

CIRCUMSCRIPTION: PROUST'S *THE CAPTIVE* AND THE PROBLEM OF OTHER MINDS

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I like a look of Agony,
Because I know it's true—
Men do not sham Convulsion,
Nor simulate, a Throe—

The Eyes glaze once—and that is Death—
Impossible to feign
The Beads upon the Forehead
By homely Anguish strung.

Emily Dickinson, *Complete Poems*
(ed. Thomas H. Johnson), 241

There is no one but yourself who knows whether
you are cowardly and cruel, or loyal and devout.
Others do not see you, they guess at you by un-
certain conjectures; they see not so much your
nature as your art. Therefore do not cling to
their judgment; cling to your own.

Montaigne, *Essays*, III, 2 (tr. Donald M. Frame)

The two quotations above present conflicting views on the
problem of other minds. According to the first, other people's actions
can be taken as evidence of their feelings; however much people may
feign and simulate on other occasions, at some times—and it is
interesting that those times should be instances of pain—we can know

what is going on in someone else's mind. Montaigne asserts, on the contrary, that we can never know; all we have are "uncertain conjectures." The questions raised by these quotations, such as "Do we ever really *know* what others are thinking and feeling?" or "How do we know?" lead to other, related questions: Can two people have the same pain? Do we know anything apart from our own mental experiences? What is the self? Can there be a private language? Such questions are not only of interest to philosophers; they also enter the realm of the novelist, and certain of them are especially relevant to the study of Proust. Just as the province of poetry seems to be that of the "inner world," so the province of the novel is that of interpersonal relationships.¹ Plots of novels involve characters seeking to discover, usually with at least partial success, what other characters really feel and think. Clearly at the core of Proust's *The Captive* is the attempt to explore "that unknowable thing which, when we seek to form a definite idea of it, another person's life invariably is to us."² It is not surprising that so many novels deal with a love situation, where the feelings of others (of one other) are of paramount importance. A happy ending, as in *Pride and Prejudice* or *David Copperfield*, often consists in one character finally revealing his or her love to another. And jealousy, as presented by Proust, is the situation in which characters are driven to doubts about their knowledge of the beloved's feelings. Both Swann (in *Swann in Love*) and Marcel find themselves looking up from the street at the lighted window of their beloveds' rooms, an emblem of their sense of being shut out from their lives, which they can only deduce from a distance, from shadows. On the level of narration, the question of point of view or narrative perspective is that of the means of representing what characters perceive or think. On yet another level, Proust goes so far as to assert that only in art can we see something of the inner lives of others: art makes the ineffable appear, "rendering externally visible in the colours of the spectrum the intimate composition of those worlds we call individual persons and which, without the aid of art, we should never know" (p. 348).³

In *Remembrance of Things Past*, then, Proust not only comes to grips with the question of how to represent, as well as to form an idea of, another person's life, he also thematizes this problem in the course of the work. Nowhere is this clearer than in *The Captive*, whose subject is the narrator's attempt to delve into the character of Albertine, to circumscribe her. *Circumscribe* comes from the Latin *circum* (around) + *scribere* (to write), and the OED gives several definitions

of the term. It means, first, to draw a line around, to encompass, to encircle; second, to enclose within limits, to limit, bound, confine, and also to mark off, to define; third, to describe (a figure) "about another figure so as to touch it at certain points or parts without cutting it"; and finally, to write or inscribe around. All these meanings are relevant to *The Captive*. In order to define Albertine, Marcel must confine her: if he can set the boundaries to her life, he feels he can form it into a kind of circle or whole which would then be possible to grasp, to comprehend. But to describe her, he must indeed make her into a kind of figure, a trope, not containing her, but merely standing for her life, incomprehensible because it stretches out "to all the points in space and time which the person has occupied and will occupy But we cannot touch all these points" (p. 128). The task he sets himself—as character and as narrator—raises the questions regarding the minds of others which have confronted modern philosophy, especially in the works of Wisdom, Austin, Wittgenstein, and Cavell. Proust presents Marcel's efforts as leading to failure, not only from an incapacity to satisfy his doubts about Albertine, but also because first, he wants more knowledge than he can get and a kind of knowledge which he can never have, and second, because there is a fundamental disparity between two irreconcilable views of the self, both of which he holds and on both of which he tries to act. This kind of acknowledgment of the contradictions inherent in the human condition is similar to that which Stanley Cavell finds in Wittgenstein's response to what Cavell calls the "threat" of skepticism, and which he characterizes as follows: "Skepticism meant to find the other, search others out with certainty: Instead it closes them out."⁴

I

In a *New Yorker* cartoon, a wife stands over a defeated-looking husband, saying, "You *look* sorry, you *act* sorry, you *say* you're sorry, but you're *not* sorry." This cartoon brings home the problem of other minds, for how are we to know what others are thinking and feeling, if not from how they look, how they act, and what they say? And this is the central problem in *The Captive*: the more Marcel tries to discover what is going on in Albertine's mind, the less he feels he knows and the more he is led to doubt whether one can ever know. As John Wisdom shows, from the statement "A never has that reason for a statement about how things seem to B that B has," that "It is tempting to infer

that no one ever knows anything about the mind of another and even that no one ever has any right to assert anything about the mind of another.”⁵ The efforts of modern analytic philosophers have often been directed at driving a wedge between this premise and this conclusion. Austin, in “Other Minds,” argues that under normal circumstances, we of course accept the evidence of our eyes and ears, that if we doubt this evidence, there must be some reason: “Believing persons, accepting testimony, is the, or the main, point of talking” (p. 82). Language then, what one says, is usually the best evidence we have of what a person thinks and feels.

