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Conversation and Creation: Proust's Critical Antithesis

Il ne faisait pas de démarcation entre l'occupation littéraire où, dans la solitude, faisant taire ces paroles qui sont aux autres autant qu'à nous, et avec lesquelles, même seuls, nous jugeons les choses sans être nous-mêmes, nous tâchons d'entendre, et de rendre, le son vrai de notre cœur,—et la conversation.¹

Plus que tout j'écarterais ces paroles que les lèvres plutôt que l'esprit choisissent, ces paroles pleines d'humour, comme on en dit dans la conversation, et qu'après une longue conversation avec les autres on continue à s'adresser facticement à soi-même et qui nous remplissent l'esprit de mensonges, ces paroles toutes physiques qu'accompagne chez l'écrivain qui s'abaisse à les transcrire le petit sourire, la petite grimace qui altère à tout moment, par exemple, la phrase parlée d'un Sainte-Beuve, tandis que les vrais livres doivent être les enfants non du grand jour et de la causerie mais de l'obscurité et du silence.²

From its first formulation in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* to its reiteration in the final pages of *Le Temps retrouvé*, the notion of conversation is fundamental to Proust's esthetic. "Conversation" is the negative pole of the dichotomy between the language of everyday discourse, written and spoken, and the privileged language of literary creation. The term has a decidedly pejorative connotation, both in Proust's castigation of Sainte-Beuve and in the attempts of the Narrator of *A la Recherche* to formulate an esthetic of his own. Conversation epitomizes that social side of a writer by which Sainte-Beuve evaluated literary works: it represents the superficial public language of the writer rather than the authentic inner language of genuine creativity. It has its written counterpart in journalism: in his essay on the style of Flaubert, Proust quite explicitly equates conversation and Sainte-Beuve's chatty journalistic style, in a reference to "la délicieuse mauvaise musique qu'est le langage parlé . . . de Sainte-Beuve."³

Proust expands his analogy between conversation and journalism in an examination of the relationship established between the journalist/speaker and the reading public/listener. Sainte-Beuve's journalis-

tic utterance is dependent for its completion on the reaction of his readers, just as the words of a speaker in the Chambre des Députés are completed by the "vives protestations à droite, salve d'applaudissements à gauche, rumeur prolongée"⁴ which greet his remarks, the sign that some communication has taken place. This dependance ensures that both journalism and speech occur primarily in accordance with the tastes and taboos of a specific reading public or the immediate social entourage. It follows that any linguistic utterance made under these conditions will be an expression of the *moi superficiel*. To Proust it is not surprising, given Sainte-Beuve's attitudes to language, implied in his evaluation of writers and expressed in his practice of journalism, that he conceives of literature as "des sortes de Lundis que peut-être on pourra relire, mais qui doivent avoir été écrits à leur heure, avec souci de l'opinion des bons juges, pour plaire, et sans trop compter sur la postérité."⁵

The critical position taken in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* is reflected in several ways in the narrative context of *A la Recherche*. Conversation is the linguistic domain most frequently offered to the Narrator's scrutiny as he makes his way from Combray through the *matinées*, *dîners* and *soirées* of the Faubourg Saint-Germain and the supposedly more intellectual milieu of the Verdurin clan. Gradually he realizes the creative and communicative limitations of social discourse, but not before giving in to this most basic of *divertissements*. The conversational context also exposes the Narrator to conceptions of literature which are for the most part variations on the Beuvian theme, in the assumption that any writer of wit and originality should also be a brilliant *causeur*, and in the tendency to ornament one's purely social utterance with literary allusion. The interference and interpenetration of one linguistic domain by another reflect a common misconception both of language and of literature which Proust considers basic to Sainte-Beuve's critical errors. Conversation, which has a primarily analogical use in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, becomes in *A la Recherche* the actual context of the Narrator's social, intellectual, emotional and esthetic experience, before it is expanded into a metaphor summarizing the non-creative activity of the *moi superficiel*. The narrative exploration of the mechanism of conversation reveals not only its limitations within its own context, but also its irrelevance as a literary criterion, and its inferiority as a vehicle of creative expression. Conversation provides a narrative framework for the novel, a cadre through which the Narrator progresses to the perception, which has so long eluded him, of the nature of esthetic creation. Its presence in the contacts and conflicts between the sterile and the creative, which are the poles of the Narrator's experience, both substantiates the original

argument of *Contre Sainte-Beuve* and continues in the creative structure the theoretical basis of Proust's esthetic.

