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Aristocracy and Modernism: Signs of Aristocracy in Marcel Proust's *À la Recherche du temps perdu*



Duncan McColl Chesney

The heir to Balzacian obsession, Proust, for whom every social invitation seems an “open Sesame” to restored life, escorts us into labyrinths where primeval gossip conveys to him the dark secrets of all splendour, until this becomes, under his too close and yearning gaze, dull and cracked. Yet the *placet futile*, the preoccupation with a historically-condemned luxury class whose superfluity any bourgeois could show by calculations, the absurd energy squandered on the squanderers, is more thoroughly rewarded than the unclouded eye for the relevant.

—Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, § 107¹

The Salon, Distinction, and Class Struggle

It is undeniable that “class struggle” constitutes a central part of the world of Proust’s novel, if we mean by this the major cultural battle fought out during the Third Republic between the ascendant bourgeoisie and the persistent *ancien régime*, to borrow Arno Mayer’s

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Verso, 1974).

phrase.² The dominance of the bourgeoisie, claims Mayer, has been grossly overstated in the historiography of the transition from feudalism to early and then industrial capitalism, and to Modernity. While that dominance economically, and in terms of financial and government posts, may or may not be overemphasized, certainly cultural hegemony was by no means secured overnight, as if the Revolution, in overturning a society of orders politically, had revolutionized the rules of society and art. The old order persisted until the final decimation of the vestiges of nobility in the Great War and the fundamental (technological) changes in art, pastimes, and public gatherings (for instance, through the moving picture) definitively modified the cultural landscape.

This continuity in the social sphere can be observed clearly through a focus on the specific space of the *salon*. One can discern there how the cultural hegemony of the elite was cashed out in specific codes of comportment and conversation and how, through the ruses of distinction and the “laws of imitation,” *homo hierarchicus* persisted even while the political basis of a society of orders was undermined by absolutist and republican evolutions. What are at stake in the salon are the forms of distinction that govern social interaction among the ruling classes in France during this period. Distinction, a term I borrow from Pierre Bourdieu,³ is most broadly an evaluative recognition of difference within a general economy of symbolic capital. More specifically, as I intend the term here, it means adherence to, or interpellation by, a set of rules governing the manifestation and discernment of elements of a differential, formal system of signs which bear the burden of expressing, legitimizing, and reproducing power, prestige, and ideological class domination. The salon is a theater of distinction, and, as a space dominated by the nobility, is a veritable workshop of the “signs of aristocracy.” Perhaps more famously, the salon is also the center of the cultural and artistic life of France.

The codes of distinction were modified but retained over the course of the Enlightenment period to such an extent—one need

² For a study of Proust in this respect, see Michael Sprinker, *History and Ideology in Proust* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994). Mayer’s book, indispensable for any study on class and Modernism, is *The Persistence of the Old Regime* (New York: Pantheon, 1981).

³ For example, but not exclusively, in *La Distinction: critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Minuit, 1979).

only think of the contemporary stereotypes of France as the most cultivated and conversible of cultures—that they survived the upheaval of the Revolution, and were relatively easily resuscitated after the fall of the political society that gave rise to them, by the Empires and the Restorations of the nineteenth century.⁴ Several key figures, among them Balzac and Sainte-Beuve, served a reinvention of the tradition of the salon, which thus persisted as a social institution even as it became a *lieu de mémoire*, a culturally sustaining fantasy, for republican France.

These salons continued to structure the social world of the Third Republic. Artistic salons grew in number and importance over the course of the nineteenth century, causing modifications in the constitutions of more social and aristocratic gatherings.⁵ Above all, the arts—music, painting, theater—reached their pinnacle as signs of cultural capital by the Third Republic, making artists an even more essential element to successful salons than they were in the Enlightenment. However, the disappearance of a legitimate aristocracy did not diminish the appeal of nobility to the imagination of the French ruling and artistic classes. The well-known figure of the dandy is a sort of fusion of the poor bohemian artist and the carefree aristocrat. It combines a system of codified behavior, dress, and speech with a newer conception of aesthetics: the representation of self in society as an artistic project.⁶ Salons continued to play a vital role in the social life of France, and the young Proust put a great deal of effort and emotion into succeeding in these venues, making, like his narrator in the *Recherche*, a remarkable ascent. The excitement over and investment in worldly life we discover in Proust's biography and his letters, however, only serves to confuse readers of the *Recherche*, indeed of any of Proust's writings. Can we really imagine Proust all along as cynical and lucid about his social life, maintaining like Flaubert that “le but de la vie de l'écrivain est dans son œuvre, et que le reste n'existe ‘que pour l'emploi d'une illusion à décrire’”⁷? What I propose to do here

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, in a related context, describes the stability of the codes of distinction in this respect as “la contre-Révolution permanente” (*Mallarmé* [Paris: Gallimard, 1986] 35).

⁵ This history is documented well in Pierre Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l'art: Genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), especially in Part I, 75–245.

⁶ For an in-depth study of this development see Domna Stanton, *The Aristocrat as Art* (New York: Columbia UP, 1980).

⁷ Marcel Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, ed. Pierre Clarac and Yves Sandre (Paris: Gallimard-Pléiade, 1971) 265.

is to read *À la recherche du temps perdu* with respect to the codes of aristocracy reproduced in and dominating salon life as they govern the social world of the novel. I will argue the formative role of precisely the “signs of aristocracy” in the narrator’s artistic development (and thus in Proust’s model of artistic subjectivity) and explore the ways in which salon society dominates Proust’s novel, especially in its greatest critical dimension, as a Balzacian summation of his society (thus, as a critique of what we now call Modernity).

It is in this specific context of Third Republic “class struggle” that the young Proust enters the world of the *belle époque* salons and the world of art. As Gilles Deleuze has argued in *Proust et les signes*, Proust’s narrator’s coming to understand the substance and function of art, his apprenticeship to its sign system (exemplified in the works of Bergotte, Vinteuil, Elstir), is interrelated with a whole task of decipherment and semiotic education.⁸ The sensual signs (the madeleine, cobblestones, napkin, and so forth), the signs of love (in the stories of Odette and Albertine), the worldly signs (in the drawing rooms of the Guermantes) and artistic signs are all texts to be read, but understood only after the long, *champollionian* apprenticeship—one which is not, it turns out, undialectical in that there is no lost time (*temps perdu*), no false step whose negation is not sublated into a higher form of understanding on the way to Art.⁹ The worldly signs, the signs of distinction, are crucial in the narrator’s *formation* towards semiotic lucidity. All relations—amorous or social—clearly reveal their motivations, their ambiguities, and their temporality to the practiced decoder who can thus elicit a Truth from behind their façade and overcome their temporality.