But Marcel, in *The Captive*, certainly does have reason to doubt, especially to doubt what Albertine says. A good part of the novel is taken up with Albertine’s lies, their nature and their uncovering. Gilles Deleuze associates this deciphering of the beloved’s lie with the search for truth which is *Remembrance of Things Past*.⁶ Yet the experience of Albertine’s lies is extremely painful to Marcel, for not only does it pain him to find she deceives him, but this discovery, instead of clarifying the situation, leads him into a tangle of deceptions he is increasingly unable to unravel and to the added pain of his own lies. Albertine forgets which stories she has told him, gets angry when she is found out, and retreats from a position only when she thinks he knows the truth already; and in these ways, she creates level upon level of deception. Even her admissions that she has deceived him are only another level of lying: “‘It is true,’ she said, ‘I was not having drawing lessons, I told you a great many lies at first, that I admit. But I never lie to you now’” (p. 240). Sometimes Marcel feels that deciphering Albertine’s lies is a simple matter of reading her “writing” backwards; when she says she is not especially interested in going to the Verdurin’s party, he reads the opposite message, that she is in fact eager to go. This kind of lying is like writing in his eyes because there is a one-to-one correspondence between the sign and its referent. But this relation is of course already figural, since the signifiers are turned from their usual signifieds. So it is that the narrator finds that the lies leave blank spaces in Albertine’s life which he would have had to fill in, to *retrace*, in order to understand her (p. 125): language does not reveal, it blocks out. On another level, he finds that lies themselves may be evidence, a sign of something further hidden, but that that something is inaccessible: “the fact of the lie itself . . . in certain cases is self-evident. Not evidence of the truth that the lie conceals . . . the lie is immediately perceived, and our jealousy increased, since we are conscious of the lie, and cannot succeed in

discovering the truth" (p. 237). Thus, it is not through the normal use of language that communication occurs, but rather through its disruption, which engenders an ever-widening split in discourse.

As Marcel's pursuits lead to more dissimulation on her part, they indirectly lead to his lies to her, trying to convince her of his indifference in order to bind her more closely to him. He too pretends to open his mind to her, while in reality, "My words, therefore, did not in the least reflect my sentiments" (p. 475). There seems to be no way out of this expanding, or rather, contracting, circle of lies; he finds himself in a world where nothing is sure, an existence "hagridden by people who have no real connection with us, full of lapses of memory, gaps, vain anxieties, our life as fantastic as a dream" (p. 194). When Albertine tells him that she has spent the afternoon with Bergotte, for instance, and he reads that Bergotte had died the day before, he assumes that the newspaper is mistaken in its dates: a different reality has been constituted for him. He expresses his despair at ever establishing what is real and cries "To what end? To what end?" (p. 479). The Charlus sub-plot of the novel, and the theme of homosexuality in general, reinforce this idea of falseness, since the world of homosexuals presented here is one of necessary deceptions, both of society at large and of one another.

In *The Captive*, then, we see the doubt and confusion that ensue when the normal functioning of language is undermined: Marcel is led to doubt by conflicting statements made by Albertine herself, by the conflict between what she says and what she does or what others say, and by his feeling that he has insufficient evidence (of whatever kind) about her. There are also disruptions within the message itself. Albertine's lies are associated with linguistic deformations and disruptions in syntax and stylistic level in particular. The first can be seen in the passage where the narrator likens her lying to the trope of anacoluthon, a breaking-off and grammatical shift in mid-sentence. There is a similar break in her discourse toward the end of the novel, where she interrupts herself in the midst of uttering a vulgar expression, one which she would never have used with a man. In this second case, the rupture in syntax reflects a rupture in linguistic register; the expression is used out of context. Albertine herself, when explaining (fallaciously) why she avoids certain women, says it is not because of their lesbian way of life but because of the vulgarity of their speech.

Further disruptions of communication ensue when the ways we have of discovering what another person thinks contradict each other. This is clear in the many instances where Albertine's facial expres-

sions conflict with her speech, and it leads to a distrust of verbal language which Deleuze has characterized as “antilogos”:⁷

I had in the course of my life developed in the opposite direction to those races which make use of phonetic writing only after regarding the letters of the alphabet as a set of symbols; I, who for so many years had sought for the real life and thought of other people only in the direct statements with which they furnished me of their own free will, failing these had come to attach importance, on the contrary, only to the evidence that is not a rational and analytical expression of the truth; the words themselves did not enlighten me unless they could be interpreted in the same way as a sudden rush of blood to the cheeks of a person who is embarrassed, or, what is even more telling, a sudden silence. Some subsidiary word . . . bursting into flames at the unintended, sometimes perilous contact of two ideas which the speaker has not expressed, but which, by applying the appropriate methods of analysis or electrolysis I was able to extract from it, told me more than a long speech. (p. 111)