It is obvious that Proust's distinction between creative and sterile language, between the genuinely literary and conversation, bears little relation to conventional objective distinctions of *niveaux de langue* between *langue écrite* and *langue parlée*. In a few instances, such as a letter written by a *valet de pied*, Proust derives considerable comic effect from a style which mixes the most common spoken usage with the most pretentious forms of formal speech, and spelling which is for the most part phonetic (II, 566-567). Even here, where Proust reaches the extreme of juxtaposition of the two domains of language, the comic effect is due particularly to the awkward and completely ridiculous presence of literary allusion in a non-literary context. In general, however, Proust's and the Narrator's linguistic distinctions are established more subjectively in the elaboration of a personal esthetic. His main interest is the poetic potential of language, whether spoken or written.

In the speech of Marie Gineste and Céleste Albaret, and in that of Françoise, the Narrator finds a true *poétique du langage parlé*. The pleasant speech of Françoise, full of archaisms and the picturesque imagery inherent in proverbial forms of expression, has delighted the Narrator since the days at Combray. The language of Marie Gineste and Céleste has "quelque chose de si littéraire, que, sans le naturel presque sauvage de leur ton, on aurait cru leurs paroles affectées" (II, 46). The imagery characteristic of their speech is natural and unself-conscious; to the Narrator it has the spontaneity and naïveté of primitive art, and not surprisingly is frequently associated in his mind with the figurative arts of the Middle Ages, the period from which their language springs. Such language is neither innovative nor expressive of individuality. It is the heritage of generations and the product of long usage, expressing both history and geography, time and place. Pleasant language by its nature is derivative; but its imitation is that of linguistic tradition. The imitation characteristic of conversation, on the other hand, is encouraged by snobbery, fashion, and prestige. Imitation in the *langage du peuple* is natural and rooted in custom; the other form of imitation is in a sense a linguistic graft.

The *langage du peuple* is not restricted to one social class, but finds an echo at the other end of the social scale, in the speech of the Duchesse de Guermantes:

... le vocabulaire [de Mme de Guermantes], habituellement limité à toutes ces vieilles expressions, était savoureux comme ces plats . . . devenus si rares, où les gelées, le beurre, le jus, les quenelles sont authentiques . . . (II, 502).

Whatever the social class of the speaker, the key words in the Narrator's comment on the speech of the Duchesse, of Marie Gineste and Céleste are "naturel" and "authentique", and it is these qualities which create the poetry of their language. A comparison between the language of the Duchesse and the consciously archaic and occasionally vulgar speech affected by her husband the Duc, is sufficient to indicate the difference between the genuinely poetic and the imitative. Similarly, Legrandin and Bloch are the antithesis of Marie Gineste or Céleste; their language is full of literary allusion, but it is conscious and pretentious, devoid of the natural literary qualities of the speech of the two peasant women. In the case of Legrandin, nearly every word is an image or a literary echo, and Bloch alternates between excessively familiar reference to the great French writers and wildly exaggerated echoes of the literary style of antiquity. Meeting the Narrator and Saint-Loup at Balbec his issues this invitation:

Cher maître, et vous, cavalier aimé d'Arès, de Saint-Loup-en-Bray, dompteur de chevaux, puisque je vous ai rencontrés sur le rivage d'Amphitrite, résonnant d'écume, près des tentes des Menier aux nefes rapides, voulez-vous tous deux venir dîner . . . ? (I, 747).