In this sense, class—and aristocracy in particular—is a vital structuring category of Proust’s fictional world, as it was of his “real” world. The Guermantes define Marcel’s relationship to the world: at first through their inaccessibility, the insuperable distance between Swann’s way and theirs. This generates desire on the narrator’s part, and therefore attentiveness to, even obsession with, distinction and the worldly (snobbism). Next comes his fascination with the name, and his subsequent “love” for Mme de Guermantes; then his arrival in

⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Proust et les signes* (Paris: PUF, 1964). As Sprinker puts it: “If the *Recherche* narrates the tale of Marcel’s maturing into the Narrator who has told it, the matter of that tale has as much to do with his coming to understand the structures and determinants of social life as it does with his having gained insight into the nature of authentic aesthetic creation” (47). The two achievements are essentially interrelated.

⁹ Admittedly, this Hegelian language is foreign to Deleuze’s study.

society, the gradual coming to knowledge, and with it, disillusionment; and finally the last *matinée chez la Princesse de Guermantes* with its disappointments and epiphanies. It is through the Guermantes that Proust makes his sophisticated, unsentimental attack on society (aristocratic and bourgeois). The increasing number of sociological studies on Proust, accentuating his contemporaneity with the nascent French academic discipline of sociology or reading various aspects of Third Republican society through his great Balzacian *summa*, attest not only to a change in academic fashions, but also answer to a decided social-critical dimension of the book which has always to some degree been recognized.¹⁰ Evidently I owe a great deal to these studies, but I think that sociological and historical insights must, in order to serve a *literary* criticism, detect and focus on the *aesthetic* necessities that arise from historical situations. It will be the task of this essay to take the history of the salon and a sociological account of its cultural import and read them into the structure of Proust's book, in the hope that a clearer picture of the functioning of its fictional world can be derived.

Le Salon mental

It seems, perhaps, a *prima facie* contradiction of the well-known final judgments of the *Recherche* to study Proust and society, Proust and aristocracy. Only readers of the nineteen-teens, with no distance from literary Modernism, or with little patience for Proust's style (for example, Gide in 1912) could really take Proust for a straightforward

¹⁰ As Roland Barthes suggested in 1971, "L'œuvre de Proust est beaucoup plus sociologique qu'on ne dit: elle décrit avec exactitude la grammaire de la promotion, de la mobilité des classes. [. . .]" ("Une idée de recherche" in *Le Bruissement de la langue: Essais critiques IV* [Paris: Seuil, 1984] 330). Among the scholarship of note since Barthes articulated his research idea—and above and beyond the earlier studies of Walter Benjamin, Emilien Carassus, Jean-François Revel, and others well known in the Proust bibliography—I cite Pierre Zima, *Pour une sociologie du texte littéraire* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1978) and *L'Ambivalence romanesque: Proust, Kafka, Musil* (Paris: Peter Lang, 1988); Livio Belloï, *La Scène proustienne* (Paris: Nathan, 1993); Michael Sprinker, *History and Ideology in Proust*; and Catherine Bidou-Zachariassen, *Proust sociologue: De la maison aristocratique au salon bourgeois* (Paris: Descartes & Cie, 1997). Bidou-Zachariassen plots the rise of the bourgeoisie through the contrasting careers of Sidonie Verdurin and Oriane de Guermantes (cf. especially her graphic model, 23). Her work is the most relevant to my project, and indeed informs the very structure of my study, for it is her inattention to the codes of aristocracy and the history of the salon that leads to a somewhat undernuanced description of the social dynamic at work in *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

dandy and snob. Readers of the book since its canonization, and especially those readers of the *Bal de têtes* in the *Temps retrouvé*, can have no illusions about Proust's judgment of society. Society is a "néant," a void peopled by vacuous and vain social climbers, snobs, semi-literate vestiges of an old aristocracy, anti-Semites—a whole gamut of tedious and shallow people whose company can be counted as nothing but time wasted or lost.

At one point the narrator laments "cette vie de mondaine dont le désœuvrement et la stérilité sont à une activité sociale véritable ce qu'est en art la critique à la création," in which the Duchess "étendait aux personnes de son entourage l'instabilité de points de vue, la souff malsaine du raisonneur qui pour étancher son esprit trop sec va chercher n'importe quel paradoxe encore un peu frais et ne se gênera point de soutenir l'opinion désaltérante que la plus belle *Iphigénie* est celle de Piccini et non celle de Gluck, au besoin la véritable *Phèdre* celle de Pradon."¹¹ The absolute sterility and emptiness, not only of these judgments, but of the questions posed in the first place, is depressingly clear. Indeed, Proust's criticism of society and the salon is so deep that he even rejects the legitimacy of its characteristic mode of interaction: conversation.

Worldly conversation is empty, for it is constrained by forms and codes. One's interlocutors are often fools and snobs; its values are pace and *esprit*, not real dialogue. Conversation uselessly occupies one's energies, and caught in the barren game of wit, one is distracted from more productive forms of attention.¹² Social conversation is not even enjoyable (2: 817). Worse yet, the habitual effect of "social-life" presents a real danger for the development of the self. Ultimately, conversation corrupts even the imagination, for the mind becomes habituated to a sort of internal conversation that gradually becomes a true hindrance to thought. At one point the narrator has a premonition of this internal *néant* as he imagines scenarios in which he impresses Swann and gains further access to Gilberte:

Je me posais à moi-même des questions fictives choisies de telle façon que mes traits brillants ne leur servissent que d'heureuse repartie. Silencieux,

¹¹ Marcel Proust, *À la Recherche du temps perdu*, ed. Jean-Yves Tadié et al. 4 vols (Paris: Gallimard-Pléiade, 1987–1989) 2: 761.

¹² Unable to recall the appearance of a salon room he had been in, the narrator suggests, "le besoin de parler n'empêche pas seulement d'écouter, mais de voir, et dans ce cas l'absence de toute description du milieu extérieur est déjà une description d'un état interne" (2: 841).

cette exercise 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. (1: 569)

The “mental salon life” can be taken as the definitive figuration of the “brain damage” one risks by frequentation of salons and constant engagement in worldly conversation. The great example of the effect of this pernicious habit on an artistic sensibility is of course Swann, whose scholarly and literary inclinations, in this empty worldly atmosphere, degrade into idolatry and impotence.

The Hidden Truth

I want to look now at a specific episode that is fundamental to my reading of aristocracy in the *formation* of the narrator, for his nascent artistic impulse is inextricable from the early experience of distinction. As so often in the *Recherche*, an infatuation begins with a name, Guermantes, and the imaginative embellishment of the fascinated mind of a child coming to know his surroundings and their history filtered through legend. In fact, the narrator will never fully lose his association of the Guermantes with the landscape and history of Combray, with the first experiences and impressions of childhood, with the mystery of the fabled French past. And it is no coincidence that immediately after his first exploration of the mystery of Guermantes (1: 169), the narrator, dreaming of scenarios in which he knows and pleases the duchess, thinks of his artistic ambition. “Je rêvais de Mme de Guermantes. [. . .] Elle me faisait lui dire le sujet des poèmes que j'avais l'intention de composer. Et ces rêves m'avertissaient que puisque je voulais un jour être un écrivain, il était temps de savoir ce que je comptais écrire” (1: 170). In a sense this is simply the desire to be valued by the dreamed-of Duchess, the desire for her desire figured through the narrator's own nascent (aesthetic) value system. And no sooner does the fantasy conjure the real concern of his getting to work than “mon esprit s'arrêtait de fonctionner, je ne voyais plus que le vide en face de mon attention, je sentais que je n'avais pas de génie ou peut-être une maladie cérébrale l'empêchait de naître” (1: 170).