Albertine wishes to deny that she wants to leave him, but that message is transmitted despite her through signs which are both verbal and non-verbal, but in both cases involuntary. Her lies are uncovered, and “certain words, certain gestures” on some occasions reveal the truth. These other signs include: involuntary facial expressions (cf. the “rush of blood” above); facts relevant to the other’s actions, like the presence of Mlle. Vinteuil at the Verdurin’s party, which seems to explain Albertine’s desire to attend it; and actions—like Albertine’s returning from the Trocadero concert in obedience to his wishes. As the quotation above indicates, such signs often prove more accurate than direct verbal ones. This other language, that of the face, of gesture, and of inadvertent words, is truly figural. A facial expression or a word stands for another message, rather than being referential, i.e., denoting a thing or a state of affairs. Thus, all forms of language, rather than bringing us closer to what we seek, giving us the object, take us another step away. And even this gestural, facial language does not lead us to the truth; it forms a closed whole which is as non-referential as speech. Albertine’s face often does *not* reveal what she thinks: “this immobility of even a light expression was as heavy as a silence; it would have been impossible to say that she blamed, that she

approved, that she knew or did not know about these things. None of her features bore any relation to anything save another feature" (pp. 477-78). Her face is a pure signifier, a syntagm with no paradigmatic axis, a syntax without a semantics.

Marcel, as shown in the quotation above, is put in the impossible position of the interpreter, the decoder of these signs. It is as though he were analyzing Albertine's actions as a scientist would his materials, studying the "residue" left on her face by her emotions (p. 476), taking them as symptoms (pp. 456; 536). The prevalence of imagery of reading and interpretation in this novel result, as J. Hillis Miller has pointed out, from this conception of character as sign.⁸ Where there is reading, of course, there is also misreading: not only does the narrator inform us directly of errors in interpretation which he has made (often including prolepses of the time when he is to be undeceived); in addition, he often uses a structure of analepses paralleling the prolepses, in which new information leads him to rectify earlier impressions or to fill in gaps in his knowledge. *The Fugitive* is in large measure a reprise of *The Captive* and earlier volumes, a re-reading of the same material (Albertine's life) from new perspectives. As Genette has pointed out, this analeptic structure is that of *Remembrance of Things Past* as a whole.⁹

The opacity of Albertine's character, constructed for the narrator through her lies, silences, and evasions, is created also for the reader by means of the narration of the novel. It has often been noted that Albertine is a mystery for the reader as well as for Marcel because we see her only from his point of view, and that the *whether . . . whether* and *perhaps* constructions imply that neither the narrator nor we can have more than a series of hypotheses regarding the motives of others.¹⁰ Indeed, the narrator admits it himself: "whether I was right to trust to that nature [his own feelings and motives] or on the contrary it did not corrupt Albertine's intentions instead of making them plain, that I find difficult to say" (p. 476). An exception to Albertine's silence, so to speak, is the intercalated note she writes to him when he has sent word that he would like her to return immediately from the Trocadero, to which he had earlier insisted that she go. That she will return (Françoise telephones him the news) seems to him proof that she belongs to him, but the note she writes and which gives him even more pleasure sounds patently insincere in its hyperbole and its protestations that nothing would be nicer than to rush home to him: thus, what seems to be written evidence of her attachment is rather a

figure, replacing the real and opposite message, her falseness. Like irony or allegory, it is an invisible trope dependent on the receiver for its deciphering. Its intended receiver is unable to make it out.

All these contraventions of communication lead Marcel to a Cartesian conception of a person as comprising two realms of existence, an inner and an outer being, the first of which is known only to him or herself. The vertiginous feeling he experiences at the contemplation of the "abyss" created by her lies and their destruction of the idea of a stable reality leads him to the skeptical position that a person's inner life (like his or her past life) is necessarily closed to others: in Albertine's eyes he senses "regions more inaccessible to me than the sky, in which Albertine's memories, unknown to me, lived and moved. . . . I felt that there yawned like a gulf the inexhaustible expanse of the evenings when I had not known Albertine." He can touch her body, but "I felt that I was touching no more than the sealed envelope of a person who inwardly reached to infinity. How I suffered from that position to which we are reduced by the carelessness of nature which, when instituting the division of bodies, never thought of making possible the interpenetration of souls" (pp. 526-27). The body, then, is a substance radically different from the mind; and Albertine is not only "the captive" of Marcel; her soul, like everyone's, is caught (in Plato's image) in the prison-house of the body. In the quotation above, the image of an envelope recalls the descriptions of Albertine sleeping—a being "enclosed in a human body" (p. 128). The pleasure he takes in watching her sleep, mentioned often and described in somewhat disturbing detail, is not only that of the jealous man not wanting to reveal his desire, nor does it arise solely from the fact that she cannot prevent her features from revealing what she feels; it comes largely from the fact that while she sleeps, she is in a sense absent from herself.¹¹ The imagery used to describe her is that of plants, statues, and dead women. Though the narrator says that "I had that impression of possessing her altogether, which I never had when she was awake," (p. 85; see also p. 501), it is rather that she possesses herself as little as he possesses her.

