

**LA DOUBLE ENTENTE:
EAVESDROPPING IN
A LA RECHERCHE DU TEMPS PERDU**

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Notre sagesse commence où celle de l'auteur
finit, et nous voudrions qu'il nous donnât des
réponses, quand tout ce qu'il peut faire est
de nous donner des désirs.

Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*

Although scholars of Marcel Proust have thoroughly explored his visual sensibility,¹ they have virtually ignored his reliance on aural perceptions to evoke particular moments, scenes, or *ressentiments* which resound from "le violon intérieur."² Surprisingly for an author whose aural sensitivity is legendary,³ attention to the role of sounds in *La recherche* remains minimal, except for music.⁴ Indeed, the criticism on Proust seems to confirm an "oculocentrism" in the western literary tradition.⁵ Although not denying the importance of vision in Proust's text, I would argue that hearing, and more specifically eavesdropping plays a critical role in Proust's *oeuvre*, particularly in scenes usually explained as voyeuristic. These episodes register an anxiety about the private spaces of desire--both literal and psychological--and yet simultaneously admit the near impossibility of keeping them protected from inquisitive ears and eyes. In *Le temps retrouvé*, the narrator describes how his composition must use "par opposition à la psychologie plane dont on use d'ordinaire, d'une sorte de psychologie dans l'espace" (336). *La recherche* explores the psychological weight attached to certain spaces and kinds of categories such as the opposition of public and private, masculine and feminine, gay and straight. Eavesdropping, a transgressive border activity, helps Proust figure and figure out such considerations.

Moments of illicit listening in *La recherche* deal explicitly with sexual identity and desire. Such scenes represent instances of what Peter Brooks calls "epistemophilia"--that is, a general, primal impulse to know (5). They dramatize Proust's intimate association of sexual knowledge with this larger epistemological urge and suggest a theory of narrative desire which extends to the reader of *La recherche*. If "desire, in human sexuality, is always transgression . . . something that is never completely fulfilled" (Kohon 371), moments of eavesdropping represent both the

transgressive aspect of desire--the illicit acquisition of information--and its inability to be fully satisfied. No matter how much we know, we always want to know more. Eavesdropping usually provides us with only partial information, yet whets our appetite to know the complete story. It not only blatantly dramatizes the exchange of information which forms the crux of storytelling, but in its incomplete acquisition of information, it entices us to create additional stories to account for what we may have heard. By the conclusion of Proust's novel, not only the characters and the narrator but the reader as well are implicated in this epistemophilic, narrative drive.

In particular, three eavesdropping scenes represent an escalation of the kind of secret, sexual knowledge being obtained and the supposedly "perverse" nature of this information. From the episode in *Du côté de chez Swann*, where young Marcel inadvertently overhears Mlle Vinteuil's performance with her lover, to Charlus and Jupien's first encounter in *Sodome et Gomorrhe* at center of the work, and finally, to the scene at Jupien's sado-masochistic hotel in *Le temps retrouvé*, Proust links the aural acquisition of knowledge with issues of identity, sexuality, and desire. Although the novel is filled with moments of chance overhearing and deliberate eavesdropping, instances which provoke jealousy, misperceptions, and narrative delay, in these sustained, paradigmatic eavesdropping scenes, the actual epistemophilic mechanism is dramatized as the subject of narrative itself.

The first occurs when the young protagonist, asleep in the bushes outside the Vinteuil home, awakes to find Mlle Vinteuil and her lover alone inside the former's private salon (*Swann* 157). He is immediately aware of the impropriety of remaining so close to the house, but he fears that the sounds he would need to make in order to leave would reveal his presence to her and make her believe that "[il] étai(t) caché là pour l'épier" (157). His scruples, however, are inconsequential, for Mlle Vinteuil deliberately sets up the scene with her lover as if it were a performance for some unnamed, unseen and unheard third person. When her friend asks her to leave the windows open, Mlle Vinteuil objects "Mais c'est assommant, on nous verra," and provokes the words "qu'elle avait en effet le désir d'entendre, mais que par discrétion elle voulait lui laisser l'initiative de prononcer," words which her lover "recites," namely, "quand même on nous verrait ce n'en est que meilleur" (159). In this performance of and about desire, her protestations of modesty actually emphasize the ritualized, transgressive

nature of the act to follow.

Significantly, Marcel not only sees the scene, but hears it as well, so that he receives clues indicating the theatricality of the lovers' interaction, which would not be obvious if only seen from afar. Although the scene concludes when Mlle Vinteuil, "vint fermer les volets et la fenêtre," so that the young protagonist can neither hear nor see, he remarks only on the fact that "[il] n'en *entendi[t]* pas davantage" (161). Listening has become more important than seeing, for in overhearing the lovers' interaction more than in viewing it, the young boy senses, even if he does not fully comprehend then, the staged, ritualistic quality to the sexual encounter which takes place behind closed doors, or here, closed windows.