Soon after this period, the situation arises, in the marriage of Dr.

Percepied's daughter, for young Marcel actually to see, if from afar, the dreamy Mme de Guermantes, who turns out to be "une dame blonde avec un grand nez, des yeux bleus et perçants, une cravate bouffante en soie mauve, lisse, neuve et brillante, et un petit bouton au coin de nez," and with a general redness of visage that bore only "des parcelles d'analogie" with a portrait of her he had had the fortune to see, filtered through his fantastic imagination (I, 172). Deeply disappointed, the narrator is nonetheless not long deflated, for the persistence of the real vision battles in his mind with the Idea of her name, until the image is readjusted. Moments later, willfully ignoring anything Mme de Guermantes's face has in common with more banal women, the narrator can affirm, "Qu'elle est belle! Quelle noblesse! Comme c'est bien une fière Guermantes, la descendante de Geneviève de Brabant, que j'ai devant moi!" (I: 174).

Following this event in the passage from "Combray II" we again find the narrator despairing over his lack of talent. Not, however, out of pure nascent sexual desire or desire for affirmation (although there are knightly gallant dreams of vulnerability and domination), or not only out of such desire does he thus fantasize. The passage continues: "bien en dehors de toutes ces préoccupations littéraires et ne s'y rattachant en rien, tout d'un coup un toit, un reflet de soleil sur une pierre, l'odeur d'un chemin me faisait arrêter par un plaisir particulier qu'ils me donnaient, et aussi parce qu'ils avaient l'air de cacher au-delà de ce que je voyais, quelque chose qu'ils invitaient à venir prendre et que malgré mes efforts je n'arrivais pas à découvrir" (I: 176). This obscure call disturbs the narrator in his inability to perceive in the objects the cause of his pleasure. "Comme je sentais que cela se trouvait en eux, je restais là, immobile, à regarder, à respirer, à tâcher d'aller avec ma pensée au-delà de l'image ou de l'odeur." Why? Because this is precisely the lesson he has just learned from Mme de Guermantes. Her appearance, with its flaws and common elements, might not speak its value to anyone, but the narrator knows that a glorious past of power, romance, and dignity shines forth from the eyes and visage of the duchess. He knows this because in a sense he, through her name, endowed her with all of her glory.

A half-truth has suggested itself to the artistically-inclined narrator, enabled by his quickly self-preserving reassessment of Mme de Guermantes. The world is full of objects that emit complex signals, but how are they to be read? It is precisely at this point that the famous episode of the steeples of Martinville occurs. Marcel and his

parents, out on a longer walk than usual, meet Dr. Percepiéd who collects them in his coach, but must make a medical visit in Martinville-le-Sec before he can return them home. The narrator propped in front with the coachman then experiences one of the key epiphanies of the *Recherche* as he watches the changing relation of the steeples and their deceptive distance from the coach (1: 177–78). In a flash the narrator grasps the insight that he lacked in the face of the hearkening objects of his walks: it is he, it is the coach, the subject that is moving, changing, not (just) the object. The search cannot limit itself to the object “ne se rapportant à aucune vérité abstraite.” It is the subject, the perceiver who supplies that link, just as it had been the narrator who furnished Mme de Guermantes with her glory. Immediately,¹³ this insight is articulated by the narrator in a creative impulse. And this first glimmer of the role art will play not only in communicating, but also in helping to perceive the truths of nature and society is established here in a way inextricable from the appeal and romance of Mme de Guermantes. Her image will undergo a great deal of scrutiny over the course of the next few thousand pages, but it will never entirely lose the power it has in this enabling moment of the narrator’s artistic vocation.

Mme de Villeparisis

Another episode illustrates well the sentimental and semiotic education of the narrator. Mme de Villeparisis, as we know from the first Balbec sequence in *À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, is a Guermantes cousin (aunt of the Duke and Duchess) who has become somewhat *déclassée* over the years because of her artistic and literary commitments. Mme de Villeparisis’s salon is the only representation in Proust’s book of the aristocratic literary salon so important to the history of French letters and consequently for the purposes of this study. There is, of course, in the *Recherche* a whole gamut of salon types. At one extreme is the purely social, aristocratic gathering of the princess de Guermantes described in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*. Somewhat less extreme is the duchess de Guermantes’s salon described in *Le Côté de Guermantes II*. Oriane is more idiosyncratic, more open to

¹³ Actually, not immediately. The narrator’s first impulse is to talk about it, have a conversation. “Le cocher, qui ne semblait pas disposé à causer, ayant à peine répondu à mes propos, force me fut, faute d’autre compagnie, de me rabattre sur celle de moi-même et d’essayer de me rappeler mes clochers” (1: 178).

artistic trends and more committed to the necessary aesthetic dimension of fashionability than her cousin Marie-Gilbert. In the middle is Mme de Villeparisis who, with the “spirit of a second-rate writer,” yet a born and bred Guermantes, is at the real center of the aristocratic and cultural exchange of the period. Further in the direction of art is Sidonie Verdurin, who will of course exemplify the shift in the social kaleidoscope throughout the book, culminating in her replacement of Marie-Gilbert as the Princesse de Guermantes (a no less remarkable rise than that of Gilberte Swann [de Forcheville de Saint-Loup], but more important for a study of the role of art and aristocracy in the book). On the other side of Mme Verdurin is Odette, whose gatherings lack aristocratic glamor and any profound commitment to art, but simplify the signs of both into pure fashionability.

In a way, if the Duchess de Guermantes and Mme Verdurin represent the two crucial elements of the social story of the *Recherche*, Mme de Villeparisis, as the hinge between them, pinpoints the essential relation between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy as it is played out in the artistic and cultural sphere. If the aristocratic cousins of Mme de Villeparisis (Saint-Loup, the Duke and Duchess de Guermantes and so forth) were not forced into contact with a wider cross-section of the artistic and academic bourgeoisie (the narrator and Bloch, Legrandin, the historian, the writer G***, and so forth), the victory of Mme Verdurin would not be possible. Her accumulation of cultural (and other) capital is contingent on her ever-changing stable of artists and academicians. There had to be a preliminary *rapprochement*, a gesture from both directions (“up” from the bourgeoisie and “down” from the aristocracy). The object and emblem of this peace is art.