These two philosophic stances with regard to the human mind, that it is separate from the body and that it is inaccessible to others, are interdependent, and they are both highly relevant to this novel: the prison of attentions and surveillance in which Marcel shuts Albertine turns out to be nothing compared to the one out of which she shuts him: his attempted intrusions into her mind are met with walls impossible to penetrate.

II

This skeptical position, though it is contradicted in a sense by Proust's views on art and by the very existence of the novel, is that with which analytic philosophy has tried to come to terms. Austin gives examples of times when we are mistaken about another's inner life (sometimes we are deceived; or we did not correctly interpret the signs given; or the signs were involuntary and did not accurately reflect the person's feelings), but he points out that we do have ways of dealing with these special cases (pp. 111-13). If we were not sometimes sure of the truth, we would not know what lying was. As Wittgenstein writes, "The word lying was taught to us in a particular way in which it was fastened to a certain behavior, to the use of certain expressions and certain circumstances."¹² Nevertheless, how can we deny that in any particular instance we may be wrong and therefore, that we can never be sure? Wisdom points out that skepticism is "superstition with the signs reversed": the superstitious person says "we can never know that there aren't fairies," and indeed, there seems to be no way to prove it incontrovertibly ("Other Minds VIII," p. 205). From the deceptions he observes in others and from his mistakes in interpreting their words and actions, the narrator of *The Captive* draws the conclusion that others are radically inaccessible; he refers to them often as closed worlds, unsoundable abysses, or self-contained "beings."

Yet just what is meant by such statements as "that unknowable thing . . . another person's life" or "We can never know what goes on in the minds of others"? As Wisdom points out, it is hard to know what the claim really is: if it is the normal sense of knowing at a given time that someone is, say, in pain, or thinking about philosophy, the statement is clearly false. As Wittgenstein writes, "If we are using the word 'to know' as it is normally used (and how else are we to use it?), then other people very often know when I am in pain."¹³ If, on the other hand, it means that what is known as telepathy rarely (never) occurs, as Wisdom shows, then that seems true. But if it means that "we cannot know the mind of another in exactly the way he does himself," or "I cannot have his pain," it is necessarily true; it could not possibly be false (Wisdom, "Symposium: Other Minds," p. 220).¹⁴ Yet this is the point on which the skeptic concentrates: if I can't have his pain, how do I ever really know he has it? And it seems that this is just the kind of knowledge Marcel does want: The only true voyage of discovery, the only fountain of Eternal Youth, would be not to visit

strange lands but to possess other eyes, to behold the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to behold the hundred universes that each of them beholds, that each of them is" (pp. 348-49). It is not enough for him to know (in the sense of "to be right about") what Albertine is experiencing at any given moment; he wants to be certain, he wants always to be certain, and even more, he wants to *have* her experiences.

The desire to assimilate Albertine to himself is expressed in terms of two interlocking strands of imagery that underlie the novel: imprisonment and possession. In a novel of this title it is hardly necessary to stress the images of prison, captivity, cages, bars, closed doors, enclosed spaces, and so on, that run through the work. It is, however, an imagery which grows in frequency and intensity: whereas at first, it seems just that Albertine is living with the narrator, his increasing and increasingly desperate surveillance of her makes it progressively clearer that she is his captive and at the same time renders inevitable her desire to leave and her eventual "escape." Indeed, according to the narrator, love itself depends on the fear of losing the beloved, who is a "fugitive" and thus a "captive woman" (p. 118). At the same time, he is aware of the reciprocal nature of imprisonment: "I was more of a master than I had supposed. More of a master, in other words more of a slave" (p. 207). It is he who is controlled by Albertine, for the more she eludes him, the more he finds himself obsessed with the desire to know about her. Her deceptions are like those of a slave or a captive, and they reinforce his sense of possession, but by means of them he is sealed out of her life.

Deleuze shows that Marcel holds Albertine prisoner in order to explicate her, to empty her of her worlds (pp. 107-08). As such, he could know her and truly possess her. He is continually looking for signs in Albertine's behavior to indicate that she "belongs" to him. He buys her gifts of clothing and jewels because he wants to keep her happy in order to prevent her from leaving him, but also because when she wears the things he has bought, she is wearing the signs of his possession, and he has in a sense paid for her. He speaks of her repeatedly in terms of an *objet d'art*, something that can be collected; and the description of her own silver collection reinforces that image. It is while she sleeps, when she has lost her conscious identity and become like an object, that he experiences physical pleasure with her. Yet what he seeks to possess is not her body, but "that unknown life" which is hers (p. 227). It pleases him to think, upon returning home,

that she will be there, that his home should be hers also; it is a "material symbol of my possession of her" (p. 233) and also an emblem of the union of consciousnesses he desires. When they walk together, their shadows blend into one, and their joined arms form a ring which "united our two persons in a single self" (p. 232). Likewise, he feels that a double of Albertine exists within him (p. 341). At least, this is the state to which he aspires: if he were she, he could feel her pains, think her thoughts, and he would have attained that certainty which he lacks. But of course, he cannot possess her in this sense; he cannot both be her (the only true possession) and yet feel the joy of possessing her. He can keep her, but he cannot have her: even the actions of her body stretch out "to the infinity of all the points that it had occupied in space and time" (p. 491; see also p. 128). Further, as soon as she is his, she has lost the freedom, the very otherness which attracted him to her. In a kind of functioning of the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, his efforts to pin her down in order to study her destroy the effect he wishes to examine. Only when he remembers her as free, as she was on the beach at Balbec, can he love her: as soon as he thinks of her as his captive, she becomes "possessed and of no great value" (p. 231); "because the sea breeze no longer buffeted her skirts, because above all, I had clipped her wings, she had ceased to be a Victory, was a burdensome slave of whom I would fain have been rid" (p. 507). What is valuable in her is what she has not given up to him. He is thus caught in a double bind: love is a desire to possess, and yet we love only what we cannot possess.¹⁵

