souriant d'un air bonhomme, mais je ne vous le conseille pas. — Pourquoi ? — Je craindrais pour vous que les visiteurs élégants n'allassent pas plus loin que la loge." Ce fut entre eux la première escarmouche. Mme Verdurin y prit à peine garde. Il devait malheureusement y en avoir d'autres à Paris. (III, 357)

Not only does Charlus make Mme Verdurin believe that her question is a valid one, with his apparently affirmative 'Mais si... mais si', the smile he gives her seems to be a further confirmation that she has made an artful move. This creates a more violent effect when he informs her that the idea behind the question is a most vulgar one, and the term 'escarmouche' captures how the sudden halt to which Charlus has brought the conversation is indicative of the clash of their respective mindsets, and this tension between them also takes a physical form.

Part of Charlus's social performance involves the way he uses his body, and one of the ways he makes his social acquaintances feel uncomfortable is through his bodily comportment.²⁸ His deliberate physical awkwardness at La Raspelière is, once again, both a means of displaying his social superiority, and an attempt to conceal his homosexuality. When Charlus arrives for dinner, the nervous excitement he feels having his first experience of bourgeois society (III, 298), causes a momentary loss of physical control. Although Charlus has spent many years trying to rid his body of any traces of effeminacy – 'le baron avait durement peiné pour la dissimuler et prendre une

²⁸ For a critical study of Charlus's body, 'une physiologie de ses gestes et des ses mots', see Roger Kempf's *Sur le corps romanesque* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1968), and for a more recent discussion of Charlus's transformed body in the latter volumes of the novel, see Adam Watt's chapter, 'La poétique du corps dans l'épisode de la guerre du *Temps retrouvé*' in *Proust écrivain de la Première Guerre mondiale*, ed. by Philippe Chardin and Nathalie Mauriac Dyer (Dijon: Éditions universitaires de Dijon, 2014). For a study of body language throughout the novel, see Richard W. Saunders's *Metamorphoses of the Proustian Body: A Study of Bodily Signs in A la recherche du temps perdu* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), and, more recently, Liza Gabaston's *Le Langage du corps dans A la recherche du temps perdu* (Paris: Éditions Honoré Champion, 2011), in which the author argues that the significance of corporal signs is not limited to character description, in accordance with the model established by narratology, but rather constitute the very essence of the narrative dynamic in a novel in which "action" is always problematic.

apparence masculine' (III, 300) – his desire to perform his nobility with graceful gestures causes a momentary slip: 'On aurait cru voir s'avancer Mme de Marsantes, tant ressortait à ce moment la femme qu'une erreur de la nature avait mise dans le corps de M. de Charlus' (III, 300).²⁹ As the evening goes on, Charlus regains physical control, by placing Mme Verdurin in a literally awkward position when he refuses to stand up: 'M. de Charlus ne s'inquiétait pas que Mme Verdurin fût debout et restait installé dans son fauteuil pour être plus près de Morel' (III, 357). The narrator draws attention to this physical awkwardness by stressing that, even as the conversation goes on, 'M. de Charlus continua à ne pas quitter sa chaise' (III, 358). Again, Charlus indicates the deliberateness with which he creates this awkwardness for Mme Verdurin, with a faint 'sourire' (III, 358), but again, Mme Verdurin is surprisingly flexible about this transgression of a social code: 'La Patronne n'avait l'air nullement étonnée par la posture du baron' (III, 358). Ironically enough, it seems that because the Verdurins are so obsessed with obtaining adherence to their self-created social codes and gestures, Charlus's flouting of wider social conventions, like standing up for a lady, has a dulled effect.

Although Charlus systematically displays his contempt for the Verdurins and the rules of the salon, his unfamiliarity with their codes³⁰ causes him tingles of apprehension during the evening. Several times, Charlus misinterprets what is being said or done as an allusion to his homosexuality, and the awkwardness of these

²⁹ For a discussion of 'le transfert qui paraît s'opérer d'une personne d'un sexe à une personne d'un autre sexe d'une même famille', see Jean-Louis Baudry's *Proust, Freud et l'autre* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1984), p. 42.

³⁰ For an extended discussion of why 'La vie mondaine exige donc, comme la diplomatie, un art du chiffre et une habitude de la traduction immédiate', which references the conversations at La Raspelière, see Gérard Genette's *Figures II* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), p. 255.

moments stands in contrast to Charlus's habitual manipulation of the social scenario. In the first instance, Cottard's effusive smiles 'pour rompre la glace' (III, 310), are read by Charlus as flirtation rather than friendliness. No words have been spoken, so Charlus cannot use his tactics of aggressive insolence, and instead resorts to a defensive coldness: 'il prit l'air offensé et glacial' (III, 311). As such, while Leo Bersani is right to state that Charlus's desire takes the form of 'a kind of continuous tension of interest in the *possibility* of homosexuality in apparently heterosexual men [...] titillating exposures that create ideal, brief moments during which supposed heterosexuals are suddenly moved into the homosexual world',³¹ it is also crucial to recognise the awkwardness that is produced when he is the recipient rather than the instigator of the "guessing game". Rather like Mme Verdurin, Cottard is unaffected by Charlus's response. Although he is 'bloqué par le silence de M. de Charlus', he can 'se donner de l'air des autres côtés' (III, 317), by letting Charlus ignore him and talking to another guest. Because Charlus fails to make Cottard feel uncomfortable, the awkwardness of the moment reverberates back onto his own self: Cottard will later tell Ski that it is Charlus who 'ne doit pas être commode tous les jours, il a un air pincé' (III, 323). The word 'pincé' is significant, especially in combination with the narrator's description, slightly further on, when Charlus believes M. Verdurin is making allusion to his homosexuality: 'l'injurieuse franchise du Patron le suffoquait' (III, 332). Being stiff and feeling suffocated indicates another way of distinguishing between awkwardness and shame. Charlus is not embarrassed in his exchanges with these men, but rather uncomfortable about how to react, especially because, unlike in the case of M. de Vaugoubert's

³¹ Leo Bersani, *Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and Art*, p. 165.

knowing smile, here Charlus cannot be certain that the men are in on his secret. The great irony is that the attempts of the Verdurins to assimilate Charlus to their group are what cause him the greatest alarm, as evidenced by a loss of control on his body. M. Verdurin's innocent comment ('j'ai compris que vous "en étiez"!') (III, 332)) gives Charlus such a shock that he performs a physical reflex in response, 'un haut-le-corps' (III, 332). Further on, Mme Verdurin's similarly-worded question ('Monsieur de Charlus, est-ce que vous en êtes?') (III, 359)) again provokes a physical reaction from Charlus: 'Le baron [...] sursauta' (III, 359). While Charlus will become better acquainted with the "dialect" used in the Verdurin salon, and avoid the awkwardness of similar misunderstandings, as the members of the salon become better acquainted with Charlus they start to feel awkward about what they do understand of him.

2.2 Mentality

The first section of this chapter looked at the theme of awkwardness in relation to Charlus's behaviour and his deliberate social awkwardness, while this second section examines the awkwardness caused by who Charlus is, when his social acquaintances find out. The protagonist's discovery of Charlus's secret has been the focus of much critical attention, and scholars have discussed the absence of personal feeling³² in the narrator's description of Charlus and Jupien's sexual encounter: it is written in 'scientific language',³³ presented as 'moral botany',³⁴ 'firmly entrenched in 19th-century diagnoses',³⁵ or a depiction of 'le phénomène en tant que production littéraire'.³⁶ Other critics have used this scene to suggest Proust's own feelings about homosexuality, suggesting that the treatment of the Baron de Charlus reveals 'distortions, half-truths, outmoded ideas, and constant eruptions of [...] internalised homophobia'.³⁷ But how do the Verdurin devotees feel about Charlus's identity as a homosexual, how do they feel about his presence, and how does this change their behaviour towards him? These are the questions I explore in the analysis which follows, an analysis based on close readings of Charlus's interaction with the Verdurin clan, and

³² For a discussion of the protagonist's voyeurism and his 'detachment from what is being observed', see Stephen Gilbert Brown, *The Garden of Desire*, p. 73.

³³ 'Entry 117. John Charpentier on *Albertine disparue*, 1926' in Leighton Hodson, ed., *Marcel Proust*, p. 339.

³⁴ See Lisa Guenther's 'Other Fecundities: Proust and Irigaray on Sexual Difference', *differences*, 21:2 (2010): 24-45.

³⁵ See Michael Finn's 'Proust and Ambient Medico-Literary Homosexualities 1885-1922', *French Forum*, 37:3 (2012): 49-64.

³⁶ See Mireille Rosello's, 'L'embonpoint du Baron de Charlus', *French Forum*, 10:2 (1985): 189-200 (p. 189).

³⁷ See Julius Rivers, *Proust and the Art of Love: The Aesthetics of Sexuality in the Life, Times and Art of Marcel Proust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 205.

particularly with Cottard and Brichot.

The Verdurin devotees, hereafter referred to as “the group”, become better acquainted with Charlus during the train journeys taken to get to La Raspelière: as such, as well as the literally shifting landscape outside the train windows, the space inside the train becomes crucial to the shifting social landscape, as individuals from the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie are placed into contact with each other, in the carriages.³⁸ I stress the word *shifting*, because the disposition of the group towards Charlus is also in flux, as he inspires a variety of conflicting feelings in its members. The group are interested in, and even attracted by, Charlus’s homosexuality: but the path of their curiosity is an awkward one, in the sense that their desire to know more about Charlus is blocked by his insistence that, while he has much to say on the subject, he himself is heterosexual. The narrator contrasts ‘la gêne qu’ils avaient tous plus ou moins éprouvée au début, à se trouver à côté de M. de Charlus’ (III, 428) with ‘l’idée de l’étrangeté sexuelle qui [...] exerçait sur eux une espèce d’attrait’ (III, 428). This marks a distinct turning point in terms of Charlus’s effect on those around him, in two regards. Firstly, previously it was Charlus’s comments and physical comportment which were the source of other people’s uneasiness. Now, ‘la gêne’ initially felt by the group is occasioned simply through the mere presence of Charlus, being *à côté* to him. Secondly, while hitherto the group thought about Charlus in terms of his social position (‘Un baron! Où ça, un baron? Où ça, un baron?’ (III, 303), is Cottard’s initial exclamation), now, ‘l’idée’ which preoccupies their minds is that of his sexual disposition. It is noteworthy that although

³⁸ For a wider analysis of the relationship between technological developments and the theme of social change as presented in the novel, see Nicola Luckhurst’s *Science and Structure in Proust’s ‘A la recherche du temps perdu’* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000).

the group ‘réussi à dominer la gêne’ caused by Charlus’s presence, the word ‘dominer’ indicates that this ‘gêne’ is suppressed rather than eradicated, confirmed by the fact that ‘ils gardaient sans cesse à l’esprit’ (III, 428) the matter of Charlus’s homosexuality.

The group’s interest in Charlus derives from his ‘étrangeté’ as a homosexual (III, 428), and the notion of *étrangeté* or “strangeness” has strong associations with the concept of awkwardness: early twentieth-century critics have failed to deal with this, speaking only of the group’s ‘natural feelings of revulsion’.³⁹ Perhaps the most interesting of these associations manifests in the notion of the uncanny: *unheimlich* in German, *inquiétante étrangeté* in French. Although it is Freud’s theory of the uncanny which is best known (and most used by Proust scholars⁴⁰) – as something familiar which has become alienated through repression⁴¹ – Ernst Jentsch’s earlier study of the phenomenon suggested the uncanny affect as a lack of orientation or a psychological uncertainty.⁴² As Katherine Withy points out in her recent monograph,

“Lack of orientation” suggests that this uncertainty is more basic than a lack of conceptual knowledge; it points to experiences where we *just don’t get* what to do with something or how to stand with respect to it [...] the uncertainty that produces the uncanny feeling must be an irresolvable uncertainty.⁴³

³⁹ F. C. Green, *The Mind of Proust: A Detailed Interpretation of ‘A la Recherche Du Temps Perdu’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013 [1949]), p. 256.

⁴⁰ For a study considering Freud’s uncanny and Proust’s *Recherche*, see David Ellison’s article, ‘The Disquieting Strangeness of Marcel Proust’, in, André Benhaim, ed., *The Strange M. Proust* (London: Legenda, 2009), pp. 12-22.

⁴¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2003).

⁴² Ernst Jentsch, ‘On the Psychology of the Uncanny’, trans. Roy Sellars, *Angelaki: A New Journal in Philosophy, Literature and the Social Sciences*, 2:1 (1996): 7-16. Jentsch hypothesizes that if the feeling of uncanniness persists, this is due either to ‘semi-conscious secondary doubts’ or a ‘lively recollection of the first awkward impression lingering in one’s mind’ (p. 12).

⁴³ Katherine Withy, *Heidegger on Being Uncanny* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 14.

My suggestion is that the knowledge of Charlus's homosexuality, 'l'idée de l'étrangeté sexuelle incluse en leur compagnon' (III, 428), produces awkward feelings for members of the group, not for moral reasons, but because it disorients them in the way Jentsch (and Withy) suggest. The Verdurin devotees don't know what to do with Charlus: practically, they don't know whether or not they should move to his train carriage, but also more existentially, they don't know what kind of relation they can have with someone different to '[des] gens comme tout le monde' (III, 429).

The awkward feelings Charlus causes the group is, strangely, part of what attracts them to him, and both the awkwardness and the attraction have mental and physical qualities. The language used to describe the group's interest in Charlus constantly blurs the two. Although Proust uses the term 'gêne' for their underlying feeling, English translators opt not for "embarrassment", but rather for the word 'qualms',⁴⁴ which, like awkwardness, is a physical as well as a psychological phenomenon: it can indicate the feeling of apprehensive uneasiness, or the sudden sensation of faintness or sickness. Proust finds ingenious ways to suggest the group's interest in Charlus as a combination of conscious thought as well as bodily sensation – as affect, if you will – and the language he employs continues to underscore the paradoxically unsettling nature of their attraction, through the motifs of taste and smell. Charlus's 'étrangeté' adds 'une saveur' to 'la conversation du baron, d'ailleurs remarquable, mais en des parties qu'ils ne pouvaient guère apprécier' (III, 428).⁴⁵ His presence, 'auprès de soi', is like a 'boîte de provenance exotique et suspecte qui laisse

⁴⁴ *Sodom And Gomorrah*, p. 508.

⁴⁵ For more on the way Proust links homosexuality and the sense of taste, see Joseph Litvak, 'Strange Gourmet: Taste, Waste, Proust', *Studies in the Novel*, 28:3 (1996), pp. 338-356.

échapper la curieuse odeur de fruits auxquels l'idée de goûter seulement vous soulèverait le cœur' (III, 429). In this latter quotation, this 'boîte' provides us with a sensorily-rich conception of the "closet" which challenges the binary of attraction/repulsion as well as in/out. The known secret of Charlus's homosexuality is at the same time intriguingly 'exotique' et disconcertingly 'suspecte', and the deliberately ambiguous phrasing of 'curieuse odeur' and 'soulèverait le cœur' suggest the ambivalent appeal which Charlus exerts on the group.⁴⁶ The narrator shows us more about these awkward feelings, and their development over time, through the depiction of Charlus's relationship with Cottard and Brichot. Furthermore, as two of the only characters in the novel who have jobs – Cottard is a doctor and Brichot is an academic – their interactions with Charlus allow Proust to explore the relation between social and professional judgements.

Although rich scholarship exists on the theme of medicine in the *Recherche*,⁴⁷ relatively little attention has been given to the character of Dr. Cottard, and even less to the relational dynamic between him and Charlus. Brought together, the value of existing critical commentary on Cottard is the way it points toward the paradox of his character: an 'imbécile illettré'⁴⁸ who is nonetheless a 'marvelous clinician',⁴⁹ one scholar goes so

⁴⁶ With regards to 'soulèverait le cœur', Sedgwick approves Scott Moncrieff's translation of it as 'stirs the heart' and disapproves that 'Kilmartin doughily corrects it to "would turn the stomach"'. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 224.

⁴⁷ For three book-length studies on the treatment of medicine in Proust's writing, see; Serge Béhar, *L'Univers médical de Proust* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), Robert Soupault, *Marcel Proust du côté de la médecine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967) and Bernard Strauss, *The Maladies of Proust: Doctors and Disease in his Life and Work* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1980).

⁴⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Proust et les signes*, p. 130.

⁴⁹ 'Entry 137. F.C. Green on a new psychology 1931', in Leighton Hodson, ed., *Marcel Proust*, p. 400.

far as to call him ‘the ineffable Cottard’.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, I wish to suggest that while study has been made of the humour caused by Cottard’s many moments of ignorance,⁵¹ this character demonstrates a perspicacity in his interactions with Charlus: moreover, little study has been made of why Cottard is wary of Charlus, and I argue that it is because of the challenge Charlus’s stiffness poses to Cottard’s eagerness to be a joker.

The narrator emphasises how, in contrast to the other devotees, Cottard is reluctant to incorporate Charlus into their social group, and this reluctance is perceived by Charlus. The protagonist recalls Cottard’s reaction the first time they saw Charlus boarding the train: ‘[il] avait voulu que nous le laissions seul dans son compartiment’ (III, 425). When the group insist, on another occasion, to join Charlus’s carriage, they are ‘guidés par Cottard, toujours perplexe’ (III, 426). The significance of the word ‘perplexe’ is cloudy, here: is Cottard puzzled by Charlus’s homosexuality, or is he perplexed that Charlus should exert such a strong appeal on the members of the group? A tension is established, not simply between the two men, but between them in relation to the rest of the devotees. Charlus, sensing that Cottard is loathe to include him, immediately transfers this ostracism back onto the doctor: he holds out his hand to each member of the group, in greeting, but gives Cottard nothing more than ‘une inclinaison de tout le corps, aussitôt vivement redressé’, and even refuses ‘la main que le docteur lui avait tendue’ (III, 426).

⁵⁰ Christopher Prendergast, *Mirages and Mad Beliefs: Proust the Skeptic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 11.

⁵¹ As well the article by David Ellison (1983), referenced in the introduction to this chapter, see Christian Morin’s article, ‘Un amour de Swann, un amour comique?’, *La comédie de l’amour. Actes du colloque du CORHUM organisé en 2005 par Lucie Joubert* (2006) <<https://uottawa.scholarsportal.info/ojs/index.../356>> [accessed 15 December 2015].

Quite stunning is the way that Charlus is able to perceive ‘l’hésitation de Cottard’ (III, 426), without even having lifted his eyes when the group entered the carriage. Dealing with such improbable perspicacity, the narrator explains that ‘comme les sourds-muets reconnaissent à un courant d’air, insensible pour les autres, que quelqu’un arrive derrière eux, [Charlus] avait pour être averti de la froideur qu’on avait à son égard, une véritable hyperacuité sensorielle’ (III, 426). This observation again evokes a connection between awkward feelings and ‘la froideur’, but more striking still is the way that Charlus is being described in the medical language of disability, ‘comme les sourds-muets’, and how this motif sits with the theme of awkwardness. Within the rapidly expanding field of disability studies⁵², scholars draw on the language of awkwardness to describe both the physical movements of disabled individuals and the reaction to such individuals by those who are able-bodied, who display ‘averted eyes or stolen glances, pinched smiles, awkward or overeager helpfulness – in other words, discomfort accompanied by the struggle to pretend there [is] none’.⁵³ Charlus is not physically disabled, but the narrator’s comparison of him to a “deaf-mute” suggests that he is *socially disabled*, which is to say that he is impaired in some way, and this impairment is met with awkward feelings by his society acquaintances. While this little-commented phrase could be appropriated within existing scholarly arguments about Proust’s portrayal of homosexuality as a diseased race,⁵⁴ let us remember that the

⁵² For an introduction to this field, see Lennard J. Davis, ed., *The Disability Studies Reader*, Fourth Edition (New York: Routledge, 2013).

⁵³ Marsha Saxton, ‘Disability Rights and Selective Abortion’, in Lennard J. Davis, ed., *The Disability Studies Reader*, p. 88.

⁵⁴ For a fascinating study of this, in relation to the novel’s treatment of Judaism, see Jonathan Freedman, ‘Coming out of the Jewish Closet with Marcel Proust’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 7:4 (2001): 521-51.

passage it features in is concerned with the dynamic between Charlus and the group, and let us return to this.

My suggestion is that while Charlus's homosexuality makes him intriguingly exotic to the rest of the group, as a doctor Cottard views the homosexual as a biological phenomenon like any other: we recall, after all, that Cottard calmly points out to the protagonist, 'du point de vue spécial du médecin' (III, 191), the pleasure Albertine and Andrée naturally take from the rubbing of their breasts when they waltz together. If Cottard feels uncomfortable about incorporating Charlus into the group, it is less for moral reasons than because of his ego: Cottard's *raison d'être* is to be the comedian of the group, but Charlus poses a threat to this, because, as Cottard diagnosed in their first meeting, 'il ne doit pas être commode tous les jours' (III, 323). Whereas with the rest of the group Cottard has absolute confidence in his capacity to make them laugh,⁵⁵ his jokes risk falling flat when Charlus is present, both because the group's attention is diverted from him, and because Charlus responds coldly to Cottard's joviality. It is far easier for Cottard to entertain the group with jokes about the sexual predilections of Charlus when he is absent, than to be successfully witty about some other subject when he is amongst them. Indeed, Cottard is uncomfortable about anybody in the group making jokes in front of Charlus, and the delight he takes in puns is dampened by his uneasiness about how Charlus might respond:

Chateaubriand aux pommes? interrompit le docteur Cottard. – C'est lui le patron de la confrérie, continua Brichtot sans relever la plaisanterie du docteur, lequel en revanche, alarmé par la phrase de l'universitaire, regarda M. de Charlus avec inquiétude. Brichtot avait semblé manquer de tact à Cottard, duquel le calembour avait amené un fin sourire sur les lèvres de la princesse Sherbatoff. (III, 438)

⁵⁵ As Deleuze points out, in the Verdurin salon, 'Cottard fait signe qu'il dit quelque chose de drôle, Mme Verdurin fait signe qu'elle rit' (in Gilles Deleuze, *Proust et les signes*, p. 13).

The combination of the terms ‘alarmé’, ‘inquiétude’ and ‘manquer de tact’, stresses the intensity with which Cottard feels Charlus’s presence as a strain on the group, not because he risks corrupting their morals, but because he threatens Cottard’s comedic morale. As early as the first volume, and in ‘Un Amour de Swann’, we saw Mme Verdurin’s disquiet when Cottard made a joke, and ‘Toute la table éclata de rire’ (I, 250), except for one guest: ‘elle remarqua que seul Swann ne s’était pas déridé’ (I, 250).