As the narrator enters Mme de Villeparisis’s salon, she is seated at her desk, apparently in the process of painting a floral still life (2: 486–87). Among the guests already assembled (the bourgeois always seems to arrive early) are an archivist, a solemn and intimidated historian of the Fronde (both present on business), and a young dramatic author, who is none other than Marcel’s childhood friend Bloch. Mme de Villeparisis entertains this crew by talking of aristocrats and courtly history. This is interrupted by the arrival of Alix, the second of the three Fates (Parcae) of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, fallen but illustrious ladies who hold on to what little prestige they can through family connections but who no longer, for forgotten transgressions, belong to the highest echelons of their society. Alix is scoping out the guests for possible recruits for her own Friday group

(indeed whispering an invitation to the narrator!), and proceeds to argue with Mme de Villeparisis over a portrait of the Duchess of Montmorency, Liszt, and other points of snobbish one-upmanship. This is interrupted by the arrival of Mme de Guermantes, whom Mme de Villeparisis hardly even greets, and then, uninvited, Legrandin, the snob, who proves himself embarrassingly overeager to please.

The scene is well set here: the artistic pretensions of the hostess, the presence of a variety of pedants and upstarts as well as rivals and illustrious relatives. Everyone is making her campaign of distinction in a general performative display that is quite bewildering, though not to the narrator, who seems to float in and out of various conversations relatively easily.¹⁴ At this point the narrator contemplates the Duchess who, as Mme de Villeparisis's niece, has stopped by as a matter of familial duty. Once again he muses, "Son nom, comme il était accompagné de son titre, ajoutait à sa personne son duché qui se projetait autour d'elle et faisait régner la fraîcheur ombreuse et dorée des bois de Guermantes au milieu du salon, à l'entour du pouf où elle était. Je me sentais seulement étonné que leur ressemblance ne fût pas plus lisible sur le visage de la duchesse" (2: 501–02). This is, as we have seen, the projective imagination of the neophyte narrator, still learning about the world and his role in its interpretation. The next sentence, however, comes from the much wiser retrospective narrator.

Plus tard, quand elle me fut devenue indifférente, je connus bien de particularités de la duchesse, et notamment [. . .] ses yeux, où était captif comme dans un tableau le ciel bleu d'une après-midi de France, largement découvert, baigné de lumière même quand elle ne brillait pas; et une voix qu'on eût crue, aux premiers sons enroués, presque canaille, où traînait, comme sur les marches de l'église de Combray ou la pâtisserie de la place, l'or paresseux et gras d'un soleil de province. (2: 502)

I shall have occasion later to analyze this association of Mme de Guermantes with France and the peasantry. For the moment I should point out that the comparison is offered, in this passage, as a truth

¹⁴ "In *A la recherche du temps perdu*, the work of distinction begins with the imagined position of the narrator, able, increasingly, to disengage himself from the world around him, to see himself as neutral, truth-seeking, and [. . .] without signs. From this vantage point, he is able to perceive the world in terms of pattern and repetition, and to make sense of, music out of, what might otherwise be perceived as a cacophony of voices. From this vantage point, he is able to overlook the role of his desires and ethnic identity forming his judgments of social issues." Lynn R. Wilkinson, "The Art of Distinction: Proust and the Dreyfus Affair," *MLN* 107 (1992): 992.

that will survive, indeed will only be possible after the disillusionment of the narrator with Mme de Guermantes and her world.

Distinction and the Affair

One further episode during Mme de Villeparisis's tea party must be noted, however, for at a certain point, through the very marked Bloch and the fatuous diplomat Norpois, the Dreyfus Affair enters squarely into the *matinée* and into Proust's novel. A great deal has been written about Proust's treatment of the Affair, about his actual assiduous defence ("I was the first Dreyfusard")¹⁵ and the complex metamorphosis of this commitment in the literary text, about which the least that can be said is that it teaches a lesson in the danger of mistaking the two Marceles. For while we are given to assume the narrator's Dreyfusard stance, the novel is much more concerned with analyzing the role of the Affair on French society than it is in taking sides (in Julia Kristeva words, to "dépasser la souffrance juive pour atteindre le style de Saint-Simon").¹⁶ Indeed Proust is quite willing to paint Bloch with no little contemporary anti-Semitic coloration.¹⁷ Bloch's emblematic exteriority to polite society—the unassimilable Jew—is richly developed during the course of this tea party. His gaffes serve negatively to accentuate the coherence and force of tacit social rules. What is more, his agony, his sacrifice (notwithstanding the ultimate victory of Jacques du Rozier in a changed society) is quite necessary to the event as well: that is why he is there (in addition to his nascent dramatic talent).¹⁸

Hannah Arendt's discussion of the Dreyfus Affair and Proust in the "Antisemitism" section of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* explores the change in understanding and representation of Jewishness over the period of the late nineteenth century, especially as it is implicated with the changing understanding of homosexuality. In the general

¹⁵ George Painter, *Proust: The Early Years* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1959) 273.

¹⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Le Temps sensible: Proust et l'expérience littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994) 185.

¹⁷ "The narrator's emphasis on Bloch's difference, of course, points accusingly to their similarities. Both are outsiders, parvenus, and Dreyfusards" (Wilkinson 982). Cf. also Albert Sonnenfeld, "Marcel Proust: Antisemite?" *The French Review*, 62:1 (October 1988): 25–40 and 62:2 (December 1988): 275–82.

¹⁸ "Car les juifs, ces singuliers, tendent un miroir aux singularités du clan, des clans. Aristocrates ou homosexuels, élus du sang ou élus du sexe, y reconnaissent leurs différences" (Kristeva 197).

boredom of *belle époque* France, the aristocrats turned increasingly to Jews and homosexuals (as to artists), without really reassessing received notions of the two groups as criminal. Arendt's interest is to show how a *de facto* decriminalization did not come in the form of an exoneration; rather crime was transformed into vice, for its transgressiveness was of course the source of its excitement. Viciousness, however, is hardly treatable, and the fatality of vice leads, according to Arendt, ultimately to Final Solutions. This thesis and its implications fall outside of the scope of this essay. However, the coupling of Jew and homosexual—for the benefit of the aristocrat—here under the curious gaze of the incipient artist, presents a particularly suggestive account of distinction as it governs the social world of France and of Proust's novel.

Distinction, as I have suggested, is the evaluative recognition of difference and its manifestation in signs. It is therefore always performative, negative, and community- or clique-building. It is not about individuals, but about groups. *En être ou n'en être pas*, that is the question (3: 410). Groups are of course not defined by essential traits, but by signs, by shared codes of behavior, conversation, dress. And it is in the nature of distinction to naturalize the marks of distinction. To belong is simply to be, and certainly not to try. *Désinvolture* is inextricable from a notion of inherent qualities. The aristocracy, which was already by the seventeenth century considerably severed from its feudal, military roots, was always mainly a differentiating code—"l'art infiniment varié [. . .] de marquer les distances" (2: 736)—and the salon was the laboratory for its adaptation and continuity, its presentation and reproduction. Similar in its logic is the function and definition of these other groups. Both the "Jewish clique" and the "inverts," according to Arendt, "felt either superior or inferior, but in any case proudly different from other normal beings; both believed their difference to be a natural fact acquired at birth; both were constantly justifying not what they did, but what they were; and both, finally, always wavered between such apologetic attitudes and sudden, provocative claims that they were an elite" (84).¹⁹ What separates these various groups from the aristocrats, however, is a differing sense of community: "[. . .] all marks of distinction were determined only by the ensemble of the cliques, so that Jews or inverts felt that they would lose their distinctive character in a society

¹⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1948; New York: Harvest, 1973) 84.

of Jews or inverts, where Jewishness or homosexuality would be the most natural, the most uninteresting, and the most banal thing in the world" (85).