The consequences of this paradox can be seen in the parallel endings to *Cities of the Plain* and *The Captive*, where Marcel's decisions to leave Albertine are reversed by the sense he has that she has escaped him. In the first volume, her statement that she has been an intimate of Mlle. Vinteuil (ironically, one of her lies) opens the possibility that she is a lesbian and therefore alien to him not only in her sexuality but also in the fact that she has another life of which he knows nothing. This precipitates the action of *The Captive*, in which he seeks to elucidate her past and present lives. Likewise, at the end of this volume she escapes his house before he can ask her to go, leading to his immediate desire to have her back and thus, to the action of *The Fugitive*. In this latter volume, her final escape in death ensures that she should become a permanent "fugitive" and therefore the beloved object of his years-long search into her past.

Possession is presented as knowledge, and knowledge as lan-

guage. In his desire to discover the many beings that make up Albertine, Marcel says: "I would have wished not to tear off her garments so as to see her body but through her body to see and read that memorandum block of her memories" (p. 119). The self is like a notebook, but one whose writing is accessible only to the owner. Marcel cannot read it: Albertine is like a text written in a language he does not understand, a code which, moreover, she keeps changing in order to elude his attempts to decipher it.

"For there is no one who will willingly deliver up his soul" (p. 198), writes the narrator in explaining Albertine's resistance to his curiosity, as though communicating were to turn oneself over to another, to give oneself up. Far from being a means of reaching the other, language serves to cut one off: contrasting music with speech, he imagines what interpersonal relations would have been like in a pre-lapsarian state "if there had not come the invention of language, the formation of words, the analysis of ideas" (p. 349). Imposing form, analyzing, these are the functions of naming: to name, to identify, is to cut off an entity from the rest of what exists, and thereby, from oneself. So not only can language serve to alienate when it is subverted through lies or through deformations; it is itself alienation.

Yet there is another side to the view of language evinced in such quotations. Indeed, it is often language which serves philosophers as the means of refuting the skeptic's claim for the radical alterity of others. In the ordinary language philosopher's appeal to what we say and "the search for our criteria on the basis of which we say what we say," Cavell sees "claims to community," and he expresses our deep need for such certainty in saying that "the wish and search for community are the wish and search for reason" (p. 20). This side is presented in Proust as well, as discussed below; but also the novel itself is a "memorandum block," that is, the transmission of the inner life of another person, Marcel himself. And despite his sense of failure in his attempt, as character and as narrator, in *The Captive* he has attempted to do the same for Albertine. His failure is his success: if nothing else, he has succeeded in transmitting our sense of being cut off from others, and he has figured the untenable but ineluctable position expressed by Wisdom when he writes: "Does the contradiction in the philosopher's request for perfect knowledge of others reflect a conflict in the human heart which dreads and yet demands the otherness of others?" ("Symposium," p. 229).

III

There is yet another double bind which is articulated in this novel and which leads to the failure of Marcel's attempt to "capture" Albertine. It can be seen perhaps most clearly in the following passage:

And, in themselves, what were Albertine and Andrée? To learn the answer, I should have to immobilise you, to cease to live in that perpetual expectation, ending always in a different presentment of you, I should have to cease to love you, in order to fix you, to cease to know your interminable and ever disconcerting arrival, oh girls, oh recurrent ray in the swirl wherein we throb with emotion upon seeing you reappear while barely recognising you, in the dizzy velocity of light. That velocity, we should perhaps remain unaware of it and everything would seem to us motionless, did not a sexual attraction set us in pursuit of you, drops of gold always different, and always passing our expectation! On each occasion a girl so little resembles what she was the time before (shattering in fragments as soon as we catch sight of her the memory that we had retained of her and the desire that we were proposing to gratify), that the stability of nature which we ascribe to her is purely fictitious and a convenience of speech. (pp. 77-78)

Here, the desire to immobilize, to fix Albertine or Andrée (for how can he grasp them unless they hold still?) is stymied by their movement, their passage. Not only are they others—the other, to him—they are always other than they were, that is, others to themselves. The cliché, as alike as two drops of water, is transformed here into always dissimilar drops of gold. The self, then, is intangible in its multiplicity; it dissolves into a ray of light, it "shatters in fragments" at our touch. Moreover, it is shown to be both linguistic and fictional in nature. It is this conception of the self which makes Marcel's task in *The Captive* inherently impossible, even inconceivable: there is an aporia between the necessary positing of the self, without which we could not imagine interpersonal relations or even languages at all, and the narrator's vision of the self as fragmented, almost illusory, and itself linguistic, or more precisely, topological.