As an academic, Brichot’s awkward feelings vis-à-vis Charlus are primarily caused by his difficulty in understanding the mind of the homosexual. It is true that by the novel’s fifth volume, *La Prisonnière*, the visibility of Charlus’s homosexuality is disconcerting for any of his social acquaintances: when Brichot and the protagonist encounter him en route to a reception hosted by the Verdurins, Charlus ‘traînant sans le vouloir à sa suite un de ces apaches ou mendigots que son passage faisait maintenant infailliblement surgir même des coins en apparence les plus déserts’ (III, 709). But as the narrator points out, because Brichot is so blind, he probably doesn’t see this. Indeed, the narrator stresses that ‘Il importait peu, du reste’ (III, 709), whether or not Brichot is aware of the young men trailing Charlus, ‘car depuis la Raspelière, et malgré l’amitié que l’universitaire avait pour lui, la présence de M. de Charlus lui causait un certain malaise’ (III, 709). This ‘malaise’ is not caused by what Brichot perceives as the strangeness of Charlus’s sexual practices, but rather by the strangeness of Charlus’s mind: ‘Les grosses plaisanteries de Brichot, au début de son amitié avec le baron, avaient fait place chez lui, dès qu’il s’était agi non plus de débiter des lieux communs, mais de comprendre, à un sentiment pénible’ (III, 710). The term ‘comprendre’ is

crucial: while social interaction is performative – ‘débitier des lieux communs’ – when social acquaintances become friends, individuals seek a more profound understanding of one another. Brichot takes the approach of a historian, trying to apprehend Charlus’s passion for men by reading ‘des pages de Platon, des vers de Virgile’ (III, 710), but as the narrator points out, ‘M. de Charlus lui-même ne l’eût pas compris’ (III, 710) – that is, how his ‘manie’ is quite different to the homosexuality practiced in antiquity, ‘l’homosexualité de coutume’ (III, 710). Brichot feels uneasy, not about what Charlus does with his body, but rather about the workings of a mind so alien to his own: ‘des mœurs mauvaises [...] elles effrayent parce qu’on y sent affluer la folie, bien plus que par moralité’ (III, 709). Ultimately, it is one’s mind rather than one’s morals which risk being punished by social exclusion: ‘Il n’est pas, en effet, d’exil au pôle Sud, ou au sommet du Mont-Blanc, qui nous éloigne autant des autres qu’un séjour prolongé au sein d’un vice intérieur, c’est-à-dire d’une pensée différente de la leur’ (III, 716).

Brichot feels uneasy in the presence of Charlus because, having developed a rapport with him,⁵⁶ it is now difficult to extract himself, and as such, although he sees Charlus as the embodiment of ‘la folie’, he is forced to pretend that the conversations they have are quite normal. The narrator expands on this particular form of awkwardness, of pretending that there is nothing out of the ordinary, even when one is faced with a madman, with an extended analogy. An individual like Charlus may have an extraordinary aesthetic sensibility, but,

⁵⁶ For a discussion of Brichot and Charlus’s shared passion for ‘étymologies et généalogies’, see Antoine Compagnon, *Proust entre deux siècles* (Paris: Seuil, 2013).

Cela ne dispense pas les gens sains d'avoir peur quand un fou qui a composé un sublime poème, leur ayant expliqué par les raisons les plus justes qu'il est enfermé par erreur, par la méchanceté de sa femme, les suppliant d'intervenir auprès du directeur de l'asile, gémissant sur les promiscuités qu'on lui impose, conclut ainsi: "Tenez, celui qui va venir me parler dans le préau, dont je suis obligé de subir le contact, croit qu'il est Jésus-Christ. Or cela seul suffit à me prouver avec quels aliénés on m'enferme, il ne peut pas être Jésus-Christ, puisque Jésus-Christ c'est moi!" Un instant auparavant on était prêt à aller dénoncer l'erreur au médecin aliéniste. (III, 711)

The tensions in this scenario are manifold. In the first instance, the 'fou' is not recognised as such, because he is talented ('un sublime poème'), articulate ('ayant expliqué par les raisons les plus justes') and moral ('gémissant sur les promiscuités'). In the second, initially his reasoning appears to resemble that of the ordinary man and to be just ('Tenez, celui qui [...] croit qu'il est Jésus-Christ [...] cela seul suffit à me prouver avec quels aliénés on m'enferme'). Because of the man's qualities, and the quality of his reasoning, we receive all the greater shock to realise how mad he is ('Jésus-Christ c'est moi!') and equally how thoroughly deceived we were, to the point that 'Un instant auparavant on était prêt à aller dénoncer l'erreur au médecin'. Indeed, the awkwardness is produced by the sudden halt one is brought to, having being taken along a certain conversational path believing all was well, only to discover that one has been led astray. Unlike a visitor to an asylum, Brichot has no easy way of extracting himself from any further interaction with Charlus, and because they continue to see one another, the awkwardness is perpetuated and even aggravated, as Charlus becomes more confident in their friendship.

Charlus has become embarrassingly indiscreet on the subject of homosexuality – 'Il débordait maintenant dans ses propos' (III, 712) – and this affects all of his social acquaintances, but it causes particular discomfiture for Brichot, because Charlus speaks to him as though they share the same vice. Brichot can do little to steer the topic onto

another, because what constitutes their conversation is in fact Charlus's extended speeches which give Brichot scant chance to intervene:

C'est comme ça, Brichot, que vous vous promenez la nuit avec un beau jeune homme? dit-il en nous abordant, cependant que le voyou désappointé s'éloignait. C'est du beau! On le dira à vos petits élèves de la Sorbonne, que vous n'êtes pas plus sérieux que cela. Du reste la compagnie de la jeunesse vous réussit, monsieur le professeur, vous êtes frais comme une petite rose. (III, 712)

In contrast to the way that, earlier in the novel, Charlus deliberately made other people feel awkward with malicious or ambiguous language, his comments to Brichot have a friendlier tone. The coldness we saw him so often display has been transformed into an eagerness for interaction: the phrase 'dit-il en nous abordant' stresses that it is he who approaches the protagonist and Brichot. The repetition of the term 'beau', to describe both the protagonist and the sight of Brichot with the protagonist, suggests that Charlus really does find a beauty in what he sees, furthered by the compliment he gives Brichot: 'la compagnie de la jeunesse vous réussit, monsieur le professeur, vous êtes frais comme une petite rose'. Even the comment which is likely to be most alarming for Brichot to hear, Charlus's suggestion that he will speak to Brichot's students about what he has seen, seems intended less as a threat than as a strange sort of compliment. Nonetheless, Brichot's uneasiness about Charlus's mind is sustained, and intensified, by this type of behaviour. Brichot's general discomfiture can be contrasted with the protagonist's exceptional distress, as the three men enter the Verdurins' house and the event begins. In the final section of this chapter, I focus on the protagonist's queasy feelings as he watches the Verdurins' plot against Charlus take form and is unable to

extract himself from the scenario: my argument is that a conflict between sympathy and self-interest produces a profound sense of awkwardness on his part.

2.3 Empathy

Charlus's embarrassing indiscretion in public, with strangers, causes consternation for the protagonist, who feels implicated simply through being present. Quite aside from his own discomfiture at Charlus's behaviour, the protagonist demonstrates anxiety about how others might react, and we see this anxiety through shifts from the narrator's voice into the first-person 'je' of the younger protagonist. When he and Brichot are approached by Charlus on the street, quite distinct from the narrator's commentary on Brichot's blindness to the ruffian trailing him (and his uneasiness about Charlus having little to do with this), the protagonist is concerned about what Brichot sees: 'je ne sais s'il avait aperçu le voyou attaché aux pas du baron' (III, 709). When the men enter the Verdurins' hallway and Charlus takes off his hat, the narrator's commentary on Charlus's deceptive appearance ('Son visage, loin de répandre, dissipait les mauvais bruits' (III, 731)) is again contrasted with the protagonist's personal response to Charlus's face:

Et pourtant, même sous les couches d'expressions différentes, de fards et d'hypocrisie, qui le maquillaient si mal, le visage de M. de Charlus continuait à taire à presque tout le monde le secret qu'il me paraissait crier. J'étais presque gêné par ses yeux où j'avais peur qu'il ne me surprît à le lire à livre ouvert, par sa voix qui me paraissait le répéter sur tous les tons, avec une inlassable indécence. (III, 731)

To the protagonist, Charlus's face is a mismatch, a clash of 'expressions différentes', and the use of the term 'fard' to describe the hypocrisy that is painted on it simultaneously suggests the protagonist's embarrassment to look at it: "piquer un fard" being a French idiom for the act of blushing. The effect Charlus's face has on the protagonist is so strong that it is not only described in visual terms, but as though it is an assault on his auditory senses also – 'le secret qu'il me paraissait crier' – and the

juxtaposition of ‘secret’ and ‘crier’ evokes the tension the protagonist is feeling, as though he anticipates a public outcry that might be directed against Charlus. As well as worrying about how ‘tout le monde’ will react to Charlus, what is most uncomfortable for the protagonist is how Charlus might react to him. The term ‘presque gêné’ suggests that while the protagonist has nothing to be ashamed about, he feels awkward in realising that if he can read Charlus’s face, perhaps Charlus will also be able to read his. Although the protagonist may be acting in self-interest, wanting to hide his own expression in ‘peur’ of Charlus’s wrath, an alternative interpretation is that he doesn’t want his embarrassment to be seen, because it would cause Charlus a sense of shame. In the German language, the term *fremdschämen* denotes an individual’s sense of shame for another person who has done something embarrassing,⁵⁷ but for the protagonist the scenario is even more complicated, because Charlus has no awareness of the strangeness of his behaviour – ‘[il] ne se rendait plus compte de ce qui se fait et ne se fait pas’ (III, 732) – and the protagonist does not want to be the person to set him straight, hence the anxiety to control his facial expressions. I use the expression “set him straight” as an extension of the narrator’s own metaphor, that ‘M. de Charlus perdait souvent maintenant ce qu’on appelle le nord’ (III, 732): Charlus has lost his bearings, he is moving in the wrong direction, in the wrong way, and thus into ‘danger’ (III, 716). Being able to do little to steer Charlus back to safety, the protagonist deems that the kindest, and less awkward, way to proceed is to do what he can to perpetuate Charlus’s delusion, and so he carefully asks after Morel, ‘pour avoir l’air à la

⁵⁷ ‘Fremdschämen’ in Dict.cc English-German Dictionary <<http://www.dict.cc/>> [accessed 14 December 2015].

fois de ne pas craindre de lui parler de Morel et de ne pas croire qu'il vivait complètement avec lui' (III, 718).

Charlus is as insolent as ever he was, if not worse – the narrator unsparingly recounts his disgraceful treatment of Mme. Verdurin throughout the evening⁵⁸ – but he also exhibits a new softness, at least intermittently, and this further complicates the protagonist's feelings towards him, especially as a bystander to the execution. Charlus is particularly kind to the protagonist throughout the party, and even paternal in certain moments. Without the protagonist having spoken, Charlus notices that he is uncomfortable outside in the cold:

Mais vous n'avez pas l'air bien et vous allez avoir froid dans cette pièce si humide, dit-il en poussant près de moi une chaise. Puisque vous êtes souffrant, il faut faire attention, je vais aller vous chercher votre pelure. Non, n'y allez pas vous-même, vous vous perdrez et vous aurez froid. (III, 792)

Not only does Charlus remark on the protagonist's state, he takes the trouble to give him a chair, and is even ready to go and fetch him a coat.⁵⁹ Although these seem like small gestures, the kindness contained in them becomes amplified when considered beside previous moments in the text. We recall, for example, how in *Sodome et Gomorrhe* Charlus refused to rise from his chair while speaking to Mme Verdurin (and, in the same volume, deliberately refrained from inviting Mme Cottard to take a chair beside him (III, 459)). Now, he insists upon the chair for the protagonist's comfort, and not as a form of seduction, but from a desire to look after him. The willingness Charlus has to

⁵⁸ Above all, he fails to introduce his guests to Mme Verdurin, and even when the evening ends, by all accounts a success, he commits 'la même erreur qu'à leur arrivée. Il ne leur demanda pas d'aller vers la Patronne, de l'associer elle et son mari à la reconnaissance qu'on lui témoignait' (III, 770).

⁵⁹ Charlus's gesture parallels a moment in the third volume of the novel when Saint-Loup jumps over the furniture in an overcrowded restaurant to offer the protagonist his own coat: a sequence of movements analysed by Patrick Ffrench's chapter 'Proust and the Analysis of Gesture' in *Proust and the Visual*, ed. by Nathalie Aubert (Cardiff: University of Wales Press), pp. 47-67.

fetch the coat himself, without ordering someone else to do it (finally it is Brichtot who goes for it, but only so as to keep Charlus away from Morel), provides a contrast with M. Verdurin's cruelty to Saniette earlier in the evening. After complaining about Brichtot's involuntary manifestation of poor health ('Comme vous soufflez!' (III, 733)), M. Verdurin encourages the servants to keep Saniette waiting in the cold, both indirectly ('La grossièreté de M. Verdurin eut pour effet que les hommes du vestiaire firent passer d'autres personnes avant Saniette' (III, 733)) and then deliberately ('Voilà des hommes d'ordre, voilà des compétences. Très bien, mes braves' (III, 733)). So Charlus's kindness to the protagonist stands in contrast to his own past behaviour, but also to the conduct of the Verdurins, who are increasingly vicious with those they are closest to, 'le désir de brouiller [...] rendu presque furieux par les mois passés à la Raspelière, où l'on se voyait du matin au soir' (III, 734). Charlus not only shows an attentiveness to the protagonist's delicate health, but also to his happiness. When the protagonist mentions his interest in the porcelain crockery he saw at La Raspelière, and although Charlus understands it will be 'moins commode' (III, 731) for the Verdurins to bring it out again tonight, nonetheless he will insist upon it for the sake of the protagonist's pleasure: 'il demanderait qu'on me montrât ce que je voudrais' (III, 731). But if Charlus's gesture is intended to please the protagonist, it has the opposite effect: the protagonist feels awkward at the idea of such trouble being taken on his account, and pleads with Charlus 'de n'en rien faire' (III, 731).

While Charlus has become somewhat less egotistical, particularly towards the protagonist, the protagonist is more self-absorbed than ever, because of his worries about Albertine: this puts a further strain on his compassion towards Charlus as the

victim of a plot, because he is desperate to pump Charlus for information about Mlle Vinteuil. Furthermore, the information he seeks, and which Charlus supplies, causes such ‘affreuse douleur’ and ‘souffrance’ (III, 728), that the protagonist cannot but help resent him for it. The narrator hints at this resentment through a language of frustration, when Charlus, having answered the protagonist’s question about Mlle Vinteuil’s, veers off course into a self-indulgent speech about homosexuality more widely.

L’insistance avec laquelle M. de Charlus revenait toujours sur le sujet – à l’égard duquel, d’ailleurs, son intelligence, toujours exercée dans le même sens, possédait une certaine pénétration – avait quelque chose d’assez complexement pénible. Il était raseur comme un savant qui ne voit rien au delà de sa spécialité, agaçant comme un renseigné qui tire vanité des secrets qu’il détient et brûle de divulguer, antipathique comme ceux qui, dès qu’il s’agit de leurs défauts, s’épanouissent sans s’apercevoir qu’ils déplaisent, assujetti comme un maniaque et irrésistiblement imprudent comme un coupable. (III, 809)

The protagonist’s frustration is expressed directly, in the term ‘complexement pénible’, but also in the extended description which captures his shifts of feeling during the speech: on the one hand Charlus displays ‘intelligence’ and ‘pénétration’, on the other he is a ‘raseur [...] agaçant’, and on the third hand he is like a ‘maniaque’ or a ‘coupable’. Finally, the protagonist acknowledges that if he finds Charlus’s comments ‘pénible[s]’, it is because he cannot help but ‘tirer d’elles des déductions à l’égard d’Albertine’ (III, 809). What he doesn’t acknowledge directly, but is suggested throughout the entire scene, is that the protagonist’s complicated feelings about Charlus are caused by an identification that lies beneath his sympathy. Because the protagonist is so preoccupied with his own tortured affair with Albertine, he cannot but help see something of himself in Charlus, and this is uncomfortable for him.

Like Charlus, the protagonist is as intellectually gifted as he is exasperatingly obsessive, and if he judges Charlus for ‘L’insistance avec laquelle [il] revenait toujours sur le [même] sujet’ (III, 809), he cannot be unaware that this is exactly what he himself does, returning time and again in his mind and in his words to the subject of Albertine and her assignation with Mlle Vinteuil. The protagonist’s fascination with Charlus’s feelings (for Morel), can thus be understood as a fascination with his own (for Albertine). Hence when Morel is performing, and a lock of his hair falls down onto his brow, the protagonist is compelled to turn his attention to Charlus: ‘Je tournai imperceptiblement la tête vers le public pour me rendre compte de ce que M. de Charlus avait l’air de penser de cette mèche’ (III, 756). After the concert, the protagonist’s interest in such a seemingly incidental moment is proved to have been incredibly prescient – for Charlus, it was the climax of the performance and his emotion:

Avouez, Brichtot, qu’ils ont joué comme des dieux, Morel surtout. Avez-vous remarqué le moment où la mèche se détache? Ah! bien alors, mon cher, vous n’avez rien vu. On a eu un *fa* dièse qui peut faire mourir de jalousie Enesco, Capet et Thibaud [...] Et alors, tout d’un coup, s’écria M. de Charlus avec emphase et en mimant comme un coup de théâtre, alors... la Mèche! Et pendant ce temps-là, gracieuse petite contredanse de l’allegro vivace. Vous savez, cette mèche a été le signe de la révélation, même pour les plus obtus. (III, 791)

Although Charlus states the importance of Morel’s curl was obvious ‘même pour les plus obtus’, the only other character who noticed it was the protagonist. We can understand why he alone was sensitive to it, when we recall the protagonist’s fixation on Albertine’s hair at the beginning of *La Prisonnière*: ‘chaque matin, le crespelage de ses cheveux me causa longtemps la même surprise [...] Le sourire propose plus d’amitié; mais les petits crochets vernis des cheveux en fleurs, plus parents de la chair dont ils semblent la transposition en vaguelettes, attrapent davantage le désir’ (III, 528). The

curl in the beloved's hair is a symbol – for Charlus, desire's wick, or fuse, for the protagonist, desire's hook – and if the parallel drawn between the men's obsessions wasn't already clear enough, the protagonist comments again on Albertine's hair later in the same volume, this time while she, like Morel, is playing music: 'Et pendant qu'elle jouait, de la multiple chevelure d'Albertine je ne pouvais voir qu'une coque de cheveux noirs en forme de cœur, appliquée au long de l'oreille...' (III, 874).⁶⁰ I draw attention to this imagery, not to comment on a transposition of the sexes in the *Recherche*,⁶¹ or the way desire and vision are linked,⁶² but rather to show the empathetic thread that links the protagonist to Charlus. There are further examples, in a variety of forms. When Charlus is speaking of his confidence in Morel's affection for him, the parenthetical interjection of the protagonist's own thoughts, in the middle of Charlus's sentence, suggest that the men's anxieties overlap: 'Vous savez qu'il est pour moi, continua le baron, un bon petit camarade, pour qui j'ai la plus grande affection, comme je suis sûr (en doutait-il donc, qu'il éprouvât le besoin de dire qu'il en était sûr?) qu'il a pour moi' (III, 719). The plot itself ties a knot between them, with both men grieved by a letter exchanged between Léa and Morel: Charlus is 'plongé dans la douleur' (III, 720) when he opens it by mistake, and the protagonist caused 'de cruels chagrins' (III, 720) by its repercussions. Above all, on the evening in question the protagonist is placed into an empathetic perspective towards Charlus because he fears Mme Verdurin's power

⁶⁰ We see yet another reference to Albertine's single lock of hair, when the protagonist enters her room to look upon her sleeping: 'Dans la chambre sombre, je ne voyais rien que, sur la blancheur de l'oreiller, un mince diadème de cheveux noirs' (III, 889).

⁶¹ For an argument of this kind, which comments on the protagonist's attraction to non-gendered physical aspects of Gilberte and Albertine, see Justin O'Brien's article, 'Albertine the Ambiguous: Notes on Proust's Transpositions of Sexes', *PMLA*, 64:5 (1949), pp. 933-952.

⁶² For a discussion of Charlus and how 'le désir est conceptualisé en termes de vision', see Sophie Duval, 'Une Question de vision: Charlus, roi Lear et célibataire de l'art' in Adam Watt, ed., *Le Temps retrouvé Eighty Years After/80 ans après: Critical Essays / Essais critiques* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 39.

over Albertine, ‘qu’elle n’entreprît auprès d’elle, si elle n’avait déjà commencé, le même travail pour la séparer de moi que son mari allait, à l’égard de Charlus, opérer auprès du violoniste’ (III, 785).

The protagonist cannot but feel empathy for Charlus, and even compassion, that is the desire to help, but he is unable to act upon it, and for this reason the way the situation unfolds is incredibly uncomfortable for him. It is quite true that he is not the only person to feel pained as Mme Verdurin’s plot against Charlus unfolds. But while Brichot, at first, ‘semblait avoir quelques hésitations’ (III, 784), Mme Verdurin quickly removes his ‘derniers scrupules’ (III, 784) about being involved (III, 784), by calling for loyalty to her rather than to Charlus (III, 785). And although Brichot laments, after agreeing to be involved with the plan, that ‘la pensée que le pauvre baron ignore encore le coup qui va le frapper me fait une grande peine’ (III, 785), he is quite capable of detaching himself from this uneasiness through academic pontification: ‘Le Devoir moral’, begins his impromptu lecture, ‘est moins clairement impératif que ne l’enseignent nos Éthiques...’ (III, 787). But the protagonist is not so capable of suppressing his feelings, because even though he is just as conscious of Charlus’s faults, and especially the insolence he has shown Mme Verdurin, this doesn’t make the execution plan any easier to swallow: ‘Celle-ci ne diminua en rien la grande et affectueuse pitié que m’inspirait M. de Charlus (depuis que Mme Verdurin avait dévoilé son dessein devant moi)’ (III, 794). To describe the protagonist’s predicament as awkward is not to flatten the intensity of his feelings, but rather to highlight that they leave him conflicted: between a profound empathy for Charlus (‘l’idée des souffrances qu’on préparait à M. de Charlus m’était intolérable’ (III, 795)) and a sense of his own

inability to help him ('J'aurais voulu le prévenir, ne savais comment le faire' (III, 795)). This awkwardness is paralleled on a narrative level, in the protagonist's thrice-thwarted attempt to leave, delayed first by Brichot (III, 787), then by Charlus (III, 798) and again by the Verdurins (III, 812). But more awkward than the physical impossibility of leaving the party, is the protagonist's psychological impossibility to gain catharsis for his negative emotions, because even his last hope is dashed: 'Ma seule consolation était de penser que j'allais voir Morel et les Verdurin pulvérisés par M. de Charlus' (III, 820), he says, only to see that he is 'muet, stupéfait, mesurant son malheur sans en comprendre la cause, ne trouvant pas un mot' (III, 820). This final, most awkward of awkward silences, denies the protagonist any purge of emotion: awkwardness, then, shows itself not only to be the product of a tension between two forces (empathy and the desire to flee, in this case), but also the result of an impasse – a lack of catharsis, which leaves empathy and self-interest clumsily wrestling with one another.