We are not dealing here with an abstract sociological or psychological model of community or identity, for the fundamental aspect of this social situation is power, and the aristocrats are not merely one group among others marking their differences and defending their turf. Or if they are—and certainly the ambiguity and limits of a nobility decimated by the revolution, slowly rebuilt but contaminated by an entirely new Imperial aristocracy, and gradually diluted by lucrative marriages in an era of industrial and banking ascendancy make of them a difficult group to define—there is a different dimension to their distinction. I have above specified my definition of distinction as adherence to a set of rules concerning the manifestation and discernment of elements of a differential, formal system of signs which bear the burden of reproducing power and prestige. This is the distinction of the aristocrats, indeed of anyone who would gain admittance into their ranks, not as monkeys or fools, titillating Orientals or audacious queers, but, *pares cum paribus*, as those who belong. I believe Julia Kristeva's otherwise extremely interesting critique of Arendt in *Le Temps sensible*, where she identifies a "logique du sadomasochisme" at the heart of clannishness and distinction, falls short of an explanation of the role of aristocracy in Proust's world. For Kristeva "vice" is not an accidental, historical development but a necessary aspect of inter-psychological intercourse. "Chaque groupe s'agglutine autour d'un être pas comme les autres et vit, avec lui et contre lui, dans la logique du sadomasochisme: amour de la haine, haine de l'amour, persécution, humiliation, chagrin délectable. À cela, il n'y a pas d'issue sociale. Tout le social, le tout du social y est compris" (197). Here I think Kristeva is being a bit too good a Proustian. For, while according to the narrator's pessimistic account of interpersonal interaction, his lucid identification of self-interest, his traumatic epistemology of truth through suffering and cruelty, a sadomasochistic logic can be found at the heart of the world of the *Recherche*, there is more at stake for the narrator in the social than Kristeva's psychological insight allows. Kristeva agrees with Proust in a Hegelian privileging of the suffering subject. "Le narrateur, les juifs comme Swann et les homosexuels comme Charlus, détiennent le secret de la société, fût-elle la plus raffinée, celle de Saint-Germain. Ils en retiennent les clés, ils en meurent, mais en vérité" (197). I do not disagree, but there is a reason why all of these distinctions and

sacrifices are performed for, and in jealous envy of, the aristocracy. For the Jew and the Invert, exploiting their marked difference to gain some kind of acceptance in society,²⁰ want to belong, not to Sion or to Sodom, but to the Faubourg Saint-Germain. Aristocracy is thus, to my mind, the key mode of distinction.

We have seen that the Dreyfus Affair, like the War that will follow it, enters the *Recherche* as a social reflexion, as an unstated event whose effects constitute a spin of the social kaleidoscope. As the Baron de Charlus says at the end of the Villeparisis's event in a sort of seduction of the young narrator who at this point has no insight into the codes of homosexuality and is therefore quite impervious to any of the Baron's insinuations (2: 586):

Toute cette affaire Dreyfus [. . .] n'a qu'un inconvénient: c'est qu'elle détruit la société (je ne dis pas la bonne société, il y a longtemps que la société ne mérite plus cette épithète louangeuse) par l'afflux de messieurs et des dames du Chameau, de la Chamellerie, de la Chamellière, enfin des gens inconnus que je trouve même chez mes cousines parce qu'ils font partie de la ligue de la Patrie française, antijuive, je ne sais quoi, comme si une opinion politique donnait droit à une qualification sociale.

Dreyfus—more profoundly, but not unlike Wagner, Manet, or Debussy—has served to alter the social landscape as a modish cause around which cliques can form or reform. The eighteenth-century opening of salon chat onto political concerns had broadened the social importance of the institution, but had also subjected the political to the rigors of fashion. Mme Verdurin's cultural capital, for example, soars through her Dreyfusard commitments because certain elements of the aristocracy, intelligentsia, and art world gravitate towards her and away from reactionary social groups, however more illustrious and elegant they may be. Ultimately the Affair proves much more formative than the latest artistic development in shifting definitively the social kaleidoscope, and with the Great War, will mark the real beginning of the end for the aristocratic dominance of the social world in France. For the last wars, not about race and citizenship (which are sadly still being fought in France as elsewhere), but over the old aristocratic institutions—the church, the military, and the state—were finally culminating in a Republic that sought to undermine that hegemony in precisely these spheres and a retrenched

²⁰ Exploiting . . . and performing, inventing, and subverting: thus their affinity with the artist and the dandy.

aristocracy exercising political power increasingly from the isolated strongholds of their salons. The *Affair* shows that the balance of power was finally tilting in the direction of the Revolution and that the sociability and limited political critique in the salon was dissolving into a larger public sphere (as well as re-empowered state institutions) no longer reliant on older elites. For some aristocrats it meant that “for things to stay the same, everything would have to change.”²¹ For others it meant an increasingly reactionary isolation that could only lead to complete irrelevance and extinction.

Les Aimables et Bénévoles Conservateurs du passé

After the interlude of the narrator’s illness and a reintroduction of Albertine into the *Recherche*, the social story of *Le Côté de Guermantes* continues with a *soirée chez Mme de Villeparisis*, which is mainly important for the narrator’s encounter with Mme de Guermantes. The latter unexpectedly invites the narrator to a *dîner* “en petit comité.” Coming to terms with his gratified and happy shock, the narrator reveals a further element of his infatuation (2: 670):

Deux minutes auparavant j’eusse été stupéfait si on m’avait dit que Mme de Guermantes allait me demander d’aller la voir, encore plus de venir dîner. J’avais beau savoir que le salon Guermantes ne pouvait pas présenter les particularités que j’avais extraites de ce nom, le fait qu’il m’avait été interdit d’y pénétrer, en m’obligeant à lui donner le même genre d’existence qu’aux salons dont nous avons lu la description dans un roman ou vu l’image dans un rêve, me le faisait, même quand j’étais certain qu’il était pareil à tous les autres, imaginer tout différent; entre moi et lui il y avait la barrière où finit le réel.