By opening *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, the volume of *La recherche* literally and ideologically at the center of his work, with a second eavesdropping scene, Proust dramatically stresses its importance. The narrator first hears, and then sees Jupien "qui ne pouvait me découvrir derrière mon store où je restai immobile jusqu'au moment où je me rejetai brusquement de côté par peur d'être vu de M. de Charlus, [qui] . . . traversait lentement la cour" (4). From this hidden position, he secretly witnesses and hears but only dimly senses the nature of their initial mating dance. When Jupien invites Charlus inside his shop, the narrator relates how "la porte de la boutique se referma sur eux et je ne pus plus rien *entendre*" (9, e.m.). Rather than accept the dénouement of the scene as such, the curious Marcel "fort ennuyé de ne plus *entendre* la conversation de l'ancien giletier et du baron" realizes that by moving to the adjoining, vacant shop, he can continue his surveillance (e.m.). Choosing between a "prudent," subterranean route or one which "longeant les murs, [il] contourna[t] à l'air libre la cour en tâchant de ne pas être vu," Marcel opts for the latter path which exposes him to possible counter-espionage. As he reflects on the reasons for this choice, the narrator evokes the scene at Montjouvain, and links both moments. He determines that the revelation of secret knowledge requires a similar risk of detection. He also relates this quest for knowledge to the heroic military exploits which he has been reading about, and goads himself not to be "pusillanime . . . le seul fer que j'aie à redouter est celui du regard des voisins qui ont autre chose à faire que regarder dans la cour" (10). The epistemological quest becomes analogous to a heroic search for truth, and the implicit comparison between the bookish narrator's activities and those of the reader becomes more apparent.

Through its eavesdropping scenes, the narrative validates yet complicates the theory of scopophilia which Freud was developing at the time Proust was writing *La recherche*.⁶ In his analysis of infantile sexuality, Freud discusses an "instinct for knowledge or research" whose activity

corresponds on the one hand to a sublimated manner of obtaining mastery, while on the other hand it makes use of the energy of scopophilia. Its relations to sexual life, however, are of particular importance, since . . . the instinct for knowledge . . . is attracted unexpectedly early and intensively to sexual problems. (194)

Freud's association of sexual curiosity with a more general "epistemophilic impulse" (Brooks 7) offers a means of articulating the correlation between investigations into two kinds of knowledge in *La recherche*.⁷ To a greater extent than the earlier lesbian love scene, this second overheard sexual moment dramatizes the quest for knowledge often associated with the discovery of adult sexual relations, where the child first mistakes pleasure for sadistic torture. The narrator describes how the sounds he hears "étaient si violents que, s'ils n'avaient pas été toujours repris un octave plus haut par une plainte parallèle, j'aurais pu croire qu'une personne en égorgeait une autre à côté de moi . . . J'en conclus plus tard qu'il y a une chose aussi bruyante que la souffrance, c'est le plaisir" (11).

In his exploration of possible non-heterosexual primal scenes and sexual desires, Proust extends and deepens Freud's study of desire. Moreover, Proust's text recuperates the aural component of the epistemophilic urge which Freud's theory scants in favor of the visual.⁸ The psychoanalyst perceives how "the concept of instinct is . . . one of those lying on the frontier between the mental and the physical" (168). It comprises a liminality. Eavesdropping--a word whose very etymology indicates a boundary and its trespass--spatially represents being neither fully in one category, nor completely in another, a place which, in its very transgressiveness, evokes anxiety and fear of punishment; it thus provides a more evocative means of figuring an investigation of this liminal psychosexual territory than voyeurism.

In contrast to the scene at Montjouvain which terminates before the moment of consummation, Proust here presents a fully realized sexual

encounter; yet despite its details, the narrative exposes less a sensual moment than one of epistemophilic insight, a sublimation of carnal pleasure into an instance of psychological understanding. In listening to rather than seeing "l'acte de possession physique," in which, moreover, "l'on ne possède rien" (*Swann* 230), Marcel learns not only about Charlus' sexual orientation and homosexual love, but, more generally, about the proximity of the seemingly antithetical states of extreme pain and exquisite pleasure.⁹