3. Speaking to Friends

The introduction to this thesis offered a brief assessment of psychological studies on awkwardness, research which suggests that the feeling is often catalysed in the process of dialogue, either through the act of speaking in difficult circumstances, or in commonplace discussions which go wrong. This chapter explores a variety of conversations which occur in the context of the protagonist's friendship with Saint-Loup and Bloch, and my analysis demonstrates a difference between Bloch as a clumsy conversationalist because of his propensity for gaffes and grandiloquence, and Saint-Loup as a disquieting conversationalist because of his tendency to dramatise and his deceitfulness. My argument is that Bloch causes social awkwardness by the way he speaks, while Saint-Loup provokes a more existential awkwardness: this is crucial to understanding why the protagonist's friendship with Bloch is sustained throughout the novel, despite their disputes, while his relationship with Saint-Loup deteriorates irremediably.

The previous chapter of this thesis focused on the awkwardness of holding or encountering a particular identity, while the concern here is with the awkwardness produced in the process of conversing with a friend. But because there is a strong link between these characters' personal unease about their identities (Bloch as a self-denying Jew, and Saint-Loup as a covert homosexual) and the awkward way they have of interacting and conversing, it is helpful to begin with a brief assessment of the men's identity complexes and how this affects their voice. This provides a firm foundation for the analysis which forms the main body of the chapter, where I look at the effect of these voices on the protagonist, and draw out the distinction between conversations

which are socially awkward because codes of etiquette are broken, and those which provoke a sense of “existential” awkwardness.

The critical consensus on Bloch is that his ineptitude as a conversationalist is caused by his self-consciousness as a Jew. Many critics go further, arguing that Proust, himself half-Jewish, used Bloch as a scapegoat for his own embarrassment: that Proust’s ‘anxiety over the idea of incurring neglect and rejection in the society he adored because he was Jewish [...] [is] externalized in his satirical depictions of Bloch’.¹ Because, as outlined in the introduction to this thesis, my methodology prioritises textual analysis rather than biographical readings, let us look more closely at scholarly arguments about Bloch’s identity and voice as a character in the novel, rather than an extension of the author. The *Recherche* depicts Bloch’s discomfort as a Jew in French society – hence his anti-semitic remarks, his claim to have only slightly Jewish roots, and his eventual adoption of a gentile name and appearance – and the way members of this society give him cause to feel uncomfortable: as well as deeply-ingrained, historical anti-Semitism, the Dreyfus Affair gives characters the chance to articulate their hostility. When Bloch brings up the subject in Mme de Villeparisis’s salon, he is publicly humiliated, first by M. d’Argencourt (‘C’est une affaire qui ne regarde que les Français entre eux, n’est-ce pas?’ (II, 543)) and again by Charlus (‘Excusez-moi, Monsieur, de ne pas discuter de Dreyfus avec vous, mais c’est une affaire dont j’ai pour principe de ne parler qu’entre Japhétiques’ (II, 544)), but with the assent of everybody present: ‘Tout le monde sourit’ (II, 544).

¹ Isabelle Monette Ebert, “‘The Premier Dreyfusard’: Jewishness in Marcel Proust”, *The French Review*, 67:2 (1993): 196-217, p. 212.

That Bloch's position in society is difficult is certain, but what is less clear is to what extent his awkwardness as a conversationalist – 'son excentricité, ses réponses bizarres, son manque de tact et sa vulgarité'² – is the unfortunate product of his best efforts to assimilate and sound less like a Jew, or a posture he assumes because he knows he can never be accepted in high society as "one of them". For Gilles Zenou, 'Bloch aspire au contrôle de soi, à la souplesse et au tact qui lui donneront un air respectable mais sa judéité qui figure tout ce qui relève de l'affectif en lui s'oppose à son désir d'assimilation'.³ There is certainly evidence for the argument that Bloch aspires to assimilation and even manages to believe, at times, that he has achieved it. In the aforementioned scene of Mme de Villeparisis's salon, in response to Charlus's comment, and despite 'l'habitude de prononcer des phrases ironiques sur ses origines juives' (II, 544), Bloch seems genuinely stunned to have been "outed": "'Mais comment avez-vous pu savoir? Qui vous a dit?' [...] son visage, son étonnement montrait quelque naïveté' (II, 544). But then again, Bloch's insistence on the topic of the Dreyfus Affair, the fact that having been humiliated by M. d'Argencourt's comment he nonetheless puts the same subject to Charlus, seems to confirm Julia Kristeva's argument, that 'De peur d'être persécuté, il s'autopersécute, il s'humilie'.⁴ Kristeva posits that Bloch's pompous and allusive language is his weapon, as an outsider, against the condescension of the clan: 'Le jargon est la voie obligée de l'étranger en français', '...quel autre comportement adopter?'.⁵ Bloch knows that he will always be treated as alien, and

² Gilles Zenou, 'Proust et la judéité', in *Europe: Revue Littéraire Mensuelle*, 705-706 (1988), p. 158.

³ Gilles Zenou, 'Proust et la judéité', p. 159.

⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Le temps sensible: Proust et l'expérience littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), p. 58.

⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Le temps sensible*, p. 55, 57.

therefore alienates himself in advance, ultimately as a form of masochism: ‘le gaffeur ne manquera de se faire persécuter, très au-delà de ce que valent ses gaffes’.⁶

It seems, then, that Bloch’s way of speaking is *both* a means of defence against his society, and an attempt to impress those around him and penetrate their social circles. Based on the critical comments above, and the passages from the *Recherche* I focus on below, Bloch’s awkwardness as a speaker – by which I mean his discourse as conspicuously at odds with that of his interlocutors – can be divided into two categories. First, Bloch’s gaffes, which can be described in general terms, as in Zenou’s summary of ‘ses réponses bizarres, son manque de tact et sa vulgarité’, but also more specifically, as in Genette’s analysis of Bloch’s mispronunciation, literalism, and naivety (which is, Genette argues, the cause of his vulgarity: ‘la naïveté et la grossièreté: c’est la même chose’⁷). Second, Bloch’s grandiloquence, which again can be swiftly summarised as ‘exaggeration, bluster’,⁸ as well as divided more specifically into his use of ‘un jargon d’écolier’ on the one hand, and ‘hellénismes dans le goût de Leconte de Lisle’⁹ on the other. It is the effect of Bloch’s gaffes and grandiloquence on his friendship with the protagonist which I will be focusing on in the first part of the chapter (3.1 Gaffes and Grandiloquence), while the second part of the chapter (3.2 Drama and Deceit) focuses on the protagonist’s uneasy conversations with Saint-Loup. The difference I want to draw out between the two men is indicated by these section titles: Bloch, for all his faults, and as embarrassing as he can be, is not a liar. Genette demonstrates that his

⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Le temps sensible*, p. 61.

⁷ Gerard Genette, *Figures II* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1969), p. 254.

⁸ Adam Watt, *Reading in Proust’s A la recherche*, p. 46.

⁹ Marcel Gutwirth, ‘Le narrateur et son double’, p. 926.

tendency to be honest, even about his lies, is partly willed, partly impulsive. On the one hand, Bloch is tactically confessional, his ‘usage homéopathique de la vérité dans le mensonge’ a ‘manœuvre consciente [...] à tenter d’écarter l’éventuel soupçon de l’interlocuteur en le fixant sur la petite part de vérité qu’on lui offre’.¹⁰ On the other, if Bloch often makes ‘l’aveu involontaire de sa judaïté’ it is because this is something ‘refusée, réprimée, et pour cette raison même irrépressible’.¹¹ Both of Genette’s examples focus on Bloch’s honesty (deliberate and inadvertent) in relation to his Jewish identity, while this chapter demonstrates that Bloch’s honesty – honesty to the point of it being a gaffe – is directed to other subjects in the course of his friendship with the protagonist, and I examine the awkwardness this creates.

When Saint-Loup is introduced to the novel in its second volume, he seems to be the ultimate foil to Bloch: the elegance of this aristocrat provides an immediate contrast with the Jewish gaffeur, and the protagonist marvels at how Saint-Loup is ‘le plus aimable, le plus prévenant jeune homme que j’eusse jamais rencontré’ (II, 91). Critics have been equally bewitched by Saint-Loup, with Laurence Bisson calling him ‘the incarnation of friendship, the type of the impossible “ideal friend”’,¹² and Jack Murray describing him as ‘one of Proust’s most endearing portraits’.¹³ But almost as soon as the protagonist has befriended Saint-Loup, he begins to feel awkward about this friendship because of the discussions they have. My argument is that Saint-Loup is a more

¹⁰ Gerard Genette, *Figures II*, p. 283.

¹¹ Gerard Genette, *Figures II*, p. 283.

¹² Laurence A. Bisson, ‘Marcel Proust: Friends and Friendship’, in *Essays presented to C. M. Girdlestone*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: University of Durham, 1960), p. 40.

¹³ Jack Murray, ‘Proust’s Robert de Saint-Loup and the Diagnostic Eye’, in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 6:1 (1964): 68-75 (p. 68).

disquieting interlocutor than Bloch because he is deceitful and, relatedly, because he treats conversation as “drama”: that is, when he speaks to the protagonist, it is a performance for a wider audience.

That Saint-Loup is deceitful is, of course, profoundly linked to his identity as a covert homosexual, and just as critics see Bloch’s *gaucherie* as a manifestation of Proust’s awkwardness about his Jewish identity, so too can Saint-Loup’s equivocality be understood as an expression of Proust’s own unease as a secret homosexual: ‘In arranging a homosexual fate for Saint-Loup, Marcel punishes himself; it is an act of confession and purgation’.¹⁴ Critics have expressed a variety of opinions about Saint-Loup’s transformation in the novel: not only the revelation that he is homosexual, but the more disconcerting fact that as his homosexuality surfaces, so too does a cruelty and coarseness to his nature, so different from the kind and elegant young man he once was (or seemed to be). Jack Murray argues that such a bewildering transformation is the product of ‘shortcomings in Proust’s representation of character’,¹⁵ because his ‘approach to the study of character relies, as many critics have observed, on the tradition of the French classical moralists’.¹⁶ But in contradistinction, Melvin Seiden suggests the text displays ‘a philosophical scepticism [sic] that cannot easily be reconciled with the certitudes of the moralist’,¹⁷ that Saint-Loup’s moral decline simultaneously allows his intellectual progression, and therefore ‘If we recognize Saint-Loup as a projection of what Marcel values most in himself, we can see in Robert’s

¹⁴ Melvin Seiden, ‘Proust’s Marcel and Saint-Loup: Inversion Reconsidered’, *Contemporary Literature*, 10:2 (1969), p. 237.

¹⁵ Jack Murray, ‘Proust’s Robert de Saint-Loup and the Diagnostic Eye’, p. 75.

¹⁶ Jack Murray, ‘Proust’s Robert de Saint-Loup and the Diagnostic Eye’, p. 70.

¹⁷ Melvin Seiden, ‘Proust’s Marcel and Saint-Loup: Inversion Reconsidered’, p. 231.

sodomy Marcel's way of confronting the moralist with the sceptic's questions. Do you dare sit in judgment of your friend's "decline"?'.¹⁸ This is a fascinating debate, but it does not take us much closer to understanding why the protagonist feels uneasy when he speaks with Saint-Loup early on in the friendship, before he knows Saint-Loup's secret (unless we reduce everything to his homosexuality). The explanation of one critic for this is that the awkwardness is not caused by Saint-Loup's 'facade of heterosexuality', but rather because of 'the guilty secret of the narrator's love for Saint-Loup'.¹⁹ Guenette argues that the men's conversations are necessarily awkward, because 'Straightforward discourse is not the province of the homosexual, who depends on veiled glances, half-truths and subtle hints'.²⁰ Although Guenette makes an interesting case, and distinguishes his focus on the narrator (as, he proposes, a homosexual character) from those critics who focus on Proust himself (the homosexual writer²¹), one cannot but help feeling that the foundation of his argument is indeed built on Proust's own biography.

The mature narrator, who knows Saint-Loup's secret, hints to the reader that his lies are not exceptions, that his whole character will turn out to have been a lie: but well before this revelation, the protagonist feels uncomfortable in his conversations with Saint-Loup, because even where it is not a matter of outright deceit, there is something performative, that is inauthentic, about the way Saint-Loup speaks to and about him.

¹⁸ Melvin Seiden, 'Proust's Marcel and Saint-Loup: Inversion Reconsidered', p. 232.

¹⁹ Mark D. Guenette, 'Le Loup et le Narrateur. The Masking and Unmasking of Homosexuality in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*', *Romanic Review*, 80:2 (1989): 229-46, p. 230.

²⁰ Mark D. Guenette, 'Le Loup et le Narrateur', p. 246.

²¹ Julius Rivers, *Proust and the Art of Love: The Aesthetics of Sexuality in the Life, Times and Art of Marcel Proust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

Some critics argue that this is not Proust's indictment of Saint-Loup himself, but rather of the very concept of friendship. Duncan Large makes an excellent summary of the protagonist's own complaints about friendship – 'it orientates the self outwards, towards the surface and superficial communication through conversation, which he dismisses as a waste of time and a failure to live up to one's responsibilities – significantly, one's responsibilities as an artist'²² – as well as pointing out how the protagonist's complaints about Saint-Loup's earnestness for things of the mind are a little unfair, considering that it is '*he* [...] who always has his nose in a book until he arrives in Balbec'.²³ But although the protagonist's friendship with Saint-Loup does indeed occur at a moment where the protagonist is more interested in social frivolities and girls than long discussions with friends, this still does not explain why he finds their conversations uncomfortable rather than simply tedious.

The most prominent aspect of Saint-Loup's identity, and voice, before he is uncovered as a homosexual, is the combination of his aristocratic social elegance with his rejection of aristocratic values: he is a republican, in a relationship with a Jewish woman, and uses fashionably slangy vocabulary to fit into her social group, which is comprised of proponents of modernist theatre. If initially the protagonist is impressed by this, he is soon disenchanted, and this quite before Saint-Loup turns his back on the egalitarianism and aesthetic modernism he once expounded. While Alison Finch proposes that 'Saint-Loup is the only socialist in the novel, and his fondness for the Narrator is not only that of the perfect gentlemanly companion but also in part stems

²² Duncan Large, 'Proust on Nietzsche: The Question of Friendship', *Modern Language Review*, 88.3 (1993): 612-24, p. 616.

²³ Duncan Large, 'Proust on Nietzsche', p. 616.

from a more political “comradeship”²⁴ my analysis shows that the protagonist starts to question Saint-Loup’s conduct very early on and not because of his politics. Priscilla Clark draws attention to the protagonist’s disillusionment, but falls back on the argument that the only issue is Saint-Loup’s uselessness to the protagonist as an artist: while his aristocratic mannerisms, habits and attitudes offer the protagonist ‘a gift of [Saint-Loup’s] past’,²⁵ this gift quickly loses its shine, because ‘*La politesse* is generalized behaviour, a reflex conditioned by generations past, lacking any contact with the present [...] The aristocracy’s relationship to the past is therefore ultimately a sterile one because it has no relation to the present.’²⁶ Duncan McColl Chesney, on the contrary, argues that Saint-Loup’s charm lies in his link to the past, and that although he fits imperfectly in the contemporary salon, ‘especially when he tries hardest to be “modern”’,²⁷ and disappoints the protagonist’s expectations, this gives way to a redemption of sorts: ‘Conversation and friendship were a trap, but one whose disappointments led to inner scrutiny.’²⁸ But my argument is that the protagonist’s disappointment with Saint-Loup is productive insofar as he comes to understand that the other cannot easily be scrutinised: however close one may be to a friend, however honorable this person might appear to be, a series of awkward conversations will soon reveal a clash of expectations, and eventually the whole show may crumble. Although

²⁴ Alison Finch, ‘Love, sexuality and friendship’, in Richard Bales, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Proust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 178.

²⁵ Priscilla P. Clark, ‘Proustian Order and the Aristocracy of Time Past’, *The French Review: Special Issue*, 47:6 (1974): 92-104 (p. 102).

²⁶ Priscilla P. Clark, ‘Proustian Order and the Aristocracy of Time Past’, pp. 102-103.

²⁷ Duncan M. Chesney, ‘Aristocracy and Modernism: Signs of Aristocracy in Marcel Proust’s *À la Recherche du temps perdu*’, *MLN*, 120:4 (2005): 871-95 (p. 889).

²⁸ Duncan M. Chesney, ‘Aristocracy and Modernism’, p. 891.

Saint-Loup's link to the theme of theatre has been discussed, with a suggestion even that he is 'sans doute le plus grand acteur de la *Recherche*',²⁹ the theatricality involved in his way of speaking (rather than in his way of moving) has gone uncommented. Focusing on the first three volumes of the novel, and dealing specifically with the early stages of the protagonist's friendships with Saint-Loup and Bloch, this chapter can be understood as an extension of the defence Kristeva made of Bloch's awkward social oratory, through its comparison with Saint-Loup, a much more disquieting conversationalist.

²⁹ André Benhaïm, 'Visages d'étoiles. Scènes, masques et coups de théâtre de Marcel Proust', in Romana Goedendorp and Sief Houppermans, eds., *Marcel Proust Aujourd'hui*, 4 (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006): 29-50 (p. 38).

3.1 Gaffes and Grandiloquence

It is easy to forget just how fond of Bloch the protagonist is at the beginning of their friendship, and that his affection is strongly based on Bloch's qualities as a conversationalist. As such, I wish to begin by highlighting what exactly it is that the protagonist appreciates about their discussions. Adam Watt discusses their early scenes in terms of the protagonist 'Learning to Read'³⁰ – that is, it is Bloch who gives him a book by Bergotte – but I think we can also understand the boys' interaction as a crucial part of the protagonist's "learning to converse". Bloch is introduced to the novel as a speaker. Although his first appearance in *Du côté de chez Swann* centers on the social awkwardness that occurs when Bloch meets the protagonist's family, it is striking that this is framed by the positive personal effect his words have on the speaker. At its beginning, the protagonist explains that 'J'avais entendu *parler* de Bergotte pour la première fois par un de mes camarades' (I, 89), and at its end, despite his gaffes with the family, the protagonist insists in a single-line paragraph that 'au sujet de Bergotte il avait *dit vrai*' (I, 92). Furthermore, this is the first conversation we see the protagonist having with someone with no connection to his family, and as I highlighted in Chapter One, the protagonist finds it difficult to speak to his parents; they are indirect (his 'impulsion nerveuse' is alluded to, but 'on ne prononçait pas ce mot') and taciturn ('on ne m'adressait plus la parole pendant plusieurs jours' (I, 35)), his father speaks about him rather than to him ('cet enfant est idiot, il deviendra affreux' (I, 406)) and his mother avoids speaking by reading a book aloud instead (I, 38). Furthermore, even when his family are conversing naturally, the protagonist is excluded by the subject of

³⁰ Adam Watt, *Reading in Proust's A la recherche*, pp. 45-72.

their discussion, which is invariably that of social commentary, even by the cerebral grandmother, who ‘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!”’. The protagonist is neither mature nor worldly enough to participate in such conversations, and like any adolescent he is interested in personal experience and entertainment, hence the discussions he seeks out with his schoolmates: ‘chaque fois que pendant les classes, je correspondais, aussitôt que le professeur avait la tête tournée, avec un nouvel ami, ma première question était toujours pour lui demander s’il était déjà allé au théâtre’ (I, 73). The only person external to the family with whom the protagonist might be able to have stimulating discussions is Swann, but Swann is the man who speaks without saying anything, a quality about which I will say more below. Indeed, in the paragraph prior to the first conversation with Bloch, we are told that Swann, seeing the protagonist reading Bergotte, offers him a ‘commentaire’ (I, 89): but we are not given any information on what Swann says (which is itself telling), only that the protagonist enters deeper into his own private fantasies. This makes for a striking contrast with Bloch, who challenges the protagonist’s habits and convictions in the course of their conversation.

Although Bloch’s way of speaking makes the reader cringe, for the young protagonist he is an impressive orator: he speaks in response to what the protagonist himself has said (‘En m’entendant lui avouer mon admiration pour la *Nuit d’Octobre*’ (I, 89)), he makes a proposal as well as offering a critique (‘Défie-toi de ta dilection assez basse pour le sieur de Musset [...] Lis donc ces proses lyriques’ (I, 89)), and this in a

spirit of friendliness and complicity between them, displayed through his use of the term ‘cher maître’ (I, 89). Indeed, although Bloch has vulgar mannerisms (‘un rire bruyant comme une trompette’ (II, 89)) and a critical spirit (‘ta dilection assez basse’), something about his tone pleases the protagonist, perhaps because he is friendly without being overly so: ‘C’est sur un ton sarcastique qu’il m’avait demandé de l’appeler “cher maître” et qu’il m’appelait lui-même ainsi. Mais en réalité nous prenions un certain plaisir à ce jeu, étant encore rapprochés de l’âge où on croit qu’on crée ce qu’on nomme’ (I, 89). By introducing this term of endearment with ‘un ton sarcastique’, Bloch gives himself and the protagonist a way of expressing their affection and their literary pretensions without becoming too self-conscious about it: it is part of the playfulness of their conversations, a ‘jeu’ in which they can take ‘plaisir’. Bloch’s approach – a self-aware grandiloquence – is the complete opposite to Saint-Loup’s, and when the latter speaks dramatically of his friendship with the protagonist as ‘la meilleure joie de sa vie’ (II, 95) with neither irony nor self-awareness, the protagonist finds this oppressive rather than endearing: ‘j’étais embarrassé pour y répondre’ (II, 95).