Legrandin, Bloch and the Duc de Guermantes represent the effort to embellish language which is unoriginal and fundamentally anti-poetic.

No one is entirely immune to this imitative tendency, to this grafting of new forms on to the linguistic core. Even the language of Françoise, evocative and picturesque, is gradually debased by imitation of the *argot* spoken by her daughter. Saint-Loup, a slave to linguistic fashion, constantly adds new terms to his vocabulary, and in fact, borrows much of his language from the milieu frequented by his mistress. Odette copies Mme Verdurin; and the young Marquise de Cambremer, formerly Mlle Legrandin, marks her rise in social rank by adopting the pronunciation used by her husband's family. Slavish imitation in the adoption of the prevailing forms of language is the hallmark of anti-poetic discourse. It reaches its height in the various social groups which compose the Proustian community, groups whose rank-and-file individual members disappear as separate entities, their language far more expressive of their adhesion to a particular collectivity than revealing of their inner being. The Narrator suggests, moreover, that language precedes and predetermines thought, rather than the contrary; this being the case, identity of speech indicates identity of thought:

. . . Swann et la princesse [des Laumes, later the Duchesse de Guermantes] avaient une même manière de juger les petites choses qui avait pour effet—à moins que ce ne fût pour cause—une grande analogie dans la façon de s'exprimer et jusque dans la prononciation (I, 342).

... dans les cénacles littéraires . . . tout le monde a une même manière de prononcer, d'énoncer et, par voie de conséquence, de penser . . . (II, 461).

Although imitation is a basic characteristic of conversation, the Faubourg Saint-Germain pays constant lip service to elegance and originality of language. New terms are frequently held up for admiration or ridicule in salon discussion. This apparent contradiction is easily resolved on examination of attitudes to language revealed in the actual practice of the salon, as well as in comments directly concerning it. Language, in fact, as the Faubourg Saint-Germain conceives of it, is simply an *accessoire de parade*; conversational brilliance ranks in the hierarchy of social values with such attributes as fine horses, fashionable clothes, and beautiful mistresses. The *beau parleur*, whose language is *spirituel*, is endowed with all the prestige of the creator. Hence the importance of *l'esprit des Guermantes* to the Duchesse; witty conversation is her stock-in-trade, and her reputation is to a large extent based on the *dernières d'Oriane* which are constantly circulated by salon gossip. This view of language as a social ornament is, according to Proust, the cause of the errors of Sainte-Beuve's literary criticism. As if to emphasize the analogy, the Marquise in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* criticizes Balzac because in person he was "un homme très commun, qui n'a dit que des choses insignifiantes."⁶ Her counterpart in *A la Recherche*, the Marquise de Villeparisis, comments that Stendhal was "d'une vulgarité affreuse", but grants him the merit of being "spirituel dans un dîner" (I, 710). Predictably enough, the Marquise is an admirer of Sainte-Beuve, "qui avait bien de l'esprit" (I, 711). The Duchesse considers *esprit* a rare and superior form of intelligence, but as the Narrator discovers, it is a form of language used primarily for display purposes.

Any utterance, written or spoken, requires a recipient—listener, audience, or reader—for completion, but it is particularly in social discourse that the rôle of the recipient becomes all-important. Language, for the Duchesse de Guermantes, Charlus, Mme Verdurin, and all the members of the Proustian community, is performance, and as such is dependent on the judgment of others. Language is the basis of that self-image which the individual receives in the reaction of those around him. Speech is therefore tailored to fit the canons of taste of a specific public, like the language of journalism to which Proust refers in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*. It is a relationship in which the audience determines the performance. Whether the speaker be a social leader like the Duchesse de Guermantes, or an intellectual despot like Mme Verdurin, the relationship is the same. The language of *esprit* is perhaps particularly vulnerable in this respect. It is the form of lan-