A perceived interdiction had compelled the imagination to furnish the salon with the most fantastic objects and characters drawn from the un- or surreality of fictions and dreams. This textual and oneiric reference is what I mean when I refer to the salon as a *lieu de mémoire*, a fictional, intertextual *topos* invested with desire and imagination. For some this fantasy can dominate so forcefully that they never realize they are in a poorly heated, dim attic discussing the races at Longchamp or the coming cold front with a third-rate writer of symbolist poems; for others, the reality, no matter how charming and

²¹ “Se vogliamo che tutto rimanga come è, bisogna che tutto cambi,” as Tancredi says to the Prince in *Il Gattopardo* (Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, 1957).

elegant, can never offer anything but disillusioning banality. Among the latter we certainly find the narrator.

After this episode follows the *soir de l'amitié* with Saint-Loup. Friendship proves anathema to the narrator, if not a downright trap for personal development, but he still derives some pleasure from the evening. This pleasure however "avait sa signification, sa cause, dans la nature individuelle de Saint-Loup peut-être, mais plus encore dans celle que, par la naissance et par l'éducation, il avait hérité de sa race" (2: 706). This will be a recurring theme in the narration of the evening at the Guermantes, despite the continued demythologizing of the noble names.

Marcel arrives at the Guermantes and is met by an elegant and affable M. de Guermantes. "[La] politesse de M. de Guermantes [...] qu'il allait me témoigner toute la soirée, me charma comme un reste d'habitudes plusieurs fois séculaires, d'habitudes en particulier du XVII^e siècle" (2: 710). M. de Guermantes is a master of the code of aristocratic manners, a seemingly anachronistic survival from the *ancien régime* whose hold over the French social imagination dominates the social events of the *Recherche*. The Duc leaves the narrator to inspect the Elstirs, and again the truth of art, as a *principium individuationis*,²² suggests itself to the narrator. "[U]ne fois en tête à tête avec les Elstirs, j'oubliai tout à fait l'heure du dîner; de nouveau comme à Balbec j'avais devant moi les fragments de ce monde aux couleurs inconnues qui n'était que la projection de la manière de voir particulière à ce grand peintre et que ne traduisaient nullement ses paroles" (2: 712). Like Chardin²³ Elstir shows that the beauty and truth of art is not in the specific object (for example, the skate) or that object generalized. "Tout le prix est dans les regards du peintre" (2: 714). A dinner bell tears the narrator from the aesthetic realm of this insight and back to his elegant *soirée*. Wherein resides *its* value?

No sooner does he enter the salon than the awkward and uncomprehending narrator is introduced by the Duc to the Princesse of Parma who astounds the narrator not only by manifesting a perfect education according to "les préceptes orgueilleusement humbles d'un snobisme évangélique" (2: 720)—which is to say, her royalty—but also by her absolute incommensurability with any Stendhalian

²² "L'essence selon Proust [. . .] n'est pas quelque chose de vu, mais une sorte de *point de vue* supérieur. Point de vue irréductible, qui signifie à la fois la naissance du monde et le caractère original d'un monde. [. . .] Le point de vue [. . .] n'est pas individuel, mais au contraire principe d'individuation" (Deleuze 133).

²³ Marcel Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, "Chardin et Rembrandt," 372–82.

association of the name. As with the Prince d'Agrigente, "aussi indépendant de son nom que d'une œuvre d'art qu'il eût possédée" (2: 725), the Princesse bears little resemblance to a work of art the narrator possesses in his head. But for all that, she is a "grande dame," who indeed, elicits an appropriate vassality from the Guermantes, who know well what role to play (2: 719). The essential and profound superficiality suggested in the passage, the seeming which commands being (according to Paul Valéry), is the essence of the code of aristocracy, and even as the narrator sees through the names and ironically animadverts the cruelty and emptiness of the behavior, he cannot help but cherish the historical and racial continuity it bespeaks. The persistence of this admiration is extremely important, given the general disillusionment with names that marks this social event. If actual d'Agrigentes, Parmas, and Guermantes prove "vulgaires, pareils à tous les hommes et à toutes les femmes," this is because the narrator had first seen in them fanciful names. Still, something of the name remains in the physique, the gestures, the very blondness of the Guermantes (2: 730–31). "Les Guermantes [. . .] n'étaient pas seulement d'une qualité de chair, de cheveu, de transparent regard, exquise, mais avaient une manière de se tenir, de marcher, de saluer, de regarder avant de serrer la main, par quoi ils étaient aussi différents en tout cela d'un homme du monde quelconque que celui-ci d'un fermier en blouse" (2: 731). A distinguished and distinguishing *primary habitus*, centuries of (in)breeding, and an arrogant and gratified will to power have made the Guermantes singular and superior, and even when he sees through their codes to their vapidness and their cruelty, the narrator cannot help but admire the distinction of the Duke, of Robert.

What, we might ask, is the narrator's use for these arrogant remainders of an earlier order? Oriane de Guermantes is not, as we know, just an anachronistic spectre from the ancien régime. She is a fashionable lady of *fin-de-siècle* Paris, well enough educated in the arts and in political and social realities of the Third Republic. Her wit, which gradually starts to ring false to the narrator, derives from an atavistic arrogance and *désinvolture* combined with a certain individual wilfulness and a very strong, if hidden, sense of the fashions of the day—fashions in art and thought as well as dress and speech.

The fictional-historical suggestiveness of the Duchess as representative of her class, her race proves most meaningful to the narrator, while her studied opinions and artistic fancies clash with his sensibilities. In the least studied and willful manifestations of her character,

the Duchess charms by this link to the past, as does Saint-Loup, Mme de Marsantes, the Duke. Indeed there is a whole discourse in the *Recherche* of “atavism” applied both to Jews and aristocrats to suggest something of the fatality of race, despite the fact that Proust goes a long way in dismantling contemporary notions of race. Just like her brother, and even in spite of herself, Mme de Marsantes is an embodiment of courtly etiquette (2: 547). Oriane seems to be subject to the same fatality of character, just as Robert is so described, especially when he tries hardest to be “modern.”

All this suggests that something of the fairy of the name remains, sustaining a belief that outlives the twilight of the gods. If the world of the salons has proven disappointing, its aristocratic participants consistently fallen short of the promise of their names, still a truth suggests itself (2: 839):

[. . .] si ce monde n'avait pu au premier moment répondre à ce qu'attendait mon imagination, et devait par conséquent me frapper d'abord par ce qu'il avait de commun avec tous les mondes plutôt que par ce qu'il avait de différent, pourtant il se révéla à moi peu à peu comme bien distinct. Les grands seigneurs sont presque les seules gens de qui on apprenne autant que des paysans; leur conversation s'orne de tout ce qui concerne la terre, les demeures telles qu'elles étaient habitées autrefois, les anciens usages, tout ce que le monde de l'argent ignore profondément.