Of course it is not only the way Saint-Loup labels the friendship which makes the protagonist feel awkward about responding to, but the fact that the friendship itself leaves him unstimulated, because while Saint-Loup wants to spend ‘plusieurs heures chaque jour’ (II, 91) talking about literature, his manner is ‘un peu sérieux’ (II, 93) and the protagonist admits, ‘[il] m’ennuyait un peu’ (II, 92). In contrast, the protagonist holds a ‘grande admiration’ for Bloch, not only because his emphasis on literary style over subject is appealing radical – in contrast to Saint-Loup’s approach, ‘Ne jugeant chaque chose qu’au poids de l’intelligence qu’elle contient’ (II, 93), Bloch propounds

his theory of ‘le mérite suprême, de ne signifier absolument rien’ (I, 89) – but also because his own voice is an exercise in style. Even when critics lament Bloch’s grandiloquence, they are forced to acknowledge the element of genius within it: ‘Il croit spirituel de s’exprimer dans un jargon d’écolier, émaillé d’hellénismes dans le goût de Leconte de Lisle (le génie en moins!)’.³¹ We learn in the second volume that Bloch won the top prize in the prestigious *Concours général*, no doubt because of his capacity for compelling oratory. Indeed, what we can draw from this is that while a certain way of speaking might create social awkwardness, because it does not fit into the linguistic codes which others use and expect, in a different context the same voice is judged as displaying the utmost elegance. Furthermore, as one critic points out, despite sounding ‘ridiculous [...] Bloch is similar in this respect to Proust, who celebrated the wealth of possible styles available to the individual: both engage willfully in pastiche, celebrating the richness of language and literature’.³² But quite aside from the fact that Proust the writer clearly revels in the opportunity to pastiche Homer, or rather the Homeric style of Leconte de Lisle,³³ and that pastiche is an affectionate imitation of style, although Bloch sounds pompous when he speaks this way (as opposed to Proust writing this way), Bloch ironicises this pompousness.

We are told explicitly that Bloch’s instigation of the term ‘cher maître’ was made ‘sur un ton sarcastique’ (I, 89), but his whole speech to the protagonist here seems to be made with a certain irony on his part, talking in an affectedly literary way because they

³¹ Marcel Gutwirth, ‘Le narrateur et son double’, p. 926.

³² James F. Austin, *Proust, Pastiche, and the Postmodern or Why Style Matters* (Plymouth: Bucknell University Press, 2013), p. 138.

³³ Danièle Horwitz, ‘Bloch, porte-parole de Leconte de Lisle, dans *A la recherche du temps perdu*’, *Romance Notes*, 21:3 (1981): 270-5 (p. 138).

are talking about literature. The evidence for this is that when Bloch meets the family, although they find conversing with him awkward this is not because he speaks in *hellénismes*: far from it, in fact, because the family do not discuss literature, and Bloch does not speak in literary style. While in Bloch's own home, as depicted in the second volume of the novel, we see him revert to a more bombastic style, this isn't him being awkward (in the sense of deliberately clashing his voice against others) because the whole family speaks in the same way: his sisters 'avaient d'ailleurs adopté la langue de leur frère qu'elles parlaient couramment, comme si elle eût été obligatoire et la seule dont pussent user des personnes intelligentes' (II, 128-129). Now, we might well assume that this is a little bizarre or embarrassing for the protagonist to listen to, but his response suggests otherwise: 'Et les demoiselles Bloch s'écroulaient dans une tempête de rires. Je dis à leur frère combien de joies il m'avait données en me recommandant la lecture de Bergotte dont j'avais adoré les livres' (II, 129). It seems that to hear Bloch's family speaking together in his strange style reminds the protagonist why they are friends, because Bloch may be 'aussi vulgaire que lettré' (II, 129), and this may cause social awkwardness, but this does diminish from the fact that he is brilliantly literary.

Although Bloch does make verbal gaffes when he meets the protagonist's family, and is therefore culpable for the social awkwardness created, the family are guilty of judging him before he has even arrived and opened his mouth. In a general sense, he is prejudged as a Jew: the protagonist reveals (even as he claims that the family have no objections in principle to Jews) that his grandfather will likely subject Bloch to 'un interrogatoire dissimulé' (I, 90), before humming tunes from *La Juive* to amuse the family (and potentially embarrass the guest). But more specifically, Bloch will be

judged against the family's own Jewish friend, Swann.³⁴ The grandfather holds that the protagonist chooses the "wrong sort" of Jew, and the narrator elucidates the difference by showing the very different ways in which Swann and Bloch converse with the family.

Swann is at the same time the novel's most well-mannered character – and, paradoxically, one its most awkward conversationalists. He is not, like Bloch, obnoxious or a gaffeur, but for all his tact and elegance, a wearying interlocutor in quite a different way. This is not merely my assessment, but that of the protagonist's family. They adore Swann and the attention he pays them, not because he is 'un des membres les plus élégants du Jockey-Club, ami préféré du comte de Paris et du prince de Galles, un des hommes les plus choyés de la haute société du faubourg Saint-Germain' (I, 15), but on the contrary because they are quite ignorant of this: that is, because he is discreet rather than a boaster. They take pleasure in the wit he displays in telling stories about the world they know: 'racontant chaque fois une histoire nouvelle qui venait de lui arriver avec des gens choisis parmi ceux que nous connaissions, avec le pharmacien de Combray, avec notre cuisinière, avec notre cocher' (I, 17). This is what they seek from a conversationalist, and, as we shall see, what Bloch stubbornly refuses to engage in. However, once the family discover Swann's social prestige, they are eager for the conversations to be enriched. The protagonist's grandfather is 'curieux de tous les petits faits qui pouvaient l'aider à entrer par la pensée dans la vie privée d'hommes comme Molé, comme le duc Pasquier, comme le duc de Broglie' (I, 21), but Swann is more concerned with discussing an obscure passage in Saint-Simon's writings: and even with

³⁴ For an article focusing on the relation between Bloch and Swann as Jewish characters in the novel, see Henri Raczymow, 'Proust et la judéité: les destins croisés de Swann et de Bloch', *Pardès*, 21 (1995), pp. 209-22.

this, he becomes anxious, ‘regrettant de s’être laissé aller à parler même légèrement de choses sérieuses’ (I, 26). Even Swann’s great passion, art, is something he speaks about in the most neutral way possible, if at all: ‘Provoqué [...] à donner son avis, à exprimer son admiration pour un tableau, il gardait un silence presque désobligeant, et se rattrapait en revanche s’il pouvait fournir sur le musée où il se trouvait, sur la date où il avait été peint, un renseignement matériel’ (I, 16-17). While Swann does not give dishonest opinions, his pretence to have no opinion is a sort of dishonesty; his lack of engagement is ‘désobligeant’ for his hosts: and although he does pretend to be helpful in so far as supplying a factual detail like a date or a material, he is quite aware that this is neither the information which the interlocutor seeks, nor that which will be of any use to their aesthetic or intellectual advancement. Nonetheless, if the family find Swann’s manner of conversing frustrating at times, nonetheless he is a welcome guest because he allows the family to persist in their way of speaking.

While Bloch will make specific gaffes throughout the novel – and indeed, we are told in the second volume after he accidentally insults Saint-Loup’s uncle that ‘une “gaffe” était bien loin de paraître à Bloch chose à éviter’ (I, 135) – in his interaction with the protagonist’s family he is judged to be a gaffeur in a much broader sense, namely because he doesn’t adapt his way of speaking to theirs. My suggestion is that although Bloch clearly causes the family to feel awkward – because, specifically, he refuses to answer the father’s perfectly straightforward questions, displays an excess of emotion for the grandmother’s illness, and fails to apologise for turning up late – the narrator (that is, the matured protagonist who analyses the encounter in retrospect) hints that the family judge these “gaffes” too severely, and that they themselves are imperfect

conversationalists. Chesney, in reference to Bloch's gaffes at Mme de Villeparisis's tea party in a later volume, says that they 'serve negatively to accentuate the coherence and force of tacit social rules',³⁵ but my argument is that if the narrator shows us earlier on Bloch's interaction with the family, it is, in part, to accentuate the inconsistencies of such rules, even within the smallest social unit, that of kinship. On Bloch's first visit, the protagonist's father, 'le voyant mouillé, lui avait dit avec intérêt : Mais, monsieur Bloch, quel temps fait-il donc, est-ce qu'il a plu? Je n'y comprends rien, le baromètre était excellent' (I, 91). While Bloch's absurd reply is usually the focus of readers' attention – 'Monsieur, je ne puis absolument vous dire s'il a plu. Je vis si résolument en dehors des contingences physiques que mes sens ne prennent pas la peine de me les notifier' (I, 91) – my suggestion is that the narrator portrays an equal absurdity in the father's question. The father sees that Bloch is 'mouillé' and therefore knows quite well that it has been raining: the narrator further hints at the banality (rather than the irony) of the father's question by detailing that he asks it 'avec intérêt'. Indeed, if Bloch's supposed rejection of practical instruments like 'la montre et le parapluie' (I, 91) sounds rather pompous, this is surely to be contrasted with the father's pedestrian interest in 'le baromètre', and the whole family's ridiculous Saturday ritual of the clock. The family's annoyance that Bloch is half an hour late to lunch seems unjust, after all, considering their own weekly, gleeful disruption to others, when they take Saturday lunch an hour early, and mock the confused visitors who are turned away. The narrator mocks the ritual, but more especially the fact that the pleasure they take from it is the conversation it provides them. Every Saturday, the family feed one another cue lines ('Allons, encore

³⁵ Duncan M. Chesney, 'Aristocracy and Modernism', p. 882.

une heure et demie avant le déjeuner [...] vous oubliez que c'est samedi!' (I, 109), 'Comment, seulement deux heures? [...] vous savez bien que c'est samedi!' (I, 109-110)), and ask Françoise to recount the spurned visitor's bafflement: 'bien loin de nous plaindre de ses additions, elles ne nous suffisaient pas encore' (I, 110). The point is that if the family judge Bloch for his lateness and his supposed "indifference" to the clock, they themselves are equally capable of being preposterously self-indulgent in their adaptation of time according to their own social rituals.

Bloch makes the family feel awkward because he doesn't converse with them as social convention demands – that is, responding politely to the father's question, rather than undermining it – but also because his comments make them feel self-conscious. He describes the watch and the umbrella as 'platement bourgeois' (I, 91): and as the narrator shows, this is quite incisive. The father is indeed the embodiment of the bourgeois mentality: as one critic points out, he 'never finds anything more interesting to study than barometers. Among all of the many lightweight characters in *La Recherche*, this father must be one of the most striking'.³⁶ We see the grandmother imploring the father to allow the protagonist to play outside in the rain, to no avail. In contrast, Bloch not only cares little about the climate and the clock, but he also has an interest in cultures other than his own: he speaks of 'la pipe d'opium et du kriss malais' (I, 91). But whatever one's private interests, the ultimate principle of the bourgeois family is that the father's word is law: and for Bloch to contradict him, in whatever style or voice, makes him a gaffeur. But if Bloch seems to be a provocateur in so doing, we can recall that he shows a similar courage in expressing opinions contrary

³⁶ Joseph Brami, 'Strange Jewishness: Essay on the Treatment of Jewish Identity in Proust', in André Benhaïm, ed., *The Strange M. Proust* (London: Legenda, 2009), p. 53.

to his own father, who he loves dearly, and despite the friction this causes between them: ‘Bloch était mal à l’aise chez lui et sentait que son père le traitait de dévoyé parce qu’il vivait dans l’admiration de Leconte de Lisle, Heredia et autres “bohèmes”’ (II, 107). Furthermore, Bloch’s concern about reconciling his bohemian taste with his father’s distaste for it, underlined by the narrator’s comment that the approval of M. Bloch gives ‘autant de plaisir à mon camarade que si cinquante francs avaient été ajoutés à sa pension mensuelle’, contrasts with Saint-Loup’s rather unfeeling comments about his own father: ‘On me dit même qu’il aimait la littérature. Mais on ne peut pas savoir puisque ce qu’il entendait par littérature se compose d’œuvres périmées’. Although to speak this way is not a social gaffe, like Bloch’s way of speaking to the protagonist’s father, it is potentially just as uncomfortable for the protagonist to listen to, because it seems deeply disrespectful.

The other way in which the family consider Bloch a gaffeur is for the emotion he displays: again, there is nothing morally disquieting about this, but it goes against bourgeois social convention for a lunch guest to display his feelings. The narrator recounts how after lunch with the family one day, and in response to the grandmother’s comment that she feels a little ill, Bloch ‘avait étouffé un sanglot et essuyé des larmes’ (I, 91). Now, initially the family (and the reader, perhaps) judge that such displays of pained sympathy must be theatrics on Bloch’s part, particularly because he barely knows the grandmother: ‘Comment veux-tu que ça soit sincère, me dit-elle, puisqu’il ne me connaît pas’ (I, 91). But the narrator takes the trouble to explain, further on, that eventually the family change their opinion: ‘ils avaient fini par penser que les larmes que lui avait fait verser l’indisposition de ma grand’mère n’étaient pas feintes’ (I,

91). However, rather than finding this endearing, their opinion on Bloch becomes harsher, because even if his feelings are sincere, they find the manifestation of them uncomfortably excessive. Indeed, their realisation that Bloch is exceptionally caring only increases their disapproval of him as a friend for the protagonist:

Ils auraient préféré pour moi à Bloch des compagnons qui ne me donneraient pas plus qu'il est convenu d'accorder à des amis, selon les règles de la morale bourgeoise; qui ne m'enverraient pas inopinément une corbeille de fruits parce qu'ils auraient ce jour-là pensé à moi avec tendresse, mais qui, n'étant pas capables de faire pencher en ma faveur la juste balance des devoirs et des exigences de l'amitié sur un simple mouvement de leur imagination et de leur sensibilité, ne la fausseraient pas davantage à mon préjudice. (I, 92)

The language of equilibrium and duty – ‘pas plus qu'il est convenu’, ‘la juste balance’ – demonstrates the family's insistence on moderation: anything else, whether it is a lack of social etiquette, or an excess of tenderness, is uncomfortable for them. Yet for the protagonist, Bloch's excess is his appeal as a friend: if Saint-Loup's way of thinking and speaking is, as we have seen, similar to the family's (*‘Ne jugeant chaque chose qu'au poids de l'intelligence qu'elle contient’* (II, 93, emphasis mine)), Bloch is spontaneous and generous, with his gifts and with his language. The ‘corbeille de fruits’ Bloch offers the protagonist, is nothing compared with his extraordinary verbal gift, by which I mean both the extravagance of his voice, and the verbal encouragement he offers the protagonist. It is easy to forget that, while the protagonist's family treat his literary ambitions with wariness,³⁷ Bloch spurs him on. Indeed, when the protagonist doubts his capabilities (*‘Aussi, découragé, je renonçais à jamais à la littérature...’*) this is *‘malgré les encouragements que m'avait donnés Bloch’* (I, 171).

³⁷ For a discussion of the parents' contribution to the narrator's artistic developments, see Julie Grenet, ‘Separate but Equal: Complementary Influences of the Mother and Father on the Narrator's Development in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*’, *French Studies*, 61:1 (2010): 26-37.

The fatal gaffe which causes the family's exclusion of Bloch from the house is his indiscretion on the subject of sex, and specifically the sexual past of the protagonist's great-aunt. But even here, I want to make a defence of Bloch, a defence which the narrator himself hints at:

il ne m'avait assuré avoir entendu dire de la façon la plus certaine que ma grand'tante avait eu une jeunesse orageuse et avait été publiquement entretenue. Je ne pus me retenir de répéter ces propos à mes parents, on le mit à la porte quand il revint, et quand je l'abordai ensuite dans la rue, il fut extrêmement froid pour moi. (I, 92)

Now, while Bloch's comments are salacious, they occur in what is an "ordinary" conversation between two adolescent boys, about girls and sex. Bloch is not trying to slander the protagonist's great-aunt, but rather to use her as an example which will prove the point on which he is trying to enlighten the protagonist, that 'toutes les femmes ne pensaient qu'à l'amour et qu'il n'y en a pas dont on ne pût vaincre les résistances' (I, 92). Furthermore, the information becomes a gaffe when it is passed on to the adults, and there is only one person responsible for this, the protagonist himself. He feebly justifies himself, 'Je ne pus me retenir de répéter ces propos à mes parents', but this is not the first time he makes such a gaffe: earlier on, in the same volume of the novel, the protagonist causes the exclusion of his uncle from the family, because he talks to his parents about Adolphe's mistress, despite knowing that he should keep the information to himself.

3.2 Drama and Deceit

The protagonist's initial disappointment with Saint-Loup as a conversationalist has already been touched upon: he expects to find their friendship stimulating, but Saint-Loup's earnestness 'que pour les choses de l'esprit' (II, 92) and his judgement of the protagonist's tastes as 'frivoles' (II, 93) make him feel uncomfortable. However, in addition to the fact that time with Saint-Loup feels like time wasted, the protagonist is also increasingly disquieted by what appears to be inauthenticity on Saint-Loup's part. This is doubly disquieting, because the protagonist originally believed Saint-Loup to be the most sincere of individuals: sincere, even, to a fault. The narrator describes how Saint-Loup blushes at other people's errors (and specifically at Bloch's mispronunciations), 'comme si ç'avait été lui le coupable' (II, 97).³⁸ Although the protagonist finds this endearing as a sign that Saint-Loup's cares for the other's feelings, and some critics share this view, describing 'Saint-Loup's generous embarrassment on Bloch's behalf',³⁹ the problem is that when Saint-Loup blushes at another person's 'erreur mondaine', a reflex caused by his consciousness that 'l'autre aurait rougi si l'on s'en était aperçu' (II, 97), this becomes a potential indication to the gaffeur of their error. Feeling awkward, and letting this feeling show, produces the possibility for more awkwardness. Moreover, not long afterwards, the protagonist realises that 'cette sincérité naïve de son visage dont la peau laissait voir par transparence le brusque afflux de certaines émotions' (II, 474) is not mutually exclusive with a capacity for deception on Saint-Loup's part: 'comme un parfait comédien, il pouvait dans sa vie de régiment,

³⁸ For a discussion of how Saint-Loup's blushing at Bloch's mispronunciations becomes ambiguous in retrospect, see Murray, 'Proust's Robert de Saint-Loup and the Diagnostic Eye', p. 73.

³⁹ Daniel Karlin, *Proust's English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 133.

dans sa vie mondaine, jouer l'un après l'autre des rôles différents' (II, 474). In the analysis that follows, I examine the build up to this realisation, by analysing the awkwardness which occurs in the conversations between the two men. My argument is that to say the friendship with Saint-Loup 'simultaneously gives Marcel the experience of the world and demonstrates the vanity of that experience'⁴⁰ is true, but does not go far enough: the protagonist begins by finding Saint-Loup a little shallow, before realising that his conversation is constituted by multiple layers of deceit.

Saint-Loup has, like Bloch, a tendency to be excessive in his gestures towards the protagonist, and particularly in the way he speaks about him. While the protagonist's family disapproved of this behaviour by Bloch, they welcome it in Saint-Loup: the protagonist, however, finds it to be quite awkward at times, not socially, but personally. The protagonist explains that his grandmother adores Saint-Loup because of 'sa façon d'avouer sans aucun détour la sympathie qu'il avait pour moi' (II, 94), and this with 'une chaleur, un abandon qui ne connaissent pas les réserves et la froideur grâce auxquelles les jeunes gens de son âge croient généralement se donner de l'importance' (II, 94). It seems that Saint-Loup, being an aristocrat, is given more allowance to break the rules of social comportment than Bloch. While the grandmother previously suggested that Bloch, in his excessiveness, must be 'fou', she interprets Saint-Loup's gushing over the protagonist as literary, constituted of 'des mots qu'eussent contresignés "Sevigné et Beauséjour"' (II, 94). In fact, there is something overdramatic, even sycophantic, about the way Saint-Loup praises the protagonist, and even he seems to hear how ridiculous he sounds: "Tu es l'homme le plus intelligent

⁴⁰ Clark, 'Proustian Order and the Aristocracy of Time Past', p. 103.

que je connaisse, tu sais.” Il se reprit et ajouta: “Avec Elstir. Cela ne te fâche pas, n’est-ce pas?” (II, 405). In contrast, the protagonist takes a more balanced view of Bloch, acknowledging (to himself) that as well as saying ‘les choses les plus intelligentes’ (II, 128), he recounts in equal measure the idiotic ‘histoires de son père’, and these ‘pour la trentième fois’ (II, 128).

The protagonist begins to feel awkward about Saint-Loup’s excessive praise when he realises that his friend says these things for an audience: Saint-Loup’s way of speaking about and to the protagonist, in the company of his fellow soldiers at Doncières, makes his friend feel as though he is part of a performance. This does not cause the protagonist to feel socially awkward – indeed, Saint-Loup makes every effort to make his friend shine and to prevent him from falling into any gaffes – but instead the protagonist experiences a more profound and disquieting awkwardness, and it is the specificities of this feeling that I want to expose. In *Le Côté de Guermantes*, having arrived at the barracks, initially the protagonist expresses pleasure at the intensity of Saint-Loup’s affability: ‘j’étais touché de voir combien Saint-Loup se montrait autre à mon égard depuis que je n’étais plus seul avec lui et que ses amis étaient en tiers. Son amabilité plus grande m’eût laissé indifférent si j’avais cru qu’elle était voulue’ (II, 402). But it is extremely telling that the protagonist allows for the possibility, even as he rejects it, that Saint-Loup’s increased friendliness is for the sake of an audience: ‘ses amis étaient en tiers’. In the same passage, the rejected proposition is given more and more credibility. First, because Saint-Loup plays the director in the scene, prompting his star, the protagonist, to entertain while he himself checks the spectators are amused: ‘il surveillait du coin de l’œil s’ils produisaient chez ses amis l’effet sur lequel il avait

compté et qui devait répondre à ce qu'il leur avait annoncé' (II, 402). While the protagonist does not say so explicitly, the implication is that this is rather off-putting for him. The pressure he feels himself under is expressed rather in the narrator's analogy: 'La mère d'une débutante ne suspend pas davantage son attention aux répliques de sa fille et à l'attitude du public' (II, 402). Not only does the metaphor suggest how far from relaxing the scenario is for the protagonist, it also points to Saint-Loup's personal pride as motivation, rather than a genuine admiration for his friend. A few paragraphs later, in an analogy similar to that of the debutante and her mother the protagonist finds himself being stroked by Saint-Loup, 'comme un cheval arrivé le premier au poteau' (II, 405).⁴¹ Maarten van Buuren argues that it is unfair of the protagonist, some years later, to forget that 'c'est Saint-Loup qui, pendant des années et des années, a couru après lui, lui a donné toutes les marques d'une affection réelle et sincère',⁴² but as the narrator's commentary shows quite clearly, Saint-Loup's marks of affection are questioned by the protagonist early on, and make the observant reader more than a little queasy.