guage which *le monde* considers creative; it satisfies whatever esthetic of language society may be said to possess. Analogous in this respect to the language of genuine creativity, it demands from its listeners an evaluative response similar to that sought by the literary creator. But the dependence on the audience is much more pronounced in the case of Mme Verdurin, who is anything but *spirituel*. Though her language consists largely of verbal bludgeoning of her *fidèles* into recognition of her authority, it betrays a deep-seated fear of desertion by them. Hence her determined, and at times frantic, efforts to maintain regular attendance at her *mercredis*. Even an apparently successful relationship with one's audience does not prove entirely satisfactory, however, since social discourse takes place on such a superficial level. The result is prolonged conversation, as if real communication would increase in proportion to the number of words spoken. And prolonged conversation simply deepens the dependence on the audience: the Narrator notes

ce besoin de prolonger, de faire durer les entretiens . . . qui . . . s'étend . . . généralement à tous ceux qui, n'offrant à leur intelligence d'autre réalisation que la conversation, c'est-à-dire une réalisation imparfaite, restent inassouvis même après des heures passées ensemble et se suspendent de plus en plus avidement à l'interlocuteur . . . dont ils réclament . . . une satiète que les plaisirs sociaux sont impuissants à donner (III, 286-287).

The notion of language as performance suggests the theatricality of conversation and suggests comparison between this anti-poetic level of language and the poetry of great theatre as interpreted by an actor of genius. Bloch and Legrandin provide negative contrasts to Céleste and Françoise; the Duchesse de Guermantes may be seen in a similar negative relation to the great actress La Berma. The Duc de Guermantes, the "impresario" of the Duchesse, sets the stage for the witticisms of his wife; in fact, so thorough is his performance of his rôle that he does everything but sound the traditional *trois coups* to announce one of the conversational masterpieces of the Duchesse. The stage set, the "actress" performs, and the scene is completed by the smiles of recognition at her wit, and by murmurs of approbation and repetition of the *mot* throughout the assembly. La Berma needs no such artifice as is provided for the Duchesse by the Duc's *mise en scène*. The Duchesse quotes, but does not interpret, the words of literature; for her, literary allusion is merely another element of her social performance. La Berma, on the other hand, creates "autour de l'oeuvre [the play] une seconde oeuvre vivifiée aussi par le génie" (II, 49). In the cadence of her language, in the coordination of metre and thought, the

Narrator finds a mastery worthy of a poet (II, 49). Once more in this instance Proust explores analogous uses of language, one belonging to the realm of conversation and the other to that of poetry. Although the Narrator does not explicitly make such comparisons, they do act as a prelude to his speculation in the final pages of *Le Temps retrouvé* as to the means by which the transformation from conversation to art can be affected.

The Narrator himself falls prey to the temptation of conversation, to the facility of thought and expression it affords, and to the rôle it plays as his own *accessoire de parade*. The use of such expression is suggestive of the continual diversion from his literary vocation that is created by his social existence. As long as he leads the life of a *mondain*, his language will remain at the level of conversation. Even his dialogues with himself are of this superficial sort:

Seul, je continuais à fabriquer les propos qui eussent été capables de plaire aux Swann et, pour donner plus d'intérêt au jeu, je tenais la place de ces partenaires absents. . . . Silencieux, cet exercice était pourtant une conversation et non une méditation, ma solitude, une vie de salon mentale où c'était non ma propre personne, mais des interlocuteurs imaginaires qui gouvernaient mes paroles et où j'éprouvais à former, au lieu des pensées que je croyais vraies, celles qui me venaient sans peine, sans régression du dehors vers le dedans, ce genre de plaisir tout passif que trouve à rester tranquille quelqu'un qui est alourdi par une mauvaise digestion (I, 579).

He feels obscurely his literary vocation; but his first published writing is a newspaper article, a literary *faux-semblant*. It is not surprising that he compares himself to Sainte-Beuve in this regard, particularly in his concern for the reactions of his own public, the Guermantes circle. His exercise of *conversation écrite*, like that of Sainte-Beuve, is a means of enhancing his image in society. It matters little whether his public understands the thought; the article finds its real function in "la répétition de mon nom et comme une évocation embellie de ma personne" (III, 570). Thus the demonstration of the distinction between creativity and sterility in language is fortified by first-hand experience, as well as in the Narrator's observation of the linguistic phenomena which surround him.