The exclamation "Alas! Albertine was several persons in one" (p. 463), conveys both her multiplicity and Marcel's sense of help-

lessness in confronting it. Albertine is often described as a series of people. This multiplicity is both diachronic and synchronic (she has many past and future selves and there are many layers of her at any one time), both spatial and temporal; and it informs the narration of this volume: the more the narrator describes Albertine and her actions, the more the reader's impression of her becomes vague and fragmentary. The narrator returns again and again to his first impression of her among her friends at Balbec (and it is likewise of course the reader's strongest impression of her) when she was still simple to him. That moment is fixed and two-dimensional in his memory. The attempt to seize a ray of light, however, does not lead to a clearer image of it, but rather to a sense of loss at its elusiveness. Furthermore, part or parts of Albertine are entwined in the lives of other people; he speaks of her as "distributed among other people" (p. 483); his jealousy makes him try to prevent this seepage of her being into other lives; to confine her is to prevent parts of her from reaching his rivals. She is called "changeante," not only in the sense of being capricious but also elusive because she is constantly changing. She is repeatedly described as like this or like that (see especially p. 145); and the metaphors used to describe her convey the sense of her successive transformations, her metamorphoses from plant to flower to statue:

Had I not detected in Albertine one of those girls beneath whose envelope of flesh more hidden persons are stirring, than in . . . I do not say a pack of cards still in its box, a cathedral or a theatre before we enter it, but the whole, vast, ever changing crowd? Not only all these persons, but the desire, the voluptuous memory, the desperate quest of all these persons. (p. 119)

Each of these successive selves is shut up, in a box, an envelope, or an edifice, and is inaccessible to others.

From the passage quoted at the beginning of this section, it appears that to speak about the self or a person at all is to speak metaphorically: it is a question of mere convenience. We give a name to the succession of selves that make up a person, and the act of naming is a purely arbitrary notation, an abstraction, a fiction. The proper name, often conceived of as pure reference and the very model of denotation, turns out to be metaphorical, or more precisely, what Fontanier would classify as a metaphorical catachresis, because it is "forced," i.e. there is no other word we could use.¹⁶ As Marcel discovers at the

death of Swann, when a person dies and the name's denotation disappears, only "a mere name, a written name" remains. This name itself loses its shape and distinctiveness (that is, its power to distinguish) through time, becoming "formless" (pp. 269-70). Indeed, the names of the characters in this novel themselves blend into one another: Odette/Oriane; Albertine/Andrée; Charles Swann/Charlie Morel/M. de Charlus; Gilbert de Guermantes/Gilberte Swann. This blending can be seen most clearly in *The Fugitive* when Marcel takes Gilberte's signature on a telegram for the dead Albertine's, the *G* resembling an *A*, the arabesques at the end turning into an *-ine* ending: what we usually take as the authentication of a person's identity, her signature, her mark, fails to indicate the correct person.¹⁷

It is not only Albertine who is presented as successive or multiple in the course of this and other volumes of the *Remembrance of Things Past*: in *The Past Recaptured*, for example, the narrator finds that "there were, however, two M. de Charluses, not to mention any others" (p. 125), and he is aware of his own lack of unity: "We realize our own nature only in the course of time" (*The Captive*, p. 517). Deleuze links this multiplicity of the self with the moment when the sleeper wakes and chooses among the possible places and times and selves which present themselves to him (p. 114; see also the opening pages of *Combray*). This view of the self echoes Hume's argument that the self or the soul is a fiction. He says that when he looks within himself for such an entity as the self, all he finds is a series of perceptions:

Our last resource is to . . . boldly assert that these different related objects are in effect the same, however interrupted and variable. In order to justify to ourselves this absurdity, we often feign some new and unintelligible principle, that connects the objects together, and prevents their interruption or variation. Thus we feign the continued existence of the perceptions or our senses, to remove the interruption; and run into the notion of a *soul*, and *self*, and *substance*, to disguise the variation.¹⁸

Further, in Proust, the self is constituted, in yet another paradox, through that which has been shown to be altogether inaccessible, the other: through the other's language and through the unending mirroring of ourselves in the other. This position prefigures that of Lacan, according to whom the I is formed through the image of the child and others at his or her side reflected in a mirror: "We have only

to understand the mirror stage *as an identification* in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image."¹⁹ The ego so formed is for Lacan, as for Proust, a fiction: "But the important point is that this form situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction" (p. 2). It is not just in order to know Albertine's feelings in general that Marcel sequesters her: he wants to know how she feels about *him*, what he is in her eyes, questions that are resumed in the doubt about whether or not she wants to leave him (a question which is tantamount to asking whether their lives are irremediably separate). The question of *The Captive*, then, is what *he* is for *her*, and therefore, what he is. It is a question which must remain unanswered, for Albertine cannot give him what he can only find within himself.²⁰ Because of this impossibility, Leo Bersani finds that Albertine makes Marcel suffer in preventing him from using her to "objectify a stable image of himself" (p. 50). It is in *The Captive* that Marcel is named for the first time, and it is via Albertine that he is named, in a passage so unreadable that it calls into question the entire status of the narration of the novel: "she said: 'My—' or 'My dearest—' followed by my Christian name, which if we give the narrator the same name as the author of this book, would be 'My Marcel' or 'My dearest Marcel' " (p. 91). Albertine's love for him, expressed in her words, make his naming possible. It is inevitable and ironical that these words may well have been lying ones. In a parallel form of lying, the narrator admits that the self he ascribes to Albertine is one he has invented, and invented in words: "a romance which I had spent millions of minutes in writing" (p. 497). In the passage about Albertine and Andrée he makes it clear that it is our imagination which accepts characterizations of other people and that these characterizations are taken "at their word"; it must be so, for they are words.