At a certain point, Saint-Loup's quietly determined direction of the group's conversation gives way to verbal gaucherie on his part, as he cries 'Comment, comment?' at the protagonist: 'pour me faire répéter, pour faire faire attention, et aussitôt se tournant vers les autres et se faisant, sans le vouloir, en les regardant avec un bon rire, l'entraîneur de leur rire' (II, 402). The thrice-repetition of the verb 'faire', along with its variation 'se faisant', emphasises just how directive Saint-Loup is of the

⁴¹ For an original article which studies the motif of the horse in the *Recherche*, and argues for its implication in the theme of homosexuality, see Marie Miguet-Ollagnier, 'Le Cheval: du réel à l'imaginaire dans l'œuvre de Proust', *Bulletin d'Informations Proustiennes*, 25 (1994), pp. 115-28.

⁴² Maarten van Buuren, 'L'amour proustien: Essai sur le 'cycle d' Albertine', in *Marcel Proust Aujourd'hui*, 5 (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007): 181.

conversation. Meanwhile, his staged laugh, ‘un bon rire’ designed to exact ‘leur rire’ shows us that for all of his aristocratic elegance elsewhere, here Saint-Loup is more like a Verdurin devotee, or Mme Verdurin herself. So while Bloch’s laughter is often a little insulting and always embarrassingly loud (II, 89), Saint-Loup’s laugh is more quietly unsettling, because it is a demand on his friends (rather, as in Bloch’s laugh at the protagonist’s literary interests, a response). The effect of Saint-Loup’s theatrics does not cause the protagonist social embarrassment, but rather an acute sense of self-consciousness which can be described as awkwardness. The protagonist explains, in the sentence which concludes the paragraph discussed above, how Saint-Loup’s behaviour makes him feel strangely self-aware: ‘De sorte que je m’apercevais tout d’un coup moi-même du dehors, comme quelqu’un qui lit son nom dans le journal ou qui se voit dans une glace’ (II, 402). The protagonist’s sudden clash of perspective – his eyes are directed towards the group, but his mind’s eye has become turned upon himself, as though focalised through the eyes of Saint-Loup and the others – brings us back to the relation between awkwardness and the gaze, the subject of my first chapter. There, I argued that at a certain age a child becomes conscious of himself from the “perspective” of other people, often through their literal gaze, and that this caused a feeling of awkwardness for the protagonist, because he worried about their judgements. Here, we are dealing with something slightly different: the protagonist does not feel awkward about how he is being judged (he is well-received by Saint-Loup’s friends, and he knows it), but rather by the experience of seeing that for these men, whether they like him or not, he has no interiority, he is to them an object, like newspaper print or a framed image.

Critics often emphasise how ‘Marcel appears primarily interested in Saint-Loup as a live specimen of a *monde*’,⁴³ but the episode at Doncières shows Saint-Loup treating the protagonist like an animated object, a talking puppet which he can manipulate, and the narrator stresses the protagonist’s disquiet to realise that his friend’s ‘amabilité plus grande’ is indeed performative. I want to clarify that performativity does not exclude sincerity: Saint-Loup clearly does find the protagonist an insightful and entertaining interlocutor, and this is why he wants the protagonist to repeat certain stories, to give ‘une haute idée de [son] esprit à ses camarades’ (II, 403). However, with Saint-Loup’s conversational performativity comes an equal measure of duplicity, and as the protagonist realises this, he feels both socially awkward with the group and personally complexed vis-a-vis Saint-Loup. The narrator recounts three different discussions on three separate occasions at Doncières (‘le premier jour’, ‘un de ces soirs-là’, ‘Le troisième soir’ (II, 396, 402, 403)) – a pattern which echoes Bloch’s three meals and conversations with the protagonist’s family – and shows an awkwardness building up between the friends because of these interactions. In the first example, the protagonist begins an anecdote, realises that Saint-Loup has already heard it, and stops himself. More significantly, the reason he remembers so clearly that Saint-Loup knows the anecdote is, he explains, ‘qu’ayant voulu la lui dire le lendemain de mon arrivée, il m’avait interrompu en me disant: “Vous me l’avez déjà racontée à Balbec.” Je fus donc surpris de le voir m’exhorter à continuer en m’assurant qu’il ne connaissait pas cette histoire et qu’elle l’amuserait beaucoup’ (II, 402). So what is particularly unsettling for the protagonist is the contrast between Saint-Loup’s rather brisk, even brusque reaction

⁴³ Murray, ‘Proust’s Robert de Saint-Loup and the Diagnostic Eye’, p. 69.

a few days earlier, and the intensity of his reaction now, which involves exhortation and assurance. And, of course the fact that he knows, that Saint-Loup knows, that he knows Saint-Loup is lying. After all, Saint-Loup is a clumsy fibber: how can he be so certain the story will amuse him before he has even heard it? The way that Saint-Loup and the protagonist handle this skirmish is relatively straightforward: the protagonist agrees to tell the story but maintains his position, warning Saint-Loup that ‘vous allez bientôt la reconnaître’ (II, 402), and Saint-Loup maintains his lie, stressing that ‘Jamais tu ne me l’as dite’ (II, 403). The awkwardness here is brief and its intensity mild, but the exchange does presage the torturous conversations the protagonist will have with Albertine later in the novel, the difference there being the protagonist’s refusal to comply and his own increasing mendacity as a means to trick Albertine into revealing the truth.⁴⁴

In contrast to the first occasion, which concluded with a double analogy which conveyed the protagonist’s sense of awkwardness about himself as an object to Saint-Loup, this second occasion is brought to a sharp end in a short four word phrase: ‘Telle est l’amitié’ (II, 403). While Laurence A. Bisson takes this sentence as proof that Saint-Loup is depicted as the ideal friend throughout the novel, and the specific argument that it is at ‘Doncières where their friendship flourishes and flowers’,⁴⁵ the unusual brevity of this sentence suggests otherwise. Throughout the novel, the protagonist’s enthusiasm, when it occurs, is inscribed in the text in lengthy phrases with multiple subclauses. As a

⁴⁴ Joseph Hillis Miller analyses how ‘It is in the context of Marcel’s misguided attempt to get definite proof that Albertine is or not a lesbian that the question of whether or not Albertine lies to him becomes his obsession, in a chapter entitled ‘Marcel Proust: Lying as a *Recherche* Tool’, in his monograph on *Otherness* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 207.

⁴⁵ Laurence A. Bisson, ‘Marcel Proust: Friends and Friendship’, p. 43.

contrast, this laconic comment suggests that the protagonist experiences something like a pang of disillusionment, as he realises that, not only are his private conversations with Saint-Loup personally unfulfilling, Saint-Loup relishes their conversations in so far as they can further his own wider popularity. The uneasiness that the protagonist feels to be exploited in this way occurs again in a later scene, when he is presented to Saint-Loup's girlfriend, Rachel, and there he confronts Saint-Loup more directly, causing an awkwardness between them. Their lunch together is already rather uncomfortable for the protagonist, because Rachel turns out to be none other than a prostitute he met some time back, and because throughout the meal Saint-Loup's jealousy manifests in sharp comments to Rachel: 'Ce maître d'hôtel est très intéressant, Zézette? demanda-t-il à sa maîtresse après avoir renvoyé Aimé assez brusquement. On dirait que tu veux faire une étude d'après lui' (II, 464). Not only does the protagonist have to listen to their arguments, he is also unsure about how he is supposed to respond. On Saint-Loup and Rachel's interaction here, Leo Bersani describes how 'theatricality is treated in the passage as a strategy by which others are made to suffer'.⁴⁶

Rachel profits from the protagonist's presence, addressing herself to him to calm the tension – 'Elle parut vouloir obéir à Robert et engagea avec moi une conversation littéraire à laquelle il se mêla' (II, 464) – and he responds politely, until she is so vicious about Berma that he no longer wants to participate. Saint-Loup does the opposite, rejecting the protagonist as well as Rachel when in anger he decides to leave: 'Je ne savais si je devais le suivre. – Non, j'ai besoin d'être seul, me dit-il sur le même ton dont il venait de parler à sa maîtresse et comme s'il était tout fâché contre moi' (II, 468).

⁴⁶ Leo Bersani, *Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013 [1965]), pp. 54-55.

But just afterwards, when the couple have made things up, Robert becomes as awkwardly insistent as he was at Doncières for the protagonist to play the entertainer:

Robert était seulement fâché que je ne voulusse pas briller davantage aux yeux de sa maîtresse. – Voyons, ce monsieur que tu as rencontré ce matin et qui mêle le snobisme et l’astronomie, raconte-le-lui, je ne me rappelle pas bien – et il la regardait du coin de l’œil. – Mais, mon petit, il n’y a rien à dire d’autre que ce que tu viens de dire. – Tu es assommant. (II, 470)

We see here the same behaviour as earlier on in the volume, namely Saint-Loup’s desire to use the protagonist to impress other people, his insistence that the protagonist speak, and his visual surveillance of the audience. But we can also observe that he is less deceptive – he acknowledges that it is a story he has already heard (rather than denying it), and expresses his frustration in the words ‘Tu es assommant’ – which makes this exchange less disquieting for the protagonist, because he is able to speak frankly, refusing the request based on the mutually acknowledged fact that he has already told the story.

It is in the third conversation at Doncières that we see Saint-Loup being the most awkward as an interlocutor, and I use the term awkward both in the sense of the sudden and ungraceful turn his words cause to the conversation, and the effect of this on the protagonist, who is brought to a halt having begun a sentence, and who feels disconcerted by the ambiguity of Saint-Loup’s intentions in hijacking his own phrases. Although the protagonist prefaces Saint-Loup’s interruption by saying that Saint-Loup’s ‘entière assimilation’ is the crowning sign of his ‘admiration’ (II, 417), and that ‘au bout de quarante-huit heures il avait oublié que ces idées n’étaient pas de lui’ (II, 417), the language employed to depict the conversation itself appears deliberately intended to contradict this. First of all, the preface justifying Saint-Loup’s plagiarism as admiration

is itself prefaced, with the comment that this is ‘le revers qu’avait la gentille admiration de Robert’ (II, 417). Second, the protagonist describes Saint-Loup’s reaction as defensive rather than innocuous, ‘comme [...] si je ne faisais que chasser sur ses terres’ (II, 417). Third, Saint-Loup appears to be on the attack, speaking ‘avec la même force que s’il avait peur que je l’interrompisse’ and in words articulated with ‘un air de défi’ (II, 417). Fourth, he takes a dramatic pause – ‘Il s’arrêta un instant’ (II, 417) – before delivering the plagiarised adage, and in this pause he uses his face to disconcert the protagonist, ‘posant son regard comme une vrille sur [lui]’ with ‘le sourire de quelqu’un qui a bien digéré’ (II, 417-418). The way the protagonist concludes this anecdote is with a sarcasm similar to his earlier ‘Telle est l’amitié’, saying ‘Il n’avait sans doute aucun souvenir que je lui avais dit peu de jours auparavant ce qu’il s’était en revanche si bien rappelé’ (II, 418). What makes it clear that we are to understand his comment here as one made ironically is the fact that while Saint-Loup remembers the adage ‘si bien’, he appears to have ‘aucun souvenir’ of having heard it made by the protagonist, and this ‘peu de jours auparavant’. Considering this accumulation of textual evidence, it seems surprising that the majority of critics suggest that it is not until *Albertine disparue* that ‘L’amitié entre Marcel et Saint-Loup est démasquée comme une tromperie’.⁴⁷

The protagonist’s experience with Saint-Loup at Doncières has its ups and downs, and I have focused on the latter because the awkward moments which occur in these conversations cast a shadow of tension over the friendship, and this culminates in a final interaction which is decidedly unsettling for the protagonist. The scene is well-

⁴⁷ Maarten van Buuren, *Marcel Proust et l’imaginaire* (Amsterdam - New York: Rodopi, 2008), p. 140.

known: the protagonist, wanting to say goodbye before he returns to Paris, walks around the barracks in search of his friend, but when he sees Saint-Loup in a tilbury and waves to him, his friend acknowledges him only as would a stranger: ‘il vit bien le salut et le rendit, mais sans s’arrêter; et, s’éloignant à toute vitesse, sans un sourire, sans qu’un muscle de sa physionomie bougeât, il se contenta de tenir pendant deux minutes sa main levée au bord de son képi, comme il eût répondu à un soldat qu’il n’eût pas connu’ (II, 436). This silent exchange is disturbing for the protagonist, for obvious reasons: why should Saint-Loup give such a cold greeting with such stiff body language, he who is known for his warmth towards to the protagonist and the elegance of his body.⁴⁸ The protagonist finds this sufficiently perturbing that some time later, in Paris, he finds himself asking Saint-Loup about it, and it is this conversation that I wish to draw attention to, and which culminates in the narrator’s description of Saint-Loup ‘comme un parfait comédien’ (II, 474), a citation I gave at the beginning of this section. It is telling that the protagonist asks Saint-Loup about what happened when they are at the theatre – or, more precisely, on the stage after Rachel’s performance has ended, wandering among the stage scenery, a setting the protagonist finds strange:

[...] et saisissant, pour aller plus vite, le premier sujet de conversation:
– Tu sais, dis-je à Robert, que j’ai été pour te dire adieu le jour de mon départ, nous n’avons jamais eu l’occasion d’en causer. Je t’ai salué dans la rue.
– Ne m’en parle pas, me répondit-il, j’en ai été désolé; nous nous sommes rencontrés tout près du quartier, mais je n’ai pas pu m’arrêter parce que j’étais déjà très en retard. Je t’assure que j’étais navré.
Ainsi il m’avait reconnu! Je revoyais encore le salut entièrement impersonnel qu’il m’avait adressé en levant la main à son képi, sans un regard dénonçant qu’il me connût, sans un geste qui manifestât qu’il regrettait de ne pouvoir s’arrêter. (II, 475)

⁴⁸ For a discussion of ‘the aristocrat’s body’ as ‘the repository of mannerisms, habits, attitudes which comprise the legacy of the past and which find expression in a corporeal language’, see Priscilla P. Clark, ‘Proustian Order and the Aristocracy of Time Past’, p. 100.

It is as though the unfamiliarity of this environment makes the protagonist less controlled in his speech: the implication of the words ‘le premier sujet de conversation’ being that had he thought more carefully about the potentially awkward exchange which might follow such a question, he never would have asked it. But there is also a symbolism to the setting, a connection between the actual theatre and the way Saint-Loup acted on that day at Doncières. We see the protagonist treading carefully with his words, mentioning only his own actions (‘j’ai été pour te dire adieu’, ‘Je t’ai salué dans la rue’) but by so doing alluding to the way Saint-Loup ignored him. Saint-Loup is clumsy in his reply, because even though he apologises, he admits that he saw the protagonist, and this therefore invalidates his explanation that he couldn’t stop because he was late. After all, they both know the awkwardness pertains not to the fact he didn’t stop, but rather the ‘salut entièrement impersonnel’ which he gave. It is this that the protagonist remains confused by and dwells on, that Saint-Loup greeted him but ‘sans un regard dénonçant qu’il me connût’, because the awkwardness of this particular encounter alerts him to a more profoundly disturbing truth: the protagonist realises that although ‘Dans l’un de ses rôles il m’aimait profondément’, in a single instant he could become ‘un autre personnage qui ne me connaissait pas’. The language of theatricality occurs once more in the novel to describe Saint-Loup, when the protagonist overhears him instructing a servant with words that are ‘machiavéliques et cruelles’: ‘cela me faisait le même effet que s’il avait récité un rôle de Satan’ (IV, 53).

This chapter set out to compare Bloch and Saint-Loup as friends and conversationalists, and to analyse the effect of their respective styles of speaking on the protagonist’s

feelings. We observed that although Bloch is often a gaffeur, the protagonist is dazzled by his grandiloquence, and that while the family pass judgement on Bloch's way of interacting, the narrator simultaneously mocks their own bourgeois notions of what a conversation should be. When Bloch makes clumsy comments, this creates a social awkwardness: the protagonist does not express doubts about the friendship, or friendship more generally, and even when he describes Bloch's worst fault, his tendency to slander his friends, he explains that this causes Bloch 'inquiétude, et tenant pour certain [...] qu'ils allaient savoir, il préféra prendre les devants' (II, 104). Even the fact that the protagonist finds these confessions embarrassingly 'hystérique[s]' (II, 105) does not prevent him from concluding the same description by stressing that 'Ce n'était du reste pas absolument un mauvais garçon que Bloch, il pouvait avoir de grandes gentilleses' (II, 105). In contrast to Bloch, although Saint-Loup initially appears to be a more polite and scrupulous friend, the protagonist quickly comes to understand not only that their conversations are shallow, but also that Saint-Loup is deliberately deceptive, making a drama out of their discussions. The protagonist feels increasingly uneasy in his friend's presence and during their conversations, not because Saint-Loup makes a categorical breach of social codes, or even the codes of friendship, but rather because of a more profound dissimulation in his every word. The awkwardness of this is that unlike Bloch's gaffes which can be confronted (or at least recognised) and then forgiven, with Saint-Loup the protagonist has little choice but to maintain their friendship on Saint-Loup's own artificial terms.

4. Love and *l'acte maladroit*

Throughout this thesis, we have observed how awkwardness marks the protagonist's interactions with family, social acquaintances and friends. This final chapter focuses on the most awkward relationship depicted in the novel, between the protagonist and his lover, Albertine. In the introduction to this thesis, I highlighted the ways in which awkwardness, though not entirely categorisable as an affect, is implicated in a person's capacity and desire to act: this chapter provides a development of that idea, by exploring the novel's depiction of *l'acte maladroit* in the context of romantic love. The chapter is structured around three scenes in which the act of kissing is shown to be awkward; the protagonist's clumsy first attempt to kiss Albertine in *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*; the successful, but uncomfortable first kiss in *Le Côté de Guermantes*; and the goodnight kiss avoided by Albertine in one of the closing scenes of *La Prisonnière*. My argument is that although each of the kisses is awkward for different reasons, the act of kissing involves a fundamental awkwardness, not only because it can exacerbate one's sense of distance from the other, but because it involves an altered state of self-awareness.

When the topic of kissing is raised in relation to the *Recherche*, one's mind is likely drawn to the novel's first kiss: the goodnight kiss of the mother, denied to the protagonist, and, according to many critics, the source of all the protagonist's romantic problems later on.¹ Such readings have been finely refuted by a number of scholars, and

¹ Inge Crosman Wimmers makes this argument the core of her monograph, *Proust and Emotion*, which has already been referred to. See also an article by Maarten Van Buuren, who similarly suggests that 'Marcel vit sa relation avec Albertine (et avec les autres filles qu'il rencontre) sur le modèle de la relation avec sa mère, telle qu'elle s'est cristallisée à Combray au moment du baiser du soir manqué': 'L'amour proustien: Essai sur le 'cycle d'Albertine', *Marcel Proust Aujourd'hui*, 5 (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007): 174.

as such they need not resurface here. Instead, it will suffice to cite one critic's short and sharp summary of why the narrator's own references back to his mother's kiss do not call for quasi-Freudian reductionism: 'While the passage [...] on Albertine at the narrator's bedside does suggest that the narrator's adult sexuality is strongly marked by his childhood relationship to his mother, it is not unequivocal. Its continuation emphasizes the differences between maternal and sexual relationships [...]'.² However, to whatever extent one holds the mother's denied kiss responsible for the woes of her son's erotic life, and specifically in his couple with Albertine, it is quite true that similar themes emerge in Proust's depiction of the maternal and romantic relationship – namely jealousy, language and mortality – and these have been the focus of critics writing about love in the *Recherche*.³ This chapter makes a break from such analyses, dealing neither with jealousy nor language nor mortality (or at least, only in passing), because my ambition is to identify another crucial aspect of love, one which seems so obvious but has hitherto been left unsaid: love is characterised as an awkward experience, with this awkwardness a vast spectrum ranging from the slightly embarrassing to the excruciatingly uneasy. Recent work within Affect Theory enables us to think and write about love in new terms: to branch out from psychoanalytic theory, on the one hand,⁴

² Simon Kemp, 'Postpsychoanalytic Proust', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 75:1 (2014): 77-101.

³ For a range of critical essays on theme of jealousy in the *Recherche*, see Erika Fülöp and Philippe Chardin, eds., *Cent ans de jalousie proustienne* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015); for a discussion of 'The Language of Love', see Chapter Three of Leo Bersani's *Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013 [1965]); for an analysis of mortality in relation to the protagonist's grandmother and Albertine, see Katja Hausteijn's 'Emotional Cavities: Vision and Affect in *A la recherche du temps perdu*', *French Studies*, 63.2 (2009), pp. 161-173.

⁴ This is not to devalue the work of psychoanalytically informed approaches to *A la recherche*, the rich fruits of which are perhaps best demonstrated in Leo Bersani's aforementioned monograph, *Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and Art*.

and (post-/)structural discourse, on the other.⁵ Ben Highmore encourages us to recognise that ‘In common English usage the words designating affective experience sit awkwardly on the borders of the material and the immaterial, the physical and the metaphysical’,⁶ and goes on to say about love:

The bruising that I experience when I am humiliated in front of a loved one is intractably both literal and metaphorical: I am bruised, I sit slightly slumped, more weary and wary, yet this bruising also reaches inside, I feel internally battered. Could you possibly “feel” that you were in love if you couldn’t also feel your beating heart climbing into your throat or your palms sweat?⁷

While Affect Theory refocuses attention to the body, what seems so promising about it is the way it gives us a new route back to the mind, and throughout the chapter my close-readings of the act of kissing, as well as its anticipation and aftermath, pays attention to its physical and mental obstacles – and rewards. In the first section (4.1 The Rejected Kiss), I examine the botched kiss as one of ‘the confused, cack-handed ways’, to borrow Simon May’s phrasing, ‘in which we pursue [love]’.⁸ I show how the protagonist’s strategies to obtain physical contact with Albertine are ill-founded and ill-fitting, and how his over-confidence in his actions produces a loss of confidence in his feelings. In the second section (4.2 The Clumsy Kiss), I examine the protagonist’s disappointing first kiss with Albertine as an ontologically strange phenomenon which

⁵ Again, this is not to suggest that structural and post-structural work on Proust is anything but a rich treasury: as David R. Ellison points out, ‘the best-known French critics have, in fact, almost exclusively concentrated on the problem of representation in Proust, whether it be Genette on “indirect language”, metaphor, metonymy, or *naming*; Deleuze on “signs”; Ricardou on textual “self-representation” or “anti-representation”; Barthes on Proust and “photography”, etc.’, p. 67. But when Ellison gave this summary of the best work ‘In recent years’, it was in 1984. See David R. Ellison, ‘Beyond Mimesis: Narrative Modality in *A la recherche du temps perdu*’, in *French Literature Series*, 11 (The University of South Carolina, 1984): 67-76.