Françoise has been the object of this sort of insight for much of the book, in her link back with the past, her exemplarity of the France of Saint-André-des-Champs.²⁴ This passage extends the equation of the aristocracy (and the peasantry) with history, nature, indeed France, in a way that escapes the bourgeois epoch inaugurated by the Revolution. The aristocrats, in their language, their chateaux, their habits, are “les aimables et bénévoles conservateurs du passé” (2: 840). As representatives of history, links to a different epoch, they also teach a lesson about time, through their very effacement of time. When the *esprit de Guermantes* surfaces in one of Oriane’s witticisms or the courtly past in one of the Duke’s gestures, time disappears as does their individuality, and we are confronted with the atemporal, undifferentiated Guermantes of the illustrious feudal past. (An image thus both time-bound—in the Merovingian or the courtly periods—and

²⁴ For example, 2: 324: “ces Français de jadis, dont Françoise était, en réalité, la contemporaine.”

timeless—because formally retained, through language, land, tradition.) History embodied in this sense resembles the famous effacement of time through involuntary memory: “[. . .] la mémoire, en introduisant le passé dans le présent sans le modifier, tel qu’il était au moment où il était le présent, supprime précisément cette grande dimension du Temps suivant laquelle la vie se réalise” (4: 608).

Ultimately it is this lesson that confirms the narrator in his artistic vocation, most famously expressed at the end of *Le Temps retrouvé*. The well-known succession of those Proustian epiphanies of involuntary memory causes in the narrator “un élargissement de mon esprit en qui se reformait, s’actualisait ce passé, et me donnait, mais hélas! momentanément, une valeur d’éternité” (4: 613). This glimpse *sub specie aeternitatis* is the glance, through the Proustian telescope, at the “general laws” of human interaction (4: 618), allowing, through a subjective lesson, an understanding of the “temporal architecture of the self.”²⁵ On the one hand, it is a sociological as much as psychological insight into the characters and rules of society, into self-interest, sadomasochism, and vulnerability. More deeply this extratemporal viewpoint allows a subjective insight, not that the other is timebound and constantly changing, nor that “I” is an other, but that the other is another “I” within the ever different, evolving subject, that the evolution of the other is the history of my desire, my confusion, my misapprehension.²⁶ And in showing the laws that facilitate this subjective insight, the narrator will be able not to give his readers some packaged truth, but to make them the readers of themselves, to teach them how to view and understand their own world: “Car ils ne seraient pas, selon moi, mes lecteurs, mais les propres lecteurs d’eux-mêmes, mon livre n’étant qu’une sorte de ces verres grossissants comme ceux que tendait à un acheteur l’opticien de Combray; mon livre, grâce auquel je leur fournirais le moyen de lire en eux-mêmes” (4: 610).

Art, the only way to see the world, and oneself in it, through the eyes of another,²⁷ is the ultimate realization of the insight made

²⁵ Malcolm Bowie, *Proust Among the Stars* (New York: Columbia UP, 1998) 4.

²⁶ “[L]’enseignement le plus profond de Proust [. . .] consiste à situer le réel dans une relation avec ce qui à jamais demeure autre, avec autrui comme absence et mystère à la retrouver dans l’intimité même du ‘Je,’ à inaugurer une dialectique qui rompt définitivement avec Parménide.” Emmanuel Lévinas, *Noms Propres* (Paris: Fata Morgana: Paris, 1976) 123.

²⁷ “Le seul véritable voyage, le seul bain de Jouvence, ce ne serait pas d’aller vers de nouveaux paysages, mais d’avoir d’autres yeux, de voir l’univers avec les yeux d’un

possible by the disappointments in love, friendship, and sociability. True communication (unlike that in society) is possible only once one leaves society behind, yet this can be the case only after one has tarried in the world (*beim Negativen verweilt*, so to speak). Conversation and friendship were a trap, but one whose disappointments led to inner scrutiny. Aristocrats proved to be not essentially distinctive and interesting, but, as embodiments of codes and laws of society, as time-bound signs of extra-temporal truths, particularly useful indicators of the power of time and the power of subjective, projective desire. So there was no time lost. Once the interior stereoscope could direct its vision, cleared of a distorting desire, the truths of society became manifest: “Ce que m’avait dit Mme de Guermantes [. . .] était faux, mais contenait une part de vérité qui me fut précieuse dans la suite” (2: 837). This part of truth was always there, but never perceptible, because it is really only a part of the subject, once ready to see.

Conclusion: Aristocracy and Modernism

Class matters in the *Recherche* in the sense that the social import of Proust’s art—that is, what makes it (relevant) art in the first place—is inconceivable outside of the framework of the social relations in his society. But in a broader sense, the mimicry (through the “laws of imitation,” through snobbery) that we see at work in the novel is also “allegorical,” so to speak, of Modernist art in general. As Fredric Jameson suggests parenthetically in a discussion of Modernity:

What has until today passed for a capitalist culture—a specifically capitalist “high culture” that is—[. . .] can also be identified as the way in which a bourgeoisie imitated and aped the traditions of its aristocratic, feudal predecessors, tending to be eclipsed along with their memory and to give way, along with the older classical bourgeois class-consciousness itself, to mass culture—indeed to a specifically American mass culture at that.²⁸

Modernity is, among other things, the expression of that *Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*—the “synchronicity of the nonsynchronous” that Jameson takes from Ernst Bloch to describe “unequal development”

autre, de cent autres, de voir les cent univers que chacun d’eux voit, que chacun d’eux est; et cela nous le pouvons avec un Elstir, avec un Vinteuil, avec leurs pareils, nous volons vraiment d’étoiles en étoiles” (3: 762).

²⁸ Fredric Jameson, “The Antinomies of Postmodernity,” in *The Cultural Turn* (New York: Verso, 1998) 67.

on the local level, cultural (as well as structural economic) heterogeneity.²⁹ It is characterized by an attempt of the ascendant class to appropriate, through imitation and subversion, that classical, aristocratic leisurely pursuit, art, which had reached, through nineteenth-century episodes in this very process of emulation, unprecedented levels of popularity and importance (cultural capital, if you will). Once they succeed—and of course this is Jameson’s real concern—then we enter into a new phase, one of homogeneity, of uniformity and repetition. This is the Postmodern.³⁰ What is important is that Proust’s novel stages the final class battles for cultural hegemony precisely insofar as they are fought through and about conversation, comportment (behavior, dress, gesture) and art, and thereby exemplifies the Modern in art: this appropriation of older and no longer relevant traditions (because the classes for whom they originated were no longer relevant or even extant) that marked an attempt to come to terms with a changed and alienating society. (This is one cause of the monumental reassessment and re-appropriation of literary traditions characteristic of the famous modernist *chefs-d’oeuvre* including *Ulysses*, the *Cantos*, the *Wasteland*.)³¹

²⁹ This uneven development—in terms of the technology, urbanization, and industrialization that polarized the traditional land-based cultures in England and the Continent and the growing metropolitan centers (and later that polarized the metropolises and the colonies)—is at the root, for example, of the Modernist focus on temporality. It is not just that technology and industry change the rhythms and rates of daily life, but that at this moment there is still clearly an alternative temporality alive, or remembered, whose contrast with the new generates bewilderment, pathos.