Through this calling into question of the concept of the self, Proust also undermines what Miller has identified as an assumption underlying the European novel: that each character has a self, a kind of center to which we can pin qualities and feelings. Instead of revealing to the reader the thoughts of the characters, Proust's narrator admits that he simply does not know them, and the reader never discovers what Albertine's feelings for him, the reader, really are. He goes even further when he admits that he has not accurately represented what he does know, that his account is itself fictitious: "Yes, I have been forced to whittle down the facts, and to be a liar,

but it is not one universe, there are millions, almost as many as the number of human eyes and brains in existence, that awake every morning" (p. 255). The tension created by the narrator's presentation of characters as they are usually conceived and our awareness of them as allegorical projections of himself are what Leo Bersani sees as the point of the novel (pp. 246-47). Marcel is not only Albertine's reader, he is also self-consciously her author. So it is that in a sense Marcel does circumscribe Albertine: he describes a figure about what is already figure, Albertine's "self." But instead of being contained within that circle, she eludes him, as ever, in an unending spiral of figuration. Her leaving him at the end of the volume is a figure of this figuring.

IV

But what language do I speak? What is my language? Am I talking French? Yes, it must be French. But what is French? I can call it French if I want, and nobody can say it isn't—I'm the only one who speaks it. What am I saying? Do I understand what I'm saying? Do I? Ionesco, *Rhinoceros* (tr. Derek Prouse)

It is not only Albertine whom the narrator writes: he also writes himself. Indeed, the novel has often been characterized as the story of his becoming a writer; and his discovery of the continuity of his self through time in *The Past Recaptured* is simultaneous with his affirmation of his faith in literature—"letters." Proust has often been taken as claiming that the self is constituted through memory (cf. Bersani, p. 214); whereas it has been pointed out repeatedly since Locke's exposition of this theory that the concept of memory is itself dependent upon the concept of the self. Nonetheless, Proust does not seem to make a claim that runs counter to the point made by Hume in refuting Locke, that "memory does not so much *produce* as *discover* personal identity" (Hume, p. 34). It is language which makes memory possible, as Proust asserts when explaining Albertine's tendency to get her stories confused when she lies: "we remember the truth because it has a name, is rooted in the past, but a makeshift lie is quickly forgotten" (p. 190). Such a connection between language, memory, and the self depends on a kind of Wittgensteinian view of the publicity of language. Wittgenstein puts into question the idea of a private language, pointing out that one could never be sure that a sign

in one's language referred to the same thing today as yesterday; there could be no "criterion of correctness": "Always get rid of the private object in this way: assume that it constantly changes, but that you do not notice the change because your memory constantly deceives you" (*Investigations*, p. 207, §258). It is this possibility and this threat which is recognized by Béranger, the last man on Earth, in the passage from *Rhinoceros* quoted above: the impossibility of understanding and responding to others that Cavell calls the "fantasy of a private language" leads to the impossibility of understanding oneself.

Conceiving of others as inaccessible closed circles imprisons the skeptic within himself as much as it seals off others; and it leads not to a search for and in others, but to their rejection: "skepticism and tragedy conclude with the condition of human separation, with a discovering that I am I; . . . the alternative to my acknowledgement of the other is not my ignorance of him but my avoidance of him, call it my denial of him" (Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, p. 389). In the face of his own belief in the inaccessibility of others, the narrator is able to affirm the possibility of such acknowledgment, not only through art, but also through love:

And I became aware that Albertine was not even for me the marvellous captive with whom I had thought to enrich my home (for if her body was in the power of mine, her mind escaped from the grasp of mine) . . . urging me with a cruel and fruitless pressure to the remembrance of the past, she resembled, if anything, a mighty goddess of Time. And if it was necessary that I should lose for her sake years, my fortune—and provided that I can say to myself, which is by no means certain, alas, that she herself lost nothing—I have nothing to regret. [Through the very pain she has caused him, she has] given me access beyond my own boundaries, upon that avenue which, private though it be, debouches upon the high road along which passes what we learn to know only from the day on which it has made us suffer, the life of other people. (pp. 527-28)

He has been opened up to Albertine, though it is through a wound, and escaped the prison of his own selfhood. So it is that he cannot be a collector, pursuing or seeking to possess works of art or people; he sees, too, that Albertine cannot be his captive. And it thus becomes possible for him to find the road out of the self and the reaching out to others which is literature.

It is important, however, not to see such a passage as a resolution of the problems raised in *The Captive*: there can be no reconciliation between the conflicting views expressed by Proust on the radical alterity of the other and this possibility of union; of the self as a graspable entity and the self as fragmented and figural; of language as preventing communication and language as constituting the self and making communication possible. In maintaining these contradictions, Proust approaches the position of Wittgenstein as Cavell reads him, writing at another level from the philosophers who, since Descartes, seek knowledge as absolute certainty and who tend to deny the problem of skepticism and the threat to reason it represents by claiming that it does not exist or that it makes no sense. Proust, too, is writing in the face of the aporias inherent in his views of the self and the other: it is these impossibilities of which he writes.