⁶ Ben Highmore, ‘Bitter After Taste: Affect, Food, and Social Aesthetics’, in Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 120.

⁷ Ben Highmore, ‘Bitter After Taste’, p. 120.

⁸ Simon May, *Love: A History* (New Haven : Yale University Press, 2011), p. 218.

proposes intimacy through alterity. Taking inspiration from existential ideas about kissing, I highlight the way in which the novel insists on the physical awkwardness of the kiss not only as a physical reality, but also as a metaphor for the mental mismatch when one subject's consciousness is directed towards another's. In the third section (4.3 The Avoided Kiss), which sees Albertine avoid the protagonist's kiss, a sign that they will soon part ways, I uncover the narrator's "rule" of awkwardness as a governing component to romantic love: the distressed lover will unconsciously but consistently chose to commit the *acte maladroite*. This is not only because desire, as Malcolm Bowie explains, is connected to 'the will to fail. It has to do both with prompt action and with the resolute refusal of action. Desire thrives upon difficulty and the threat of disappointment [...]'.⁹ But also, and I propose this as Proust's own suggestion, because although no act, however graceful or awkward, can achieve fusion with the other, *l'acte maladroite* offers an alternative: the disturbing feeling of a botched connection, which is better than no connection at all, and, with this, an expansion of self-awareness, a new mental path.

⁹ Malcolm Bowie, *Proust Among the Stars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 252.

4.1 The Rejected Kiss

The protagonist's attempt to kiss Albertine, in *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, is, in the first instance, a result of misguided self-confidence. Certain that he is older and wiser, and determined not to make the same mistakes as he did with Gilberte, the protagonist announces a general strategy in a passage which precedes the kissing scene: 'Je savais maintenant que j'aimais Albertine; mais hélas! je ne me souciais pas de le lui apprendre' (II, 278). Having come to believe that love is a subjective pleasure rather than an external reality, declaring it feels unnecessary, and perhaps even counterproductive; and, perhaps more crucially, the protagonist recognises that the less he speaks to Albertine of the delight he takes in her, the more likely she will be to furnish his pleasure. But although his theory is reasonable, the narrator shows us how clumsily it is executed in practice, and how blind the protagonist is to his own awkwardness. The protagonist gives an incidental example of how he avoids revealing his interest in Albertine (or so he thinks), when they are with Rosemonde and Andrée, and the group must take two horse-drawn carts from Maineville back to Balbec. The protagonist believes that the way he arranges the pairings, because he does not immediately suggest Albertine travel with him, gives the impression that he is indifferent to her company: 'de laquelle je feignis de me résigner tant bien que mal' (II, 279). However, the protagonist's way of doing this is rather awkward, and therefore more likely to draw attention to the fact that he does indeed want Albertine beside him. First, the way he extends the invitation to sit beside him 'successivement à Rosemonde et à Andrée' and 'pas une fois à Albertine' (II, 279), is such a deliberate exclusion of the latter that it cannot but be remarked by the women. Second, instead of using one excuse

for why in fact it might be better for him to travel with Albertine, he uses several, and they are unconvincing: ‘d’heure, de chemin et de manteaux’ (II, 279). Third, he undermines his convictions in these reasons, by pushing his decision onto the woman (‘j’amenai tout le monde, par des considérations secondaires d’heure, de chemin et de manteaux, à décider’ (II, 279)) while concurrently insinuating that this decision is ‘contre [s]on gré’ (II, 279). The point is that in the very moment the protagonist believes himself to appear uninterested, in accordance with his strategy to hide his feelings for Albertine, in fact he is behaving clumsily, by making such an exaggerated show of his indifference that it is more likely to reveal how much he cares.

The protagonist does exhibit moments of self-doubt about how convincing his displays of insouciance are, and particular self-awareness during his conversations with Andrée, whose company he pretends to prefer: ‘Quand je parlais d’Albertine avec Andrée, j’affectais une froideur dont Andrée fut peut-être moins dupe que moi de sa crédulité apparente. Elle faisait semblant de croire à mon indifférence pour Albertine’ (II, 280). We see that, once again, the term ‘froideur’ arises in a context of awkward behaviour – not only the protagonist’s displays of indifference towards Albertine when she is there, but also the way he speaks of Albertine in her absence – but here, ironically, the awkwardness of giving someone “the cold shoulder” becomes the way in which the heat of passion, ‘la fièvre’ (II, 281), reveals itself. Despite being aware that Andrée seems to be making a show of belief, instead of letting the subject drop – the subject which, after all, he claims to have no interest in – the protagonist becomes increasingly insistent on it in their conversations, and progresses from speaking of Albertine’s family with ‘l’air le plus inattentif’ (II, 280), to doing so ‘avec

malveillance' (II, 280). But the protagonist only becomes more conscious of how phony he must sound. Whereas initially he considers the possibility of Andrée's incredulity through her words and face, the performance of how 'Elle faisait semblant de croire' (II, 280), the more coldly he speaks of Albertine and her family, the more he finds himself involuntarily placed into Andrée's mind ('à la présence, dans l'esprit d'Andrée, d'une telle idée qu'elle trouvait plus poli de me cacher' (II, 280)) and, by extension, her interior monologue: 'une pensée qui peut se résumer ainsi: "Je sais bien que vous aimez Albertine et que vous faites des pieds et des mains pour vous rapprocher de sa famille"' (II, 281). The awkwardness of their conversations, then, is not only the blatant discrepancy between what the protagonist feels and what he purports to feel, but also his awareness of a discrepancy between the reaction Andrée performs to his words and the mental reaction he understands her to be having. As a strategy, a pretence of disinterest can only work in so far as it is convincing, otherwise it becomes awkward for the listener, and this reverberates back onto the speaker when he sees that he is being humored, with his new sense of awkwardness making him even less capable of being convincing. Perhaps it is important to point out that for the reader who has read the whole novel, and of course for the mature narrator who is recalling his youth, the awkwardness of this scene has another dimension, because Andrée is in fact Albertine's lover. For this reason, the protagonist's interest in Albertine, exceptionally evident when he asks Andrée about Albertine's plans to spend a night at the Grand Hotel, is awkward not only because Andrée sees through his affectations of nonchalance, but also because his feelings, though he doesn't know it, have an implication for hers.

Albertine is often described by critics as a hollow character, deprived of ‘une personnalité propre’¹ as the object of the protagonist’s desire, but one of her most striking traits as a subject is a willfulness, a self-confidence demonstrated equally well in the smiling insistence with which she insists the protagonist come to her hotel room, and the forceful rejection of his attempt to kiss her that night. Albertine’s confidence manifests as a capacity to be extremely warm or cold towards others, without feeling the need to explain herself, without, it seems, worrying about the consequences. This is, I would argue, one of her most striking similarities with Charlus: they are the two most deliberately awkward characters in the novel.² Like Charlus, Albertine deliberately treats other people in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable: she is impolite to the protagonist’s friend Bloch, afterwards giving a short but brutal explanation, ‘il me dégoûte’ (II, 235), and this is before she knows that he is Jewish (her critique then becomes anti-semitic). But even with her own friends Albertine is capable of behaving extremely awkwardly, on one occasion essentially ignoring Gisèle to make her disappear: ‘Albertine, obstinément placée entre nous deux, ayant continué de répondre de plus en plus brièvement, puis ayant cessé de répondre du tout aux propos de son amie, celle-ci finit par abandonner la place’ (II, 242). Yet again, the language of coldness is invoked as a metaphor for awkward behaviour: Gisèle posed polite questions, while Albertine ‘ne répondit rien, garda un silence glacial’ (II, 241). However, just as in Charlus’s case, the social confidence that Albertine displays in

¹ Maarten van Buuren, ‘L’amour proustien: Essai sur le ‘cycle d’ Albertine’, in *Marcel Proust Aujourd’hui*, 5 (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007): 177.

² Gilles Deleuze proposes madness as the link between Charlus and Albertine, in a section entitled ‘Présence et fonction de la folie’, in *Proust et les signes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964), pp. 205-219.

treating others with such contempt is related to the sexual secret with which she lives: Bloch's tendency to comment openly on everything is what annoys Albertine ('[elle] n'aimait pas beaucoup qu'on s'occupât de ce qu'elle faisait' (II, 235), and likewise, she insists that having treated Gisèle so coldly will teach her to be 'plus discrète [...] Elle n'a pas besoin de venir fourrer son nez partout' (II, 242).

Albertine's confidence also manifests in behaviour which is daringly "forward", even uncomfortably forward for the protagonist. His newly gained confidence to kiss her has its origin in the note she passes to him one day, declaring 'Je vous aime bien' (II, 264). She draws attention to this note by announcing to the others, 'Mes petites bonnes femmes, je vous défends de regarder ce que j'écris' (II, 264). Although the protagonist is nervous to raise the question of whether Albertine will be staying at his hotel that night, he is surely emboldened by what appear to be her advances, as she points out to him that she is wearing her hair in the style he likes: indeed, it is after she has said this that he dares to ask about her plans for the evening. Furthermore, Albertine's self-assurance manifests itself in the fact that she shows no hesitancy at all in inviting him to sit by her bed while she takes her dinner, and explains she would have liked him to take her to the train station the next morning. This latter comment shows particular boldness on her part: first, because it suggests that she has already, that is, previously, thought about the way the evening and morning will proceed ('J'aurais été contente que vous veniez à la gare' (II, 283)), and second, because she announces her willingness to flout social convention in private. She explains that while being accompanied to her train would raise eyebrows ('j'ai peur que cela ne paraisse drôle' (II, 283)), the strictures of moral propriety need not govern the privacy of a bedroom ('nous pourrions passer cette

soirée ensemble. Cela, ma tante n'en saura rien' (II, 283)). But again, the confidence Albertine shows in speaking of social rules, and how to play them, seems to relate to the delicacy of her position socially. Without a mother or a dowry, Albertine's chances for a "good" marriage are in jeopardy, and, being in this awkward social position, Albertine is faced with two conflicting necessities: on the one hand, she cannot risk scandal and disgrace, which would destroy the possibility of marrying well, but on the other hand, in order to gain the affections of a man richer than herself, she needs to offer him something that an upper-class woman would not. That the way their relationship evolves into one of the most uncomfortable domestic scenarios imaginable – with Albertine effectively a prisoner, and the protagonist keeping her presence in his house a secret – is not only part of the novel's depiction of the poisonous fruits of obsessive love, but also of the awkwardness created by specific social shifts, which permitted such an arrangement to occur.³

The effect of Albertine's invitation on the protagonist is a mistaken confidence that he can act according to his desires, that he will meet no resistance to his sexual advances. But it is an unstable sense of confidence, involving the protagonist suppressing the apprehension he feels, making his way to Albertine's room, by repeating to himself the invitation as a counter to his doubts: 'j'avais tort d'avoir des doutes, elle m'avait dit de venir quand elle serait couchée. C'était clair...' (II, 285). This is the point he returns to when, in the room, Albertine resists him: 'je me disais que ce n'était pas pour rien faire qu'une jeune fille fait venir un jeune homme en cachette, en s'arrangeant pour que sa tante ne le sache pas' (II, 286). There is certainly something

³ As Edward J. Hughes points out, 'Albertine's independence and sexual freedom become the expression of a class and an implicit rejection of Marcel's [*haute bourgeoisie*] social origins', in Edward J. Hughes, *Proust, Class, and Nation*, p. 220.

distinctly comedic about the whole scene – slapstick, even – as an illustration of the perils of miscommunication, misjudgment and misplaced confidence. The humour depends on a physical awkwardness: the fact that as the protagonist joyously rushes his way to Albertine’s room, he almost knocks over Françoise, suggests that the force of passion which propels him towards Albertine has become uncontrollable and his body unwieldy. Yet for the protagonist, drunk on a sort of excitement – ‘une telle ivresse’ (II, 285)⁴ – he feels this loss of control as a sort of power: ‘je jetais dédaigneusement dans un coin ciel, mer et falaises. “Finissez ou je sonne”, s’écria Albertine voyant que je me jetais sur elle pour l’embrasser’ (II, 286). The combination of the verbs ‘jeter’ and ‘se jeter’ stresses both the physical awkwardness of the protagonist’s movements and the interpersonal awkwardness his action creates. In his mind, the protagonist is a Romantic hero, so connected to the forces of nature, indeed so possessed with them, that he has the power to fling sky, sea and cliffs into a corner. But as for his body, the protagonist is a quivering clumsy wreck, and the narrator masterfully portrays this through the very language which makes up the protagonist’s grandiose stream of consciousness. The sky, sea and cliffs are nothing to him, ‘plus léger à porter que des plumes pour les globes de mes prunelles...’ (II, 285), the protagonist claims, but hidden in the same sentence, the narrator suggests that from an external perspective the protagonist’s eyes are fixed and dilated like a madman’s stare: ‘...les globes de mes prunelles qu’entre mes paupières je

⁴ The language of ‘ivresse’ here operates as a parallel to another scene involving awkwardness and seduction, in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*. There, the drunkenness is literal: the protagonist drinks ‘l’un après l’autre sept à huit verres de porto’ (III, 232), to rid himself of ‘l’hésitation ou la crainte’ in the presence of an unknown young lady. Again, the protagonist’s drunken self confidence (‘il n’y avait plus d’obstacles à l’enlacement de nos deux corps’ (III, 233)) is ironised by the narrator’s voice (‘Plus d’obstacles pour moi du moins. Car ils n’avaient pas été volatilisés pour elle qui n’avait pas bu de porto’ (III, 233)).

sentais dilatés, résistants’ (II, 285).⁵ Prendergast draws attention to the obvious difference between the protagonist ‘orbiting in the ecstasy of a solipsist *dérive*’, and his creator, Proust, ‘the skeptical ironist on the side of the philosopher’s rational claims, wryly contemplating his narrator’.⁶ But my suggestion is that Proust’s wry smile casts itself as much on the protagonist’s body as on his mind, with the repeated technique of mocking the protagonist’s physical comportment through the metaphors the latter intends as Romantic. The protagonist describes the weakness of the sea waves, compared to the power which animates him in this moment: ‘les souffles de la mer m’eussent paru bien courts pour l’immense aspiration qui soulevait ma poitrine’ (II, 285). Again, what is intended by the protagonist as a poetic description of his feelings is simultaneously crafted, by Proust, in such a way as to suggest how the protagonist must appear to Albertine: breathing conspicuously heavily, and, presumably, in quite a sweat after his race to her room.

The protagonist’s confidence dramatically implodes in the denouement of the scene: he insists on the kiss, despite Albertine’s resistance, empowered by his recollection of the maxim that ‘l’audace réussit à ceux qui savent profiter des occasions’ (II, 286), but he learns the terrible lesson that audacity is just as capable of producing a damning awkwardness. This awkwardness is conveyed through the narrative rather than shown as a feeling: conspicuously, we are *not* told how the

⁵ I use the term ‘madman’ as a deliberate allusion to the protagonist’s own description of Charlus’s dilated eyes, in *Balbec*: ‘j’aperçus un homme d’une quarantaine d’années, très grand et assez gros, avec des moustaches très noires, et qui, tout en frappant nerveusement son pantalon avec une badine, *fixait sur moi des yeux dilatés par l’attention*. Par moments, ils étaient percés en tous sens par des regards d’une extrême activité comme en ont seuls devant une personne qu’ils ne connaissent pas des hommes à qui, pour un motif quelconque, elle inspire des pensées qui ne viendraient pas à tout autre – *par exemple, des fous ou des espions*’ (II, 110-11, emphasis mine).

⁶ Christopher Prendergast, *Mirages and Mad Beliefs: Proust the Skeptic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 20.

protagonist feels to be so harshly brought back to reality by ‘un son précipité, prolongé et criard’, the sound of the bell that ‘Albertine avait sonné de toutes ses forces’ (II, 286). But the entry of this sudden, shrill sound – as an onomatopoeic description which breaks the flow of the grandiose style of the text preceding it – creates a phonic expression of awkwardness as a jarring clash. In parallel to this, we can also understand the bell as a sharp piercing to the ‘vertigineux tourbillon’ (II, 286) in which the protagonist’s mind has been caught up, and the awkwardness in this sense would be an involuntary and unpleasant shift in consciousness. Furthermore, we are not told how exactly the scene resolves after Albertine rings the bell – presumably the protagonist leaves the room as hastily as he entered it, before a member of staff arrives, with his tail between his legs and a few blundering words of apology – and instead the next paragraph’s fast-forward to a week later suggests that the protagonist’s disappointment and embarrassment during this week are too acute to be described. When Albertine returns to Balbec, their first encounter is necessarily awkward: ‘elle me dit avec froideur: “Je vous pardonne, je regrette même de vous avoir fait de la peine, mais ne recommencez jamais”’ (II, 286). The ‘froideur’ Albertine shows the protagonist not only causes him to abandon confidence in the principle, learned from Bloch, ‘qu’on pouvait avoir toutes les femmes’ (II, 286), but also to lose confidence in the feelings he had: ‘comme si, au lieu d’une jeune fille réelle, j’avais connu une poupée de cire’ (II, 286). The final awkwardness of this event, then, is not only the intersubjective act of the failed kiss – the protagonist seems especially relieved that ‘Albertine ne raconta à personne l’échec qu[il avait] essuyé auprès d’elle’ (II, 287) – but also, and perhaps more

profoundly, the protagonist's realisation that he didn't launch himself at a woman, but at a wax doll.

4.2 The Clumsy Kiss

The protagonist's desire to kiss Albertine is related to her alterity, which can be understood in a variety of ways. In the first, a woman who is notably other – that is, whose thoughts are difficult to read and who resists emotional and physical intimacy – is appealing: ‘les femmes un peu difficiles, qu’on ne possède pas tout de suite, dont on ne sait même pas tout de suite qu’on pourra jamais les posséder, sont les seules intéressantes’ (II, 658). The maxim suggests that women who are rather awkward to interact with, those ‘un peu difficiles’, are those who produce the desire for intimacy, because the intimacy is all the more precious as a transformation of radical alterity into mutuality: the protagonist struggles to penetrate the truth of Albertine’s character, and this difficulty is exactly what exacerbates his desire for intimacy with her. After being rejected by Albertine, whose mystery now seems so inaccessible that it is ‘vide’, the protagonist redirects his desire towards Andrée, but finds that it cannot be fed, because ‘elle était trop intellectuelle, trop nerveuse, trop malade, trop semblable à moi. Si Albertine me semblait maintenant vide, Andrée était remplie de quelque chose que je connaissais trop’ (II, 295, emphasis mine). Additionally, we saw earlier that Albertine’s awkwardness, as someone secretive, unpredictable and difficult to read, seems to be related to her difficult class position, and in any case the fact that she comes from a different social world, however class-complexed she is or not, is another aspect of her appealing alterity.⁷ Positioned at a different rung of the social ladder from the

⁷ Jacques Dubois’s *Pour Albertine. Proust et le sens du social*, cited in the Introduction to this thesis for its concept of *une sociologie amoureuse*, provides a wonderful analysis of Albertine’s strangely appealing character (‘Quel est ce cocktail exotique de petit-bourgeoise, de sportive et d’homosexuelle?’) while also observing that ‘les classes montantes et leur nouvelle culture proposent des formes de relations moins convenues et finalement plus déconcertantes’, pp. 194, 193.

protagonist, this makes the potential of sexual intimacy with Albertine all the more exciting because it would be a double transgression. The desire for intimacy with someone who is socially other is not unique to the protagonist: Swann shared it, as a young man, and would become enchanted by families ‘qu’il eût été plus élégant de ne pas chercher à connaître’, if, in this family, ‘une femme se présentait à ses yeux parée d’un charme qu’il n’avait pas encore connu’ (I, 189). If the act of seduction was not already precarious enough, there is a particular awkwardness involved in courting a woman of a different class: ‘Swann, qui était simple et négligent avec une duchesse, tremblait d’être méprisé, posait, quand il était devant une femme de chambre’ (I, 189). But the suggestion is that this awkwardness has its appeal: the wider the initial gap between two individuals, and therefore the more difficult it is to relate, the more valuable the intimacy is, if and when it is achieved. Of course later in the novel, the protagonist discovers that Albertine’s fundamental alterity is her sexual taste for other women, and his devastation stems from the realisation that a profound intimacy with her is not even theoretically possible.

In addition to the reasons already detailed as to why the protagonist’s desire for intimacy with Albertine is fanned by her alterity – as a woman who is ‘un peu difficile’ (II, 658), as a woman from a different social class, and, later, as a woman who prefers woman – there is the specific fact that the Albertine who turns up in Paris one evening seems different to who she was before: ‘Certes, même à Balbec, dans nos rencontres quotidiennes j’étais toujours surpris en l’apercevant tant elle était journalière. Mais maintenant on avait peine à la reconnaître’ (II, 646). Although Albertine had spurned the protagonist’s advances at Balbec, even after rejecting his kiss, the

protagonist noted a continuity in their friendship, effected by Albertine in ‘tant d’actes différents, tous de gentillesse pour moi’ (II, 292). Now, meeting Albertine again is like meeting a stranger, and she herself manifests the distance that has sprung up between them: ‘peu aimable avec moi, ne semblant guère se plaire dans ma compagnie’ (II, 649). Considering that Albertine pays this visit to the protagonist of her own volition, and, presumably for her own pleasure, the coldness and unease she displays may be strategic on her part, to provoke his interest by making herself appear ‘un peu difficile’. Separate to this, though, the protagonist is struck by how there really is a new distance between them, because of how different this Albertine is to the one he knew: there is a radical physical change (‘Elle avait un autre visage [...] son corps avait grandi’ (II, 647)), a matured mind (‘son intelligence se montrait mieux’ (II, 648)) and she has shifted social circles (‘je ne connaissais pas, même de nom, les personnes qu’elle fréquentait à Paris’ (II, 648)). Most appealingly of all, for the protagonist, Albertine has a new voice: ‘certains mots qui ne faisaient pas partie de son vocabulaire’ (II, 650), ‘une prononciation si charnelle et si douce que, rien qu’en vous parlant, elle semblait vous embrasser’ (II, 656). It is here that Proust’s account of love and physical desire differs the most greatly from Sartre’s: although, as Joel M. Childers points out, both writers posit desire as ‘the desire to possess not the body, but the consciousness [of the other]’,⁸ Sartre argues that humans are most sexually attracted to those parts of the body which are least personal and least connected to consciousness, ‘les masses de chair les moins différenciées [...] les seins, les fesses, les cuisses, le ventre’.⁹ But Proust shows that the

⁸ Joel M. Childers, ‘Proust, Sartre, and the Idea of Love’, *Philosophy and Literature*, 37:2 (2013): 389-404 (p. 397).

⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L’Être et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), p. 466.

consciousness, expressed through the voice, is what propels the lover towards the lips. The intimacy that the protagonist wants to effect through the lips, by a kiss, is propelled by the alien expressions of these lips: the voice that the protagonist knew so well, through so many conversations at Balbec, has become unfamiliar, and this changed voice suggests a changed mind. Although this makes being reunited a little uncomfortable and their conversation rather stilted – ‘Vous ne me comprenez pas’, Albertine interjects at one point, ‘je veux dire [...]’ (II, 650) – the point is that this awkwardness between them has a certain appeal for the protagonist, perhaps if he succeeds in kissing Albertine this time, the intimacy of the moment will be even greater than if he had succeeded in doing so in Balbec, because it will involve a greater transition.

One of the ways in which intimacy can be described as awkward, and especially the intimacy of a romantic kiss, is that it has to be achieved carefully, implicitly negotiated degree by degree. Awkwardness is a misstep, a move in the wrong direction or in the wrong way, and the process of kissing another person involves a series of tentative steps if it is to be successful: the attempt to kiss Albertine in Balbec failed because, instead of drawing psychologically and physically closer to her step by step and moment by moment, the protagonist hastily and clumsily threw himself onto her. Now, in this scene, in Paris, he demonstrates more awareness of the need to proceed with care, but the problem is that if acting too prematurely can cause the awkwardness of a collision between two individuals – a lack of harmony in direction and speed – there is an equal danger of awkwardness occurring if the movement towards intimacy

occurs too slowly. The protagonist struggles to find a balance between acting precipitously and not acting at all:

Voulant et n'osant m'assurer si maintenant elle se laisserait embrasser, chaque fois qu'elle se levait pour partir, je lui demandais de rester encore [...] chaque fois, après avoir regardé sa montre, elle se rasseyait à ma prière, de sorte qu'elle avait passé plusieurs heures avec moi et sans que je lui eusse rien demandé; les phrases que je lui disais se rattachaient à celles que je lui avais dites pendant les heures précédentes [...] (II, 649)

The physical awkwardness of Albertine repeatedly standing up to leave, only to be asked to sit back down again, seeps into the quality of the conversation itself: the language of the latter phrase implies that the protagonist rather tediously discourses, with logic but without saying very much at all, and becomes sprightly only when Albertine moves to leave. In reverse, when Albertine has her turn to speak the protagonist becomes suddenly animated, and reverts to the forcible style he used in Balbec, although this time at least he proceeds in steps rather than leaps: '[Son langage] était si nouveau [...] que, dès les mots "à mon sens", j'attirai Albertine, et à "j'estime" je l'assis sur mon lit' (II, 651). Likewise, although the words he uses to entice her even closer could at best be described as lacking subtlety, and at worst be dubbed embarrassingly obvious – 'Imaginez-vous que je ne suis pas chatouilleux du tout, vous pourriez me chatouiller pendant une heure que je ne le sentirais même pas' (II, 653) – they do propose an invitation rather than make a proposition. The protagonist knows that there is an awkwardness to his invitation: 'Elle comprit sans doute que c'était l'expression maladroite d'un désir' (II, 653). But the slight awkwardness caused by these words is a necessary one, because it allows the protagonist to declare his desire to touch Albertine without imposing it. The precarious thing about intimacy as a new mutual act between individuals who are not very familiar, is that its possibility cannot

be taken for granted, and some sort of negotiation must proceed it. But if the moments preceding the intimate act are necessarily a little maladroit, this is also what makes the intimacy possible when it occurs: as a counter-illustration, a couple who have been together for some time may still kiss one another, but will experience neither the awkwardness of their first kiss, nor its intimacy.

The significance of Françoise coming into the room, just as the protagonist has persuaded Albertine to lie with him on the bed, is as an illustration of another way in which intimacy between two people involves awkwardness, because it is by nature an act of excluding others from this intimacy. Throughout the thesis, we have seen the way in which the configuration of groups – in society but also in the family and friendships – produces exclusions which cause uncomfortable feelings for the individual rejected and even, sometimes, those doing the rejecting. In the love relationship, the physical act gains its intimacy because it something shared only by those in the couple, and there is a certain pleasure to be found in the awkward moments where this exclusivity is glimpsed by the outsider. We see this kind of reverse voyeurism – the fact of acting in such a way as to make another person be the uncomfortable witness to your intimacy – in various forms throughout the novel, but it is especially clear in a scene between Saint-Loup and Rachel which I referred to in Chapter Three. The couple have been arguing throughout their lunch with the protagonist, much to his discomfort, an argument ending with Saint-Loup storming out of the restaurant and the protagonist feeling even more awkward about whether he should follow him (II, 468). But just a little while later, the protagonist is summoned by Saint-Loup into the ‘cabinet particulier’ (II, 468) where he has made things up with Rachel. For the protagonist, being called into this private room is as

awkward as if he were invited into their bedroom, because the couple behave as though they were in the latter: 'Je trouvai sa maîtresse étendue sur un sofa, riant sous les baisers, les caresses qu'il lui prodiguait' (II, 468). The protagonist is 'mal à l'aise' to be the spectator to this physical intimacy, and proceeds to drink a lot of champagne so as to feel less awkward. A telling comment about Saint-Loup and Rachel's behaviour hints that not only are they aware of the protagonist feeling uncomfortable, but that this is by their design:

Quant à Robert et à sa maîtresse, ils avaient l'air de ne garder aucun souvenir de la querelle qu'ils avaient eue quelques instants auparavant, ni que j'y eusse assisté. Ils n'y firent aucune allusion, ils ne lui cherchèrent aucune excuse pas plus qu'au contraste que faisaient avec elle leurs façons de maintenant. (II, 469)

That the description of how they appear to behave ('ils avaient l'air') is combined with a repetition of negations ('l'air de *ne garder* aucun souvenir [...] *ni que*', 'Ils *n'y firent* aucune allusion, ils *ne lui cherchèrent* aucune excuse') emphasises the implausibility that the couple have recovered their pride after their embarrassing public dispute. Indeed, it is for this reason, that they make such a display of their affection now, as a deliberate 'contrast': they cannot banish the awkwardness created by the argument, so they transform it into another sort. This not only allows Saint-Loup to deal with the protagonist, who has been awkwardly waiting, but also to reestablish his intimacy with Rachel, whose attention to the waiter had been so disconcerting, by making the protagonist the uncomfortably excluded onlooker.

When Françoise walks in on the protagonist and Albertine, this is by her design rather than theirs – the protagonist suspects that 'avait-elle choisi cet instant pour nous confondre, étant à écouter à la porte, ou même à regarder par le trou de la serrure' (II,

653) – but although this is a surprise, the awkwardness of almost being caught, when almost in the act, allows them to become more psychologically intimate in preparation for the kiss. Although the protagonist is, even before Françoise’s ambush, made ill at ease by the thought that she ‘devait déjà trouver contraire à un des articles de son code qu’Albertine [...] fait une visite aussi prolongée’ (II, 653), this tension is actually relieved by her entrance. Albertine’s whispers about Françoise establish a sense of trust and complicity between them (‘me prenant à la fois pour maître et pour complice’ (II, 656), as well as making the protagonist feel ‘charmé’ (II, 656)). The content of her whispers is also effective in this regard: Françoise (and by extension, the protagonist) is concerned with social codes being broken, but Albertine draws attention to the rules of grammar which Françoise breaks with her incorrect conjugation of *éteindre*. On a physical level, too, the presence of Françoise means that Albertine must draw closer to the protagonist for her words not to be heard, and there is distinct eroticism about the way he receives her whisper: ‘[“]Teigne?” glissa à mon oreille Albertine’ (II, 656). Perhaps above all, Françoise’s sudden appearance is felicitously awkward because it gives the protagonist and Albertine something concrete to focus on, and speak about, and something other to themselves.

We have already observed the protagonist’s self-consciousness about the fact that his conversation has been rather laborious, emphasised by his repetition of its length (‘plusieurs heures’, les heures précédentes’ (II, 649)), and he also laments how artificial his words are; ‘Il n’y a rien comme le désir pour empêcher les choses qu’on dit d’avoir aucune ressemblance avec ce qu’on a dans la pensée. Le temps presse et pourtant il semble qu’on veuille gagner du temps en parlant de sujets absolument

étrangers à celui qui nous préoccupe' (II, 649). In recollecting awkwardness as an impasse caused by a clash, we understand that the protagonist finds the conversation leading up to the kiss uncomfortable because he feels a sense of urgency ('Le temps presse'), but also the need to 'gagner du temps': likewise, while his mind is fixed on one thing, his words wander off in the furthest possible direction. In previous chapters, we saw the protagonist rendered uneasy by his perception of the discrepancy between what someone said to him and what they were actually thinking – Swann in Chapter One, Charlus in Chapter Two, and Saint-Loup in Chapter Three (I, 553; III, 719; II, 402) – but now we see the uneasiness he feels to be the inauthentic speaker himself. This sensation is developed by two further reflections made during the conversation, which convey his psychological awkwardness through a conflicting lexicon of excess and restraint. On the one hand, the protagonist feels himself swept away as if by a tidal current, by his own words, 'ce bavardage interminable' (II, 650), while on the other hand each word feels like a constriction: 'continuant à ajouter un nouvel anneau à la chaîne extérieure de propos sous laquelle je cachais mon désir intime' (II, 652). The importance of this is as a confirmation of my initial point, that Françoise's awkwardly-timed appearance actually provides a happy shift in the conversation, but furthermore its significance is that it illustrates the way in which awkwardness is not only a social phenomenon but also a private or "existential" concern. Of course, the protagonist feels awkward because these words occur in a conversation *with* Albertine, who likely sees through his 'expression[s] maladroite[s]' (II, 653), but it seems that there is also an uneasy conversation occurring *within* himself.

The erotic kiss is necessarily a confrontation with alterity: as Miller points out, ‘It is impossible to kiss one’s own lips, and even kissing another part of one’s body does not seem to work as a form of auto-affection [...] you need the other for a kiss to be a real kiss’.¹⁰ This is, perhaps quite obviously, yet scarcely said, why the act of kissing is so liable to awkwardness: not only the psychological awkwardness in its anticipation, as explored above, but also a physical awkwardness of lips, nose and eyes, which effects new forms of mental perturbation. Although the kiss can only exist as contact with the other, in a strange way the act of kissing the other is as impossible as knowing the other. On a conceptual level, Derrida’s writing on the kiss gestures towards this: while his argument is that the intimate touching of a kiss permanently breaks open the self – that in the first kiss the subject encounters wholly the other – this other may not be the subject whose lips are kissed, but rather the wholly other that is lodged somewhere within myself. The kiss is, after all, the touch of oneself through the other: Derrida borrows Nancy’s fittingly anomalous locution, ‘se toucher toi’,¹¹ which is especially awkward to translate (rendered best, perhaps, as “to self-touch you”). This is, in part, why the protagonist senses that the promise of the kiss is superior to its actuality: ‘savoir qu’embrasser les joues d’Albertine était une chose possible, c’était un plaisir peut-être plus grand encore que celui de les embrasser’ (II, 657). Indeed, the protagonist’s own excitement for the kiss – ‘j’aurai enfin de lui la connaissance par les lèvres’ (II, 659) – is exposed as ill-founded by the narrator’s voice, before it has even occurred:

¹⁰ Joseph Hillis Miller, *Literature as Conduct: Speech Acts in Henry James*, p. 35.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Le toucher, Jean-Luc Nancy* (Paris: Galilée, 2000).

Je me disais cela parce que je croyais qu'il est une connaissance par les lèvres [...] parce que je n'avais pas songé que l'homme, créature évidemment moins rudimentaire que l'oursin ou même la baleine, manque cependant encore d'un certain nombre d'organes essentiels, et notamment n'en possède aucun qui serve au baiser. À cet organe absent il supplée par les lèvres, et par là arrive-t-il peut-être à un résultat un peu plus satisfaisant que s'il était réduit à caresser la bien-aimée avec une défense de corne. (II, 659)

The physical hyperbole used in this analogy, the comparison (by differentiation) of man to a sea-urchin, whale, or horned animal, works to underscore the conceptual doubts being espoused about the possibility of intimacy through kissing. The specific comparison (by differentiation) of human lips to an animal's tusk, as just 'un peu plus satisfaisant' for the act of kissing, creates a comical awkwardness: the reader is summoned to carry out a sort of "image experiment" in how a walrus might kiss another walrus, or a rhinoceros a fellow rhinoceros.¹²

Although the comic element of the physical awkwardness of kissing is continued in the passage, as the narrator's maxims give way to the protagonist's description of this kiss itself, there is also something more solemn about the protagonist's discomfort. His frustration that the closer his lips move to Albertine's, the further deprived he is of the other organs which would enrich the experience, is conveyed in the humorous language of a 'détestable' (II, 660) physical misfit – 'pour le baiser, nos narines et nos yeux sont aussi mal placés que nos lèvres mal faites – tout d'un coup, mes yeux cessèrent de voir, à son tour mon nez s'écrasant ne perçut plus aucune odeur' (II, 660) – but also hints at a profound disquiet on his part. Because photography has become a popular subject in Proust scholarship, critics often focus on the visual difficulty the protagonist

¹² In fact, as strange as it is to picture in one's mind eye, a search on Google Images shows that both walruses and rhinoceroses do indeed manage to arrange their horns in such a way as to "kiss" their fellow species. And in fact, as Adam Phillips points out, 'Styles of [human] kissing can be seen but not easily described, as though kissing resists verbal representation', in *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 95.

experiences in the scene: ‘as if, in the flickering light of an early film, Marcel were seeing the separate frames that made up the movement of his face toward Albertine’s [...] the jerky, uneven movements of early films are a wonderful metaphor for Marcel’s dissatisfaction’.¹³ But the passage focuses equally, if not more so, on lips, and the way the protagonist describes his, ‘dans cette zone désolée où elles ne peuvent trouver leur nourriture, elles sont seules’ (II, 659), seems an apt metaphor for the way he sees his own state of being: unnourished, alone. Now, such feelings are depressing and distressing rather than awkward, but it is the combination of such melancholy with the frustration preceding it which creates (to borrow from Malcolm Bowie’s examination of sex in the *Recherche*) ‘an awkward blend of pathos and farce’.¹⁴ Not only for the reader, perhaps, but also for the narrator, recollecting how as a young man all his over-romanticism amounted to nothing much at all.

As for the protagonist, having gained the kiss he so desired, and finding that physical intimacy involves a clumsiness that reinforces one’s sense of alienation from the other, he is left dealing with a whole new sort of social awkwardness, because Albertine insists on the etiquette which would be expected following a first kiss, while he just wants her to leave as soon as possible. The protagonist describes their clash of expectations about how the evening should proceed, and Albertine’s embarrassment, a strikingly rare thing:

¹³ Richard E. Goodkin, *Around Proust* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 98.

¹⁴ Malcolm Bowie, *Proust Among the Stars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 234.

Bien différente de moi qui n'avais rien souhaité de plus qu'un apaisement physique, enfin obtenu, Albertine semblait trouver qu'il y eût eu de sa part quelque grossièreté à croire que ce plaisir matériel allât sans un sentiment moral et terminât quelque chose. Elle, si pressée tout à l'heure, maintenant sans doute et parce qu'elle trouvait que les baisers impliquent l'amour et que l'amour l'emporte sur tout autre devoir, disait, quand je lui rappelais son dîner :

– Mais ça ne fait rien du tout, voyons, j'ai tout mon temps.

Elle semblait gênée de se lever tout de suite après ce qu'elle venait de faire, gênée par bienséance, comme Françoise, quand elle avait cru, sans avoir soif, devoir accepter avec une gaieté décente le verre de vin que Jupien lui offrait, n'aurait pas osé partir aussitôt la dernière gorgée bue, quelque devoir impérieux qui l'eût appelée. (II, 662)

There is something quietly excruciating about all this, with the passage putting all of its tentacles so accurately on the nerve of a trauma many of us have lived (or so this reader suspects, at least): after the moment of physical fusion comes an awkward split, with one individual wanting separation and the other wanting to cling on. Although the clinging individual may act for reasons of social decorum rather than any real romantic attachment, the dent to their pride is as intensely uncomfortable as a blow to their heart would be painful, and there is a certain cruelty in how the protagonist recognises Albertine's unease at his behaviour (she is twice 'gênée') only to suggest that in her 'bienséance' she is as laughable as Françoise, whose social comportment is notably "off".¹⁵ In fact, it is the protagonist who is socially clumsy – but expressly, it seems – telling her twice more that it is time for her to leave, and doing so as retorts to the most intimate comments Albertine makes to him: and if the first, a compliment, is admittedly a little embarrassing ('Vous avez de jolis cheveux, vous avez de beaux yeux, vous êtes gentil' (II, 663), the second is something quite special, with her speaking of that which has hitherto been confidential: 'Albertine me raconta sur sa famille et un oncle d'Andrée une histoire dont elle avait, à Balbec, refusé de me dire un seul mot' (II, 664).

¹⁵ For a study of the social world of the *Recherche* through an analysis of Albertine, see Jacques Dubois, *Pour Albertine, Proust et le sens du social* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1977).

So instead of returning Albertine's compliment, as would be polite, the protagonist points out that it's getting late, and instead of encouraging her to feel at ease in sharing family secrets, he insists upon her going home, without even escorting her to the door: the protagonist knows exactly what motivates Albertine ('un devoir de confiance que le rapprochement des corps crée' (II, 664), and how uneasy his response makes her feel ('si confuse pour moi de ma grossièreté, qu'elle riait presque pour m'excuser' (II, 664)). What we learn from this, the protagonist's changed behaviour following the kiss, is that physical intimacy is less likely to yield interpersonal communion than it is to produce feelings of awkwardness; discordant reactions to it, a sense of against rather than with, an impatience to be alone frustrated by the necessary rituals which follow a kiss, and a stronger sense of the other's otherness than if the kiss had not happened at all.

4.3 The Avoided Kiss

The protagonist's insistence that Albertine leave, in the scene depicted above, retrospectively becomes one of the most terrible ironies of the novel: the protagonist's feelings soon change dramatically, leading to an obsession with Albertine to the point of his imprisonment of her, and in one of their final scenes together, the protagonist is horrified to find that it is Albertine avoiding his kiss, refusing to actively participate in the rituals of coupledness, just as he himself once refused this. The irony, further, is that the very thing that made the protagonist want to get rid of Albertine as quickly as possible, namely the overwhelming sense of her otherness created by the cold feelings resulting from physical intimacy with her, becomes the force of his desire to keep her close to him: the more disquietingly other Albertine is revealed to be, the more the protagonist feels the need to sustain the relationship. Many critics have written about the perverse basis of the protagonist's love for Albertine, and that is not my focus here. Rather than examining the protagonist's feelings for Albertine in general, I want to look specifically at the awkwardness that is involved in the act of breaking up, the "parting of ways". Throughout *La Prisonnière* we see the protagonist contemplating and sometimes even trying to break things off with Albertine: he makes clumsy attempts to provoke admissions from her which would decide the future of the relationship one way or another, and during one blundering confrontation even goes so far as to bluff a separation (only to swiftly revoke it), in a scene which is painfully awkward for the protagonist, Albertine and reader alike. Pressure is mounting on the protagonist on all sides: his repeated arguments with Albertine are punctuated by letters from his anxious mother, for whom his behaviour would be highly socially embarrassing if he were not

so secretive, but for whom the awkward fact of her son keeping a woman in secret is probably more mentally disturbing than the shame of public scandal would be. And just as the protagonist feels uncomfortable about the way he keeps watch over Albertine, he is uncomfortably aware of being watched: ‘de ma jalousie, de la surveillance que j’exerçais sur Albertine, et desquelles j’eusse tant voulu que Françoise ne se doutât pas, celle-ci ne tarda pas à deviner la réalité, guidée, comme le spirite qui, les yeux bandés, trouve un objet, par cette intuition qu’elle avait des choses qui pouvaient m’être pénibles’ (III, 867).

The awkwardness of breaking up with Albertine is, again ironically, in direct proportion to the awkwardness of their life together. The protagonist is oppressed by the domestic set-up he has established: he lives in a state of constant psychological torture, worrying when Albertine goes out, and troubled, when she stays in, by her comportment; the incongruity between what she says explicitly (‘ce que Albertine me disait sans cesse de son bonheur à la maison’ (III, 848)) and inadvertently (‘L’intention de me quitter [...] ne se manifestait que d’une façon obscure, par certains regards tristes, certaines impatiences’ (III, 848)); the strain effected even when she abstains from expression altogether (‘elle cessait de prendre part à la conversation, non seulement avec la parole, mais avec l’expression du visage [...] Et cette immobilité d’une expression même légère pesait comme un silence’ (III, 851)); the disquieting way she looks at the protagonist while he is speaking, and even when he has finished (‘Je m’étais tu, et pourtant elle continuait à me regarder avec cette attention persistante qu’on prête à quelqu’un qui n’a pas fini de parler’ (III, 900)). There is also the practical awkwardness of living as they do: not only because it is impossible to hide his

obsessive behaviour from Françoise, but even visits from friends are difficult to manage, with the protagonist keeping Albertine hidden. These visits are not only uncomfortable for the protagonist when they occur in *La Prisonnière*, but also create a practical and interpersonal awkwardness later on: when Albertine flees, the protagonist can only engage Saint-Loup to pursue her by admitting that ‘une jeune fille eût habité chez moi tout un hiver sans que je lui en eusse rien dit’ (IV, 20), and Saint-Loup, realising this was the girl he had often asked after, is ‘froissé’ to discover he has been lied to (IV, 20).¹⁶ But because Albertine does secretly live with him, because they cannot have an honest conversation, because they have already performed the conversation of a separation, and then repealed it, for these reasons and others too – because Fortuny gowns have been ordered, because if Albertine leaves she will be taken into another woman’s arms,¹⁷ because it would be better to separate at a happier moment – the thought of breaking-up, an action which would need to be taken, seems as difficult to perform as continuing together without any action is painful.