Conversation renders impossible the true communication of the *moi profond* that can be achieved through creation. But even on the level of conversation, the verbal mechanism of stimulus and response which passes for communication is inhibited by the misconceptions of language characteristic of some of its users. Their fundamental error is a naïve assumption of universally valid systems of reference, the belief that any given linguistic utterance has the same meaning for all its

users. Accompanying this is an unconscious belief in the identity of word and referent, the belief that a word is somehow the thing it represents. From these errors Proust has derived some of his most comic effects, while demonstrating at the same time the communicative insufficiencies of conversation.

Cottard is a near-pathological case of linguistic incomprehension, in his acceptance of every word at its face value. Things are what they seem, and words have only one meaning; hence his inability to understand the slightest *détour* or allusion. Cottard's laboriously-articulated witticisms are learned by rote, without understanding, since they involve play on word meaning which he is incapable of perceiving. Even when he has acquired a greater measure of linguistic finesse, his persistent questioning of idioms shows that he has not entirely assimilated such semantic units. Cottard is oblivious to the oblique nature of speech, to the meaning which it suggests only indirectly, as he demonstrates in a conversation with "la Patronne." Mme Verdurin is chagrined at his reaction to her false modesty. Having invited Cottard to hear Sarah Bernhardt, she remarks coyly, "Vous êtes trop aimable d'être venu, Docteur, d'autant plus que je suis sûre que vous avez déjà entendu Sarah Bernhardt, et puis, nous sommes peut-être trop près de la scène." Instead of the protestations which she obviously expects, Cottard's reply takes at face value each term of her utterance: "En effet, on est beaucoup trop près et on commence à être fatigué de Sarah Bernhardt. Mais vous m'avez exprimé le désir que je vienne. Pour moi, vos désirs sont des ordres" (I, 201). Mme Cottard is as naïve as her husband; in particular, she is oblivious to sexual double-entendre, as is obvious in her reaction to a conversation concerning Charlus:

Mme Cottard ne distingua que les mots 'de la confrérie' et 'tapette', et comme dans le langage du docteur le premier désignait la race juive et le second les langues bien pendues, Mme Cottard conclut que M. Charlus devait être un Israélite bavard (II, 1038).

As for Mme Verdurin, so unaware is she of multiple meanings of certain expressions, that she quite unconsciously speaks the truth about Charlus: "Quelle tapette!" (II, 278). She multiplies occasions of error, making unconscious reference to Charlus' homosexuality: she offers to lend him a book, saying, "Je pense qu'il vous intéressera. C'est de Roujon. Le titre est joli: Parmi les hommes" (II, 1045). The expression "en être" becomes the archetype, in its frequent recurrence, of referential difference. To Charlus it denotes his membership in the confrérie of homosexuals; to the Verdurins it refers to membership in any group. M. Verdurin's comment to Charlus that "Dès les premiers mots que nous avons échangés, j'ai compris que vous en étiez" (II, 941)

gives Charlus the disagreeable impression that his sexual anomaly is known to the "petit clan", when in fact M. Verdurin is referring with envy to Charlus' position in aristocratic circles. "En être" pursues Charlus throughout his relationship with the Verdurin clan, and is but one of many indications of the illusory nature of communication: the users of conversation are unaware of multiple meaning in language, with results that are obvious only to the perceptive observer.