NOTES

1. This point was made regarding novels by J. Hillis Miller in a seminar on the novel at the School of Criticism and Theory at Irvine on July 24, 1979. Stephen Toulmin has so characterized poetry in his article, "The Inwardness of Mental Life," *Critical Inquiry*, 6 (1979), 4.
2. Marcel Proust, *The Captive*, tr. C. K. Scott Moncrieff (New York: Random House, 1929), p. 74. All references to *The Captive* are to this Modern Library edition.
3. See also a similar passage in *The Past Recaptured*: "Through art alone are we able to emerge from ourselves, to know what another person sees of a universe which is not the same as our own and of which, without art, the landscapes would remain as unknown to us as those that may exist in the moon" (tr. Andreas Mayor, New York: Random House, 1970), p. 152.
4. *The Claim to Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 84.
5. "The Concept of Mind," *Other Minds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 243-44. The other papers of John Wisdom quoted in this essay are also from articles in *Other Minds*. For similar summaries of the skeptical position, see J. L. Austin, "Other Minds," *Philosophical Papers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 88; and Cavell, *The Claim to Reason*, p. 46.
6. *Proust and Signs* (New York: Braziller, 1971), p. 15.
7. Deleuze sees this reliance on nonverbal, involuntary forms of communication as

a kind of Derridean valorization of the written or gestural. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that this language proves similarly unreliable (see below).

8. The observation was made in a seminar on Meredith's *The Egoist* presented at Irvine on July 17, 1979.

9. Gerard Genette, "Discours du récit," *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972). See especially Ch. 1, "Ordre," and pp. 96-98 in particular.

10. Genette, pp. 216-17; Walter Benjamin, "The Image of Proust," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, tr. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), p. 213.

11. On Marcel's using Albertine's body, see Leo Bersani, *Marcel Proust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 79-80.

12. Notes for lectures on "Private Experience" and "Sense Data," ed. Rush Rhees, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Mind*, ed. Harold Morick (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1970), p. 172.

13. *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan Basil Blackwell & Mott, 1958), p. 89, §246.

14. Stanley Cavell, in "Knowing and Acknowledging," sees the problem of privacy as "learning why it is that something which from one point of view looks like a common occurrence (that we frequently have the same experiences . . .) from another point of view looks impossible, almost inexpressible (that I have your experiences, that I be you)." *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 262.

15. This idea is developed at great length in *The Captive*, (see especially III, pp. 97-146) and is related to the concept of "triangular" or "mediated" desire discussed with relation to Proust and other novelists by René Girard in *Desire, Deceit, and the Novel*, tr. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965). See also Leo Bersani, pp. 76-77.

16. In Fontanier's *Les Figures du discours* (Paris: Flammarion, 1968), he gives under the nominative form of "Catachrèses de métaphore," examples like *tête*, *aile*, and *lumière*: "Autant de métaphores forcées, quoique, sans doute, justes et naturelles" (p. 216); and in his discussion of metaphorical catachresis, he is brought to acknowledge the breaking-down of the distinction between the figural and the literal: "Il y a même bien peu de mots, dans chaque espèce, qu'elle n'ait soumis à son empire; car combien peu de mots ne présentent pas, sous une même forme, plusieurs idées très distinctes, et n'équivalent pas, par leurs différentes acceptions, à autant de mots différents qui manquent à la langue!" (pp. 215-16). On the epistemological value of metaphor in the constitution of the self through memory, see Leo Bersani, pp. 26-29, 54, 103, and 111. Bersani concentrates especially on the search for self-identity through an assimilation of the external world. For a deconstructive analysis of metaphor as a unifying power in Proust, see Paul de Man, "Semiology and Rhetoric," *Diacritics*, 3 (Fall 1973), 27-33.

17. For discussions of proper names in Proust, see Jeffrey Mehlman, *A Structural Study of Autobiography* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 50-59, and Roland Barthes, "Proust et les noms," in J. Bersani, ed., *Proust et les critiques de notre temps* (Paris: Garnier, 1971). On the signature as the mark of absence, see Jacques Derrida, "Signature événement contexte," in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Editions de Minuit), pp. 367-93.
18. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Bk. I, Pt. 4, §6 (1739; rpt. Morick, ed., p. 48).
19. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I," in *Ecrits: A Selection*, tr. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), p. 2.
20. I have been treating the question of the self only insofar as it touches on the question of the other as raised by *The Captive*. A full discussion of Proust's view of the self would have to take as one of its directions the reader's sense of inexplicable shifts in Proust's characters, as noted by Girard (see pp. 236-38), a characteristic Proust points out in Dostoevsky (*The Captive*, pp. 516-17). See also Leo Bersani, pp. 128-38. Such an analysis would also have to take into account the implication that all experience is a construct of the mind, as indicated but not discussed by Genette (p. 154, n. 2); and Georges Poulet's insight that experience is given a structure through reference to a system of places (*L'Espace proustien* [Paris: Gallimard, 1963], pp. 28-39).