In the specific scene where action is finally taken, not by the protagonist, but by Albertine, in a shift from her general state of passivity to her determined avoidance of his attempts to kiss, the protagonist’s realisation that this signals the end of their relationship causes him acute anxiety: my argument is that the awkwardness with which he responds to this is not simply an effect of his distress, but also (though perhaps not

¹⁶ For an insightful discussion of how friends and acquaintances are used to further the protagonist’s romantic projects, see Kathy McIlvenny, ‘Proust and the Indirections of Desire: Third-Party Involvement in the Love Relationships of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*’, in Naomi Segal and Gill Rye, eds., *Romanticism and after in France/Le Romantisme et après en France: ‘When familiar meanings dissolve...’*, *Essays in French Studies in Memory of Malcolm Bowie* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011).

¹⁷ For more on the particular intensity of jealousy the protagonist feels once he suspects that Albertine has been sexually involved with other women, see the work of Elisabeth Ladenson, who argues that the horror of lesbianism, for the novel’s jealous males, lies in its fundamental difference to the ‘inversion’ of male homosexuality: in *Proust’s Lesbianism* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1999).

entirely consciously) a way of dealing with it. On one level, the protagonist's clumsiness in attempting again and again to kiss Albertine – launching himself on her even when she has already turned her face away the first time (III, 900); calling her back the moment she reaches the door, with the weak excuse that he is not yet sleepy (III, 900); encouraging her to undress under a blatantly artificial guise of concern for her comfort (III, 901); making a last-ditched attempt which involves contradicting his previous comments ('je lui dis: "Bonsoir, il est trop tard", parce que cela ferait qu'elle m'embrasserait, et nous continuerions ensuite' (III, 902)) – shows quite clearly how desperately he wants this kiss. And we know why he wants it: it would be soothing after their violent argument earlier on, a certain symbol of their reconciliation, and the proof that he still possesses her. But then again, the protagonist learnt early on, as we saw in the second part of this chapter, that the act of kissing is more liable to produce alienation than intimacy, and so his insistence on it seems rather perverse. A better way of understanding his persistent clumsiness, I want to suggest, based on evidence in the text, is that what the protagonist finds soothing is not the desired (and rejected) kiss, but the very awkwardness created by striving for it. If it is my logic that seems a little perverted, it is a formulation of the narrator's own maxim, espoused in *Albertine disparue*: 'la manière désastreuse dont est construit l'univers psycho-pathologique veut que l'acte maladroit, l'acte qu'il faudrait avant tout éviter, soit justement l'acte calmant' (IV, 40).

It is in the context of the protagonist's attempts to win Albertine back to him that the narrator espouses a psychopathology according to which behaving awkwardly, doing the very thing which will be most clumsy, provides the only means of calm,

momentary though it is. The narrator stresses that the protagonist does not thoroughly think through the potential pitfalls of his action here, a false “farewell” letter to Albertine, and that he writes it ‘Sans s’arrêter, en effet, aux intentions qu[‘il] énonçai[t] dans cette lettre [...] suffisait pour lui prouver qu[il] désirai[t] qu’elle revînt’ (IV, 40). It is the voice of the older and wiser narrator who can reason through in advance why this letter is a bad idea: because he would probably feel compelled to send another some days later, containing the truth of his feelings, and would eventually turn up on her doorstep, ‘peut-être à ce que je n’y fusse pas reçu. Et sans doute c’eût été, après trois énormes maladroites, la pire de toutes, après laquelle il n’y avait plus qu’à me tuer devant sa maison’ (IV, 40). The narrator’s comprehensive reasoning is brought to an abrupt end, by a new paragraph, with the reminder that it is his younger self writing the letter: ‘Mais je ne prévis rien de tout cela’ (IV, 41). But although the protagonist claims he acts in the belief that ‘Le résultat de cette lettre me paraissait être au contraire de faire revenir Albertine au plus vite’ (IV, 41), it is reasonable to posit that on an unconscious, if not a subconscious level, he does have a sense of the clumsiness of this action, and indeed the difficulty involved in writing the letter – he cries throughout – is one of the reasons he undertakes to do so. What I am gesturing towards is that there is a certain pleasure to be taken in acting awkwardly, not in the manner of Charlus, a socially “awkward customer” for the purposes of secrecy and the pleasures of pride, but rather as a way for the lonely individual, trapped in a mental prison of obsession and doubt, to escape this for a moment, with a concrete action in the world and interaction with the other. After all, even when the protagonist obtained his first kiss from Albertine in *Le Côté de Guermantes*, he felt a disappointing nothingness and an acute lack of

relationality. In contrast, although the kiss Albertine avoids in *La Prisonnière* is a terrible wound – ‘je souffrais horriblement du coeur’, he says (III, 902) – the actions he takes to acquire it, awkward though they are, make the protagonist break through some of his boundaries, even if they do not allow him to break hers. By the same reasoning, their uneasy domestic life is preferable to separation, not only because the protagonist is concerned with possessing Albertine, but also because it feels to be the closest thing to interrelationality he has.

At a certain point during Albertine’s captivity, not long before the rejected kiss and her departure a few days after, the protagonist has a quiet but profound epiphany on the value of living with Albertine as he does, as difficult as it is:

Sans doute la solitude eût mieux valu, plus féconde, moins douloureuse. Mais si j’avais mené la vie de collectionneur que me conseillait Swann (que me reprochait de ne pas connaître M. de Charlus, quand, avec un mélange d’esprit, d’insolence et de goût, il me disait: “Comme c’est laid chez vous!”), quelles statues, quels tableaux longuement poursuivis, enfin possédés, ou même, à tout mettre au mieux, contemplés avec désintéressement, m’eussent – comme la petite blessure qui se cicatrisait assez vite, mais que la maladresse inconsciente d’Albertine, des indifférents, ou de mes propres pensées, ne tardait pas à rouvrir – donné accès hors de soi-même, sur ce chemin de communication privé, mais qui donne sur la grande route où passe ce que nous ne connaissons que du jour où nous en avons souffert, la vie des autres? (III, 888-889)

The passages stresses both the interrelational and personal potential of awkwardness. First, a contrast is presented between the way we relate to objects (‘au mieux, contemplés avec désintéressement’) and the way we relate to other human subjects, ‘douloureux[ement]’: the suggestion is that even if the other remains painfully alien, their capacity to provoke feelings in us is already a promising step beyond indifference. Although to have known Albertine is, at times, to feel as though he has known ‘une poupée de cire’ (II, 286), wax dolls nonetheless have more effect (or, affect) than

‘statues’. Indeed, however distant other individuals might seem, we are bound together by a shared trait – ‘la maladresse’ – just as the sentence brings together the clumsiness of ‘Albertine, des indifférents, [et ses] propres pensées’, that is, his “propre Soi”. Second, the imagery of a diverted path is employed to convey how awkwardness contains an existential as well as an interpersonal value: the difficulty of dealing with other people leads to a richer experience of oneself. Awkwardness is, to return to the etymological definition with which this thesis began, a wrong direction, in the wrong way: and just as the protagonist finally discovers his geographical error about the ‘côté de Méséglise’ and the ‘côté de Guermantes’ – they lead into and not away from one another – so too does he glimpse here that while his relationship with Albertine has been anything but smooth-sailing, it has forced him out of his own boundaries, ‘sur ce chemin de communication privé, mais qui donne sur la grande route’. My commentary is not an attempt to espouse a redemptive reading of awkwardness, throwing it into the category of “painful experience” which is ultimately redeemed, according to many critics, by its transformation into art. (Although, and I will say more about this in the conclusion, it is not insignificant that the narrator’s maxim about ‘l’acte maladroit, l’acte qu’il faudrait avant tout éviter [...] l’acte calmant’ (IV, 40) pertains to the act of writing (a letter).) As the recent work of one Proust scholar demonstrates, the weight of skepticism throughout the novel unsets the possibility of a final “Truth” in *Le Temps retrouvé*. Prendergast writes: ‘his novel does not simply proffer the aesthetic solution to the problem of living but also enacts a struggle with the solution as a problem in its own right’.¹⁸ My purpose in the latter part of this chapter, then, has been to draw attention to

¹⁸ Christopher Prendergast, *Mirages and Mad Beliefs: Proust the Skeptic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 18.

awkwardness as a phenomenon situated somewhere between the pain of isolation and the impossible ideal of fusion. At the beginning of the thesis, my suggestion was that awkwardness was not merely a social concept, but equally implicated in existential concerns. Proust's depiction of awkward kisses – rejected, achieved and avoided – has provided the consummate example of what the *acte maladroite* is and why it matters: an encounter at once physical and psychological, socially governed and privately experienced, an imperfect coalescence with the other which grants the individual an expanded mental space.

Conclusion

In the first paragraph of this thesis, the subject of my research was set out as follows: what forms does awkwardness take, and how does it affect the relationships between characters in the *Recherche*? The closing paragraph of the final chapter contained a brief version of the answer: awkwardness occurs during human interaction, as a type of feeling and a manner of behaving; it takes bodily and psychological forms, and is shaped by social practices and private concerns; it is variously cause and effect of deterioration in the characters' relationships, as a sort of negative intimacy, confirming the narrator's intuition that coalescence with another other person is imperfect at best and impossible at worst; but it does, more promisingly, expand and even break certain mental boundaries for the individual, and as such awkwardness is a crucial aspect not only of the protagonist's relationships with family, friends, social acquaintances and lovers, but also the one he has with his own mind.

Awkwardness was a promising subject for original research, because its thematic role in the *Recherche*, and French literature more broadly, has never been discussed. But as a pleasingly fresh subject in the extensive field of scholarship that is Proust studies, my starting point involved two great challenges. First, because the term awkwardness is one we use in so many different ways and contexts, as a concept for analysis it risked proving unstable and unwieldy. Awkwardness has expanded far beyond its etymological significance which denotes being turning the wrong way: today, it is used to signify a vast range of experience and material, including styles of movement, discourse and art, and relationships between humans, cultures and political states. Even when it is narrowed down, to a bodily and psychological phenomenon experienced by an

individual in the course of interaction with others, awkwardness has a double nature: “I feel awkward” indicates the affective, “I am awkward” suggests the behavioural. My objective was to cover both of these things, and it was my ambition, in the tradition of some of the finest scholars, to investigate the complex boundaries between the world and the self as presented in the *novel*. Critics like Deleuze, Bersani and Bowie found ways of discussing the *Recherche* which reflected its extraordinary double nature as a “human comedy” built through extensive social portrait and a “modernist” excavation of the fragmented self. It seemed to me that awkwardness might also provide a way of discussing the novel’s depiction of society and the self, and the relationship between the two.

The second challenge I faced was an extension of the first. Because no single definition of awkwardness contains the width and depth of the phenomenon, because it has become a sort of umbrella term for various things which overlap but are distinct, how could I use this indefinable and thus untranslatable word to discuss a text written in the French language? During research time spent in France, every time I was politely asked for my “*sujet de thèse*” there followed a slightly awkward moment in which I attempted to provide, in French, the desired one-line explanation. Initially, for the sake of brevity, I settled for “*la gêne*”, but as time went on this seemed untenable: after all, I was not writing a thesis about embarrassment, but about awkwardness. (Tellingly, the same question posed by anglophone interlocutors, and answered with ‘Awkwardness in Proust’, almost invariably provokes another question: what do you mean by awkward?)

There is no single French term for my theme, but as we have seen in the course of this thesis, the *Recherche* is replete with a lexicon that not only denotes various forms

of awkwardness – a *délicat* or *difficile* situation, an act that is *maladroit* or *déplacé*, a person who is *maladroit* or *gauche*, commits *gaffes* or *maladresse* or feels *mal à l'aise* – but also helps to describe and conceptualise it. Through close readings of passages in the *Recherche* which employed this vocabulary, a multi-faceted but coherent vision of awkwardness emerged, as described above. The value of this project, then, has not only been to examine what proved to be a crucial undercurrent of Proust's novel, but also to discover how fruitful it can be to approach a French text through the English language. The thesis chapters were organised by types of relationship (family, social, friendship, love) and forms of awkwardness (the gaze, identity and its performance, conversation and kissing), and this allowed me to cover much of the novel's content and many of its characters. Awkwardness took us to some of the novel's best-known passages – the *drame du coucher* and the grandmother's death, the social execution of Charlus, and the first kiss with Albertine – as well as showing us the richness of scenes and details which have garnered less attention from critics, including the moment the protagonist catches the monk spying on him, the way professions shape personal relationships, what is said “between the lines” at Doncières, and the simple act of walking to the door. We have also been able to deal with the different tonalities in the novel, its pathos and its humour, because awkwardness took us from blunders and gaffes to masochism and grief, sometimes even in the same scene. Nonetheless, there has been one notable gap, with my analyses taken from all volumes of the *Recherche* except for its last, *Le Temps retrouvé*. As such, the concluding remarks below synthesise the observations of this thesis – their significance and two potential directions for further research – with reference to the awkwardness depicted in *Le Temps retrouvé*.

In the first chapter of this thesis, we observed how the young protagonist's interactions with his family involved uncomfortable moments as he learned to read the look in their eyes, and failed to dissimulate the emotion contained in his own. When the aged protagonist arrives at 'Le Bal de têtes', he is startled and horrified by the aged faces of his friends, and knows that his feelings should be kept from showing on his face or in his words: 'un instinct m'avait averti de les dissimuler le plus possible' (IV, 502). But to do so proves as difficult now as it was all those years ago as a wide-eyed child and earnest adolescent. Seeing M. de Cambremer's decomposed face, the protagonist is paralysed with indecision about how to respond: 'je restais hébété, n'osant regarder cette sorte d'anthrax dont il me semblait plus convenable qu'il me parlât le premier' (IV, 511). Although M. de Cambremer's face recalls to the protagonist his own impending mortality, such uncomfortable uncertainty about how to respond to others has been an issue from the very beginning of the novel, and in the context of family life and love just as much as in the social world and with strangers: we saw the protagonist too paralysed by fear to respond to his father's unexpected kindness he shows on the night of the *drame du coucher*, and too incapacitated by regret to acknowledge his uncle's greeting, causing a fatal rift. The awkwardness produced by the act of looking emerged as a significant meeting point between the social and the psychological. On the one hand, the notion of the "awkward look" was shown to be a social construction. The protagonist feels he shouldn't let M. de Cambremer catch him looking at the anthrax because it would show a lack of social grace, but in the course of the grandmother's death we discovered that for Françoise the idea of feeling awkward about looking at something which is visually fascinating is unheard of: she has never

been told that ‘il serait plus délicat de ne pas paraître remarquer’, and people in her social class ‘ne cherchent pas à dissimuler l’impression, voire l’effroi douloureux causé en eux’ by the sight of death or anything else (II, 615). This point was not afforded a thorough treatment due to the scope of this thesis – I was looking at manifestations of awkwardness, rather than its absence – but could prove an interesting subject for further research on Proust’s depiction of emotions according to social class.¹

The second chapter of this thesis shifted attention from awkward feelings between members of the protagonist’s family to the prevalence of awkwardness in the social scenes involving Charlus, who, we saw, deliberately made his acquaintances feel uncomfortable in order to distract from his homosexuality, but whose identity and way of behaving eventually became the catalyst of a profound uneasiness which led to his exclusion and demise. Although the protagonist is by no means socially excluded at ‘Le Bal de tête’, he does experience an unsettling realisation that he is no longer completely attuned to the social environment. Initially, the protagonist takes pleasure in realising that he is no longer the intimidated young man we saw in Chapter Two, nervous to be present at such a gathering and feeling awkward about being introduced. Now, he remarks, there is a sense of ease in such matters:

Bloch m’ayant demandé de le présenter au maître de maison, je ne fis à cela pas l’ombre des difficultés auxquelles je m’étais heurté le jour où j’avais été pour la première fois en soirée chez le prince de Guermantes, qui m’avaient semblé naturelles, alors que maintenant cela me semblait si simple de lui présenter un de ses invités, et cela m’eût même paru simple de me permettre de lui amener et présenter à l’improviste quelqu’un qu’il n’eût pas invité’.
(IV, 531)

¹ A starting point for such work would be Edward J. Hughes’s writing on ‘The primitivism of Françoise’, in his monograph *Marcel Proust: A Study in the Quality of Awareness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 69-73.

What is remarkable about this transformation is that the protagonist not only feels at ease conforming to the social conventions which so disconcerted him many years ago, but also that he feels comfortable to the point of being able (theoretically, at least) to break the rules of etiquette.

But awkwardness, as we have observed throughout the thesis, is not merely governed by social conventions but also arises when the individual is struck by the more existential gap between themselves and another. So although the protagonist, as an older man has developed a better grasp on social codes, or an indifference to them, or indeed because the specific social conventions around introductions are becoming more relaxed, he finds that the most simple discussion with another guest causes unease because of the clash between their perspectives. In conversation with a young woman, the protagonist experiences the vast gap between their points of social reference not merely as a fact, but as a feeling: '[elle] n'était pas seulement élégante et charmante, elle était intelligente aussi, et la conversation avec elle était agréable, mais m'était rendue difficile parce que ce n'était pas seulement le nom de mon interlocutrice qui était nouveau pour moi, mais celui d'un grand nombre de personnes dont elle me parla' (IV, 541). The point is repeated once again (although perhaps because the editing of this final volume was incomplete when Proust died), and with a different term for the unease: 'Ma conversation avec l'élégante amie de Bloch fut charmante, car cette jeune femme était intelligente, mais cette différence entre nos deux vocabulaires la rendait malaisée [...]' (IV, 542). Worst still, even the points of reference they do share create a deeper sense of disconnect for him, because for the vocabulary of names they do have in common, their respective impressions of the individuals fitted to these names are so

dissimilar, as though they have each seen the same actor, but in a different play. Awkwardness, then, arises through social contact, particularly in periods of social flux, but it is a significant feeling in terms of existential questions of who one is and how one becomes something else and Robert Pippin's 2005 essay, 'On "Becoming Who One Is" (and Failing): Proust's Problematic Selves',² would serve as a useful starting point for further research on the philosophical implications of awkward encounters in the *Recherche*.

As the third chapter of the thesis demonstrated, gaffes made in conversation cause embarrassment, but acute unease is caused when one interlocutor tries to manipulate or involve another in their deceit. We saw that Bloch's propensity for causing awkward moments in the course of conversation were the result of his inadvertent gaffes and grandiloquence, on the one hand, and the social judgements made of him as a Jew, on the other. During the 'Le Bal de têtes', the protagonist finds himself making a gaffe when a young woman suggests they dine together one evening: 'Comme je répondais: "Si vous ne trouvez pas compromettant de venir dîner seule avec un jeune homme", j'entendis que tout le monde autour de moi riait, et je m'empressai d'ajouter: "ou plutôt avec un vieil homme"' (IV, 509). But just as Bloch's gaffes have not been fatal to his social ascent – indeed we discover him, in this scene, transformed into the rather elegant Jacques du Rozier – nor is the protagonist's gaffe, now, something he perceives as a social disaster. Instead, his misplaced words and the ensuing embarrassment serve to aid the protagonist to glimpse himself from another's perspective (the words with which he described himself were, he realises 'celles

² Robert Pippin, 'On "Becoming Who One Is" (and Failing): Proust's Problematic Selves', in *The Persistence of Subjectivity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 307-38.

qu'aurait pu, en parlant de moi, dire ma mère' [...] je me plaçais pour me juger au même point de vue qu'elle' (IV, 509)), and I will say more about the association of awkwardness and revelation shortly.

The feelings produced by Bloch's gaffes and grandiloquence was contrasted, in the third chapter, with those felt by the protagonist as he discovers that Saint-Loup, initially appearing to be a more polite and scrupulous friend than Bloch, is deceptive and manipulative, and this well before his homosexuality is revealed later in the novel. By "Le Bal de têtes" Saint-Loup has been killed, but his aunt is there, and a conversation with her shows the protagonist that although awkwardness is frequently produced by the way that people change, or are revealed to be different from what he had thought, it can be equally disconcerting to encounter an individual whose character has remained the same, however much their face, body, or even conversation capacity has changed. The description of how the Duchesse de Guermantes's sparkling wit has decayed along with her looks creates a queasiness for the reader: 'Quand le moment de placer un mot venait, elle s'interrompait pendant le même nombre de secondes qu'autrefois, elle avait l'air d'hésiter, de produire, mais le mot qu'elle lançait alors ne valait rien' (IV, 582). But the protagonist makes the mistake of thinking that with her own decline in social brilliance, perhaps she might have a little more empathy for others, only to discover – in a gaffe – that she is just as uncaring as before. Having gently pointed out to the Duchesse that it must be rather 'pénible' (IV, 603) for her niece-in-law, Gilberte, to have to watch the poetry performance by her late husband's former mistress, Rachel, the protagonist senses the blunder he has made before she has even voiced an answer:

Je vis se former dans le visage de Mme de Guermantes cette barre oblique qui relie par des raisonnements ce qu'on vient d'entendre à des pensées peu agréables. Raisonnements inexprimés, il est vrai, mais toutes les choses graves que nous disons ne reçoivent jamais de réponse ni verbale, ni écrite. Les sots seuls sollicitent en vain deux fois de suite une réponse à une lettre qu'ils ont eu le tort d'écrire et qui était une gaffe; car à ces lettres-là il n'est jamais répondu que par des actes, et la correspondante qu'on croit inexacte vous dit Monsieur quand elle vous rencontre, au lieu de vous appeler par votre prénom. (IV, 604)

The various threads constituting the awkwardness of this exchange are those we observed in Chapter Three; gaffes often arise through sincere expression, and are caused by particular circumstances rather than universal morals; the more delicate the thing said is, the less likely it is to receive a verbal or written response; the face speaks where the mouth doesn't; there is a risk of making the same errors in one single or even multiple conversations; the awkwardness of one discussion seeps into the next, and causes an irreparable distance between the two speakers.

The presence of awkwardness in intimate moments and its capacity to create a sense of interpersonal distance emerged throughout this thesis, but most poignantly in the fourth chapter. The protagonist's kisses – rejected, accepted and avoided by Albertine – were catalysts for feelings of isolation and alienation, and these botched kisses work as a metaphor, it seems, for all action undertaken in the pursuit of the beloved, which results only in a greater sense of distance. But it is in the space of awkward feelings, the protagonist discovers, by the end of the novel, the space of embarrassing memories, social malaise, and interpersonal discomfort, that the writer will, on reflection, find his material. *Le Temps retrouvé* ends with the protagonist making a retreat from the world he has just returned to: inspired by an awkward movement, the act of stumbling on a paving stone, he will write about the people he has known and, perhaps, transform the awkwardness they have lived into art.

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