Fragments apparently intended for inclusion in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* present fictional characters whose literary opinions are remarkably similar to those of Sainte-Beuve himself as Proust interprets them. Proust continues an implicit refutation of Sainte-Beuve in the many discussions of literature which occur in salon conversation in *À la Recherche*. The Marquise de Villeparisis is not the only member of the Guermites coterie whose opinions of literature are cast in the Beuvian mould. Another member of the Guermites group criticizes Victor Hugo for his emphasis on the ugly and the grotesque. "Il y a déjà bien assez de laideurs dans la vie. Pourquoi au moins ne pas les oublier pendant que nous lisons?" Such a criticism echoes the charge levelled at Balzac by the Marquise in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*,⁷ or Sainte-Beuve's criticism of Baudelaire's poetry, which, according to Proust, he sees as "pétrarquaisant sur l'horrible."⁸ The language of literature is utterly foreign to Mme Arpajon, who undoubtedly expresses the feelings of most of the *mondains* present as she exclaims of an unidentified poem by Victor Hugo: ". . . il y a des choses ridicules, inintelligibles . . . c'est tout excepté du français . . ." (II, 491-492). The poem in question, as the Narrator eventually realizes, is "lorsque l'enfant paraît." Perhaps most similar to the attitude of Sainte-Beuve is the underlying notion of literature as essentially a decorative social phenomenon. The Duchesse de Guermites may recite Victor Hugo with sensitivity, but it is unnoticed by those present. They are far more impressed with the apparent extent of her literary knowledge. Other discussions reduce literature to a pretext for the famous *boutades* of the Duchesse, as in her judgment of Zola: ". . . il a le fumier épique" (II, 499). The Duchesse's ability to quote from poetry, to cite pell mell the names of authors and works, is a far cry from the habit of the Narrator's mother and grandmother of commenting on the events of daily existence with quotations from the greatest French writers. Again Proust balances the sterile and the creative. As used by the Duchesse and by many others like her, literature contributes to a general tendency to verbal exhibitionism. The words of Racine and Mme de Sévigné in the speech of the mother and grandmother, on the other hand, the juxtaposition of the everyday phenomenon and the poetic comment, suggest their intuition of art as the transmutation of reality.

Sainte-Beuve finds many counterparts among those whose discussions of literature animate salon conversation. But recurring esthetic discussion, whether of literature or of music or painting, serves not only to invalidate, implicitly or explicitly, Sainte-Beuve's critical position, but also to point up the laziness and sterility inherent in most reactions to art.

Ils [les amateurs] sont plus exaltés à propos des oeuvres d'art que les véritables artistes, car leur exaltation n'étant pas pour eux l'objet d'un dur labeur d'approfondissement, elle se répand en dehors, échauffe leurs conversations, empourpre leur visage; ils croient accomplir un acte en hurlant à se casser la voix: 'Bravo, bravo', après l'exécution d'une oeuvre qu'ils aiment. Mais ces manifestations ne les forcent pas à éclaircir la nature de leur amour, ils ne la connaissent pas. Cependant celui-ci, inutilisé, reflue même sur leurs conversations les plus calmes, leur fait faire de grands gestes, des grimaces, des hochements de tête quand ils parlent d'art (III, 892).

The true artist, unlike the amateur, differentiates between art and conversation, and maintains the separation between the two by avoiding direct conversational reference to his art. Saint-Loup, the amateur, talks constantly, though rarely with understanding, about art; Octave, the writer, never refers to his literary activity (III, 606).

The Narrator's experience provides in *A la Recherche* a seemingly continuous negative demonstration of the social exercise of language. The contacts between the language of literature and that of conversation emphasize the distinctions between the two domains, whether literature is used as a stylistic ornament, as it is by Bloch, or whether as a subject of discussion by *salonnards* incapable of understanding the nature of true creativity. The simple act of speech is not always conversation; the poetic language of Céleste and the interpretative genius of La Berma attest to this fact. But the speech of a writer is usually judged by Sainte-Beuve's purely conversational criteria of facility, elegance, and wit. The novelist Bergotte fails the conversational test in several instances: his expression reflects the subtlety and precision of his thought, and disappoints listeners who expect to hear him speak only of such vague subjects as "l'éternel torrent des apparences", or the "mystérieux frissons de la beauté". Moreover, the chief characteristic of his speech is its "débit prétentieux, emphatique et monotone" (I, 550); in the conversational context it matters little that this trait is "le signe de la qualité esthétique de ses propos et l'effet, dans sa conversation, de ce même pouvoir qui produisait dans ses livres la suite des images et l'harmonie" (I, 550).