³⁰ This narrative has been complicated recently by Jameson in *A Singular Modernity* (New York: Verso, 2002) where he introduces an intermediary phase, “Late Modernism,” into his account of late capitalism. This phase is characterized by the “emergence of [. . .] [a] full-blown ideology of modernism” (196) and a consequent reflexivity that is not fully at play in the earlier period of Modernism proper. This is an important development towards the Postmodern, especially in its consequences for a legitimized semi-autonomy for the artwork that was not in place for the first moderns, but was made possible by their successes (and failures). Cf. 196 ff.

³¹ The *sacre de l’écrivain* and the related development of “art for art’s sake” that Pierre Bourdieu, following Sartre and Paul Bénichou, explores in *Les Règles de l’art* (Paris: Seuil, 1996), is the basis for the “elitist” Modernist subject position characteristic of Joyce, Eliot, and Pound, all of whom were influenced to some degree by the French symbolists (Mallarmé, Laforgue, etc.). The artist as aristocrat (for example, in the figure of the dandy) is of course on the one hand a negative response to advances in education, literacy, and political equality. But what I am talking about with respect to aristocracy and modernity exceeds this well-known criticism. It is rather the very necessity of the ascendant class to appropriate the cultural forms of the waning dominant—since at any rate this was a condition of the very possibility of its ascendance. This is to say that the repugnant, elitist version of this succession, of which Eliot is often accused, is merely a variant of a larger structural condition. Proust, I

To put matters in the slightly different terms of Perry Anderson, the “modernist conjecture” arises at a moment when the persistent hold of earlier (feudal-aristocratic) traditions was still strong enough in the cultural and literary spheres to structure and give meaning (negatively) to artistic movements which arose out of the changing, industrial and increasingly urban society. “[T]he persistence of the ‘*anciens régimes*,’ and the academicism concomitant with them, provided a critical range of cultural values *against which* insurgent forms of art could measure themselves, but also *in terms of which* they could partly articulate themselves.”³² Over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a certain aesthetic and moral ideal became institutionalized in France—leading to what Anderson refers to as academicism (for example, in the Salons, or painting exhibitions chronicled by Diderot and becoming, by the time Baudelaire describes them, the definitive institution for establishing value in that cultural domain)—but certain elements or subsets of the salon-aristocratic society also fueled a critique of these ideals once they became dominant. In Anderson’s words: “the old order, precisely in its still partially aristocratic colouration, afforded a set of available codes and resources from which the ravages of the market as an organizational principle of culture and society—uniformly detested by every species of modernism—could also be resisted” (35). Some of these codes have been the object of scrutiny in this essay. I hope to have shown how Proust learns a lesson from the crepuscular aristocracy of the Third Republic that gives power and lucidity to his critique of modern society. At the same time, Proust is one of the greatest critics of this aristocratic society, and thus has little in common with reactionary or nostalgic anti-modernism.

Proust is not afraid to embrace the new, but neither is he naïve in his assessment of the modern. Making it new for newness’ sake was never his credo. Anderson’s modernist conjecture is tripartite: the persistent presence of the forms and ideologies of older traditions is coupled with the incipient and novel emergence of key technologies—the telephone, automobile, aircraft, and so forth—and finally with the “imaginative proximity of social revolution” (34). As is well

would argue (and Adorno would certainly agree), derives a positive critical position from this state of affairs that is the very opposite of the elitist, regulatory canon formation of an Eliot, but it is no less implicated in this moment of succession which is the very crisis that constitutes cultural modernity.

³² Perry Anderson, *A Zone of Engagement* (London: Verso, 1992) 35.

known, Proust did not shy away from the technological advances of his time. Indeed he attests to the fact of their genuine novelty by his awe. In an era when bets were still on as to whether the horse-drawn carriage wouldn't carry the day, Proust thrills to the speed of his automobile, but still, like the monkey encountering a phonograph, in partial disbelief and incomprehension.³³ Social revolution, in Anderson's sense, seems very far from Proust's concerns, it is true, but his whole novel is, of course, about the final rise of the bourgeoisie to hegemony in French society. This was the earlier social revolution Proust chose to chronicle, making possible the exploration of others to his successors (Malraux, Sartre).

Proust's novel, then, is a limited embrace of the modern, of the new. The narrator inhabits and then discards the codes of the aristocracy in order to serve his vision. But he remains skeptical—a skepticism rendered possible by his aristocratic lesson—of what is to come. Indeed his book culminates in an artistic project that we can understand best through Adorno as a defiant and determinate negation, in the nineteenth-century tradition of Baudelaire, Flaubert, Mallarmé, of the society that will no longer have any interest in it.³⁴ Proust is lucid about the faddishness of the bourgeoisie's commitment to art, although the text is ultimately ambivalent in this regard. Mme Verdurin, not Oriane de Guermantes, is the true connoisseur of art, but her love of art is *accidental*, strategic; its logic is not that of Mæcenas, in the idealized seventeenth-century sense, but the logic of the market, of fashion. At the end, it will have been a means to an end, as Mme Verdurin metamorphoses into the Princess de Guermantes.³⁵

³³ The best example is the description of his grandmother's voice on the telephone (2: 432–36).

³⁴ “At the very moment in which it [modernist art] conceives its vocation as high art, the latter finds its public confiscated by mass culture” (Jameson, *Singular Modernity*, 158). In other words, to sum up a Jamesonian thesis, the consolidation of artistic practices into Art, made possible over the course of some fifty years from Gautier, Flaubert, and Baudelaire to Mallarmé and Proust, is only realized at the moment this Art is clearly differentiated from mass culture, a product of Modernity. Art, as we conceive it, is a product of this Modernist dichotomy. My contention, following Jameson, is that this very self-differentiation, at the twilight of one epoch and the dawn of a new, represents the appropriation and reconfiguration of the aristocratic distinction I have documented in other spheres. The spirit of difference lives on, so to speak, in the very semi-autonomous vocation of art to transcend mass culture, at its worst—elitism, contempt—as at its best, as an utopian (determinate) negation of the social situation which gives rise to the dichotomy in the first place.

³⁵ “Le mariage du prince de Guermantes avec la Patronne réalise moins un anoblissement de la bourgeoisie protectrice de l'art, que la pérennisation de la médiocrité verduriniennne” (Kristeva 92).

If Proust passes through society and art to a renunciation (the famous cork room, symbolically), that his art might stop time and articulate a Truth not accessible in the world, this refusal is the result of a process. The time-out necessitated by the sheer labor of writing is a renunciation of the world, but the negative will have been retained. At any rate, this final renunciation has its Utopian promise in Proust. "Through the irreconcilable renunciation of the semblance of reconciliation, art holds fast to the promise of reconciliation in the midst of the unreconciled."³⁶ Proust—his friends spurned, indeed all semblance of normal human behavior renounced—sacrifices himself for this beautiful promise, at perhaps the last moment it was even conceivable.

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³⁶ T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1997) 33.