This suggestion of the relationship between spoken and written styles suggests an attenuation of the absolute dichotomy outlined by

Proust in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*. But while there are echoes of Bergotte's literary style in his speech, it remains true that ". . . la parole humaine est en rapport avec l'âme, mais sans l'exprimer comme fait le style. . ." (I, 550). The difference in the two forms of expression is one of nature, not of degree. This is borne out in the many imitations of Bergotte, particularly those of Morel, which appear, significantly enough, in journalistic form. For years Morel has excelled in verbal imitations of Bergotte's speech, and his newspaper articles are simply written copies of spoken forms. The influence of the spoken language is unproductive: "Cette fécondation orale . . . ne produit que des fleurs stériles" (III, 768n).

Morel's imitations are flawed because they do not contain "cette transposition qui en eût fait du Bergotte écrit" (*Ibid.*). It is the notion of transposition which indicates to the Narrator the process by which the language of conversation becomes the language of art. If Bergotte's speech bears the imprint of his written style, it is his speech, imitative and perhaps banal in its original state, which has nourished his writing:

Si particulier qu'il soit, tout ce bruit qui s'échappe des êtres est fugitif et ne leur survit pas. Mais il n'en fut pas ainsi de la prononciation de la famille Bergotte . . . Il y a dans ses livres telles terminaisons de phrases où l'accumulation des sonorités se prolonge . . . dans lesquelles je retrouvai . . . un équivalent musical de ces cuivres phonétiques de la famille Bergotte (I, 554).

It is Bergotte who shows the Narrator that the essence of creation is not the quality of the subject matter but the quality of the transformation of even the most banal reality. ". . . le génie [se trouve] dans le pouvoir réfléchissant et non dans la qualité intrinsèque du spectacle reflété" (I, 555).

When he first meets Bergotte, the Narrator is almost as naïve in matters of conversation as Cottard. His apprenticeship of conversation begins in the most superficial social sphere, as he learns to interpret the *formules de politesse* of society utterances, whose meaning is often at considerable variance with the words themselves. When language becomes the main element of the barrier which separates him from total knowledge and possession of Albertine, he is faced with the necessity of carrying out the most intricate and meticulous analyses in an effort to extract the truth from the fabric of the lie. It is the constant decoding of Albertine's language which teaches him that words are only symbols, and that meaning is to be found beyond words.

J'avais suivi dans mon existence une marche inverse de celle des peuples qui ne se servent de l'écriture phonétique qu'après n'avoir considéré les caractères que comme une suite de symboles; moi qui, pendant tant d'années, n'avais cherché la vie et la pensée réelles des gens que dans

l'énoncé direct qu'ils m'en fournissaient volontairement, par leur faute j'en étais arrivé à ne plus attacher . . . d'importance qu'aux témoignages qui ne sont pas une expression rationnelle et analytique de la vérité; les paroles elles-mêmes ne me renseignaient qu'à la condition d'être interprétées à la façon d'un afflux de sang à la figure d'une personne qui se trouble. à la façon encore d'un silence subit (III, 88).

It is significant, moreover, that Albertine's words are genuinely self-revealing more during her pastiche of the Narrator (III, 129-131) than at any other time: the words she uses belong properly to the realm of creative literary language, and unlike the words of conversation, they express the *moi profond* rather than the *moi superficiel*. In his social and emotional experience, the Narrator is constantly effecting the transformation of words from appearance into meaning; it is this treatment of language which prepares his realization that the creation of art from reality is an analogous process. With this realization comes the esthetic certainty of which Bergotte has provided the early example. In the same way as Bergotte has created art from the "Salon de mauvais goût où il avait passé son enfance et les causeries pas très drôles qu'il y tenait" (I, 555), the Narrator understands that his book will be created from the banal and commonplace events of his own existence. It is significant that his notion of reality is that which underlies the words spoken in response to a given situation.

Si j'essayais de me rendre compte de ce qui se passe . . . au moment où une chose nous fait une certaine impression . . . quand, flatté d'être bien reçu chez les Guermantes . . . je ne pouvais m'empêcher de dire . . . 'Ce sont tout de même des êtres exquis avec qui il serait doux de passer la vie', je m'apercevais que ce livre essentiel, le seul livre vrai, un grand écrivain n'a pas, dans le sens courant, à l'inventer, puisqu'il existe déjà dans chacun de nous, mais à le traduire. Le devoir et la tâche d'un écrivain sont ceux d'un traducteur (III, 890).

The Narrator is beset by the temptations of conversation throughout the development recounted in *A la Recherche*. He has followed the "voies buissonnières du monde", as one critic calls the society of erudites like Bichot, *beaux parleurs* like Legrandin and the Duchesse de Guermantes, and false poets like Bloch.⁹ He has become an accomplished practitioner of conversation and its written equivalent, journalism. More and more, however, the dichotomy of language imposes itself on him. Conversation finds its source in the most common domain of society and fashion; the language of art expresses that which is most individual. Only by forsaking conversation in himself can the Narrator reconcile the two antithetical extremes of language in that transposition of the everyday into the ideal book which at the end of *A la Recherche* he is ready to write.

In the final pages of *Le Temps retrouvé*, the Narrator expresses a typically Proustian warning about the interpretation of literature: "... dès que l'intelligence raisonneuse veut se mettre à juger des oeuvres d'art, il n'y a plus rien de fixe, de certain: on peut démontrer tout ce qu'on veut" (III, 893). It is obviously an oversimplification to read *A la Recherche* as nothing more than an illustration of a rather basic critical distinction made in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*. Yet the Beuvian error, as Proust conceives of it, is echoed throughout the novel: in the conceptions of literature which are in turn presented to the Narrator; in the language of social discourse which, unanalysed, is the basis for evaluation of its user; in the journalism which is a mere written continuation of conversation; in the nature of the relationships created by conversation; in the *anti-poétique* of such language. The Narrator discovers the errors and progresses beyond them to new insight; the examination of language carried out in the creative context implicitly corroborates the analyses and conclusions of the earlier critical elaboration.

NOTES

1. Marcel Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, in *Contre Sainte-Beuve précédé de Pastiches et mélanges et suivi de Essais et articles*, ed. Pierre Clarac and Yves Sandre (Paris, 1971), p. 224. The volume, as distinct from the work, will be referred to as *Contre Sainte-Beuve* . . .
2. Marcel Proust, *A la Recherche du temps perdu*, ed. Pierre Clarac and André Ferré (Paris, 1954), III, 897-898. Further references to *A la Recherche* will be cited in the text by volume and page number.
3. Marcel Proust, "A propos du style de Flaubert," *Contre Sainte-Beuve* . . . , p. 596.
4. Marcel Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, pp. 227-228: "Il en est d'un article comme de ces phrases que nous lisons en frémissant, dans le journal, au compte rendu de la Chambre . . . et dans la composition desquelles l'indication qui la précède, et les marques d'émotion qui la suivent, entrent pour une partie aussi intégrante que les mots prononcés."
5. *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, p. 228.
6. *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, p. 283.
7. *A la Recherche*, II, 497. Cf. *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, p. 284: "... ce Balzac, c'était un mauvais homme. Il n'y a pas un bon sentiment dans ce qu'il écrit, il n'y a pas de bonnes natures. C'est toujours désagréable à lire, il ne voit jamais que le mauvais côté de tout."
8. *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, p. 244.
9. Serge Gaubert, "La conversation et l'écriture," *Europe* (Aug. - Sept. 1970), p. 184.

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