A final eavesdropping scene in *Le temps retrouvé* further complicates the ideas explored in other moments of clandestine listening. In this episode, Marcel, searching for a place to buy a drink, discovers what he initially believes to be a meeting place of spies (117). Despite his misgivings about the establishment, he decides to enter. Standing in the vestibule, he overhears a conversation among a group of men which confirms his suspicion of shady dealings, but quite differently from what he assumed. At first, the "banalité" of the conversation stifles any desire to listen further. Only when, in its references to chains and beating, it reveals something illicit, unexpected, and possibly criminal does he tremble and wish to know more (119). As in the second eavesdropping scene, Proust signals the proximity of seemingly opposed emotions, fear and desire.¹⁰ The protagonist justifies his entrance into the house by figuring himself as "un justicier" who will prevent the perpetration of a crime; at the same time, he recognizes how this supposedly altruistic activity is a means of satisfying his own desire to know, the "volupté de poète" in search of a recondit, perhaps forbidden experience (119). The nature of the crime whose "consummation" he wishes to frustrate is already hinted at by a vocabulary of desire, just as the dream-like atmosphere recalls the initial primal lesbian scene.

The narrator drinks the cassis he has ordered,¹¹ but although his physical thirst has been satisfied, his curiosity has not. Instead of leaving, he climbs to the top of the budding where, "d'une chambre qui était isolée au bout d'un couloir," he thinks he hears "des plaintes étouffées" (122). Approaching the room, he first overhears a sadistic exchange in which the victim begs for mercy, and the torturer responds with insults and with what sounds like the "claquement d'un martinet probablement aiguisé de clous car il fut suivi de cris de douleur" (122). When Marcel finds a small window and looks into the room, he discovers Charlus reveling in masochistic, verbal and physical abuse (122).

Although the episode exposes the depths of Charlus' sexual

fantasies, its significance resides in the placement of Marcel as an illicit listener and voyeur. Far from revealing the hotel as a nest of spies, it portrays the *narrator* as an infiltrator of a private, secret space, the true "espion" of the episode. The continual anxious queries of the brothel's patrons about being overheard and male prostitutes' constant reminders to each other that Marcel is listening, stress not just the illicit nature of the activities of the house, but precisely the danger of its intrusion by someone who is not one of them (119, 121, 122, 124, 128, 130). Yet the language in which the narrator describes his adventure abolishes such categories, and allies his desire for knowledge with the sexual fantasies being enacted behind closed doors. Jupien emphasizes the analogy between Marcel's and Charlus' experiences when he places the narrator in the Baron's private chamber from which he can look and listen, but cannot be seen or overheard (130). By the time the protagonist leaves this specially organized space, his intellectual desire has been satisfied as fully as his earlier physical thirst--his ostensible reason for entering the hotel.

The text also implicates its readers in this epistemophilic urge. The narrator directly compares reading with eavesdropping, intimating that each represents a hermeneutic activity, an attempt to understand information to which one is not fully privy. Infatuated with Albertine, he describes how, "derrière les mots de sa lettre comme derrière ceux qu'elle m'avait dits une fois au téléphone, je crus sentir la présence de plaisirs, d'êtres, qu'elle m'avait préférés. Encore une fois je fus agité tout entier par la curiosité douloureuse de savoir ce qu'elle avait pu faire" (*Sodome* 194).¹² In both reading and listening, the recipient of the information is separated from anticipated pleasures and knowledge, the attainment of which is uncertain, if not impossible. Proust thus makes explicit the analogy, evoked earlier but not overtly stated, between sexual and readerly epistemophilia; he represents the reader's appetite for both kinds of knowledge by placing him or her as an eavesdropper segregated from the site of the desired object and its intentions. Reading becomes a "sublimated manner of obtaining mastery" over such desires. Both reading a letter and reading a scene which is overheard entail making sense of the material with which one is presented, as well as the information between or behind the lines. As *La recherche* so often demonstrates, both processes are rife with errors of interpretation which prolong an infatuation predicated on the impossibility of "possessing" the beloved, a possession which in Proust

is always both physical and psychological. The narrator declares, "On n'aime que ce qu'on ne possède pas tout entier" (*Prisonnière* 98). It is the desire to know this mystery, the "true" story of another person, which compels Marcel to acts of devious espionage and which propels the narrative; sexual and narrative desire become inextricable from each other, both instances of epistemophilia.

Proust's novel reveals an intense awareness of the reader as a second-degree eavesdropper. In *La recherche*, both reading and surreptitious listening become activities which acknowledge boundaries even as they try to eliminate them, even as such oppositions as masculine and feminine, inside and outside, true and false, are abandoned as incapable of fully representing an elusive, changing reality—elusive and changing because the subject who conceptualizes them is also constantly transforming into someone else. The writer facilitates a different kind of border-crossing by bringing two different psychological spaces in contiguity, so the reader can eavesdrop with impunity from his or her own space. Thus an early scene of Marcel's onanism becomes a moment of readerly eavesdropping, which we only recognize after having vicariously experienced *his* illicit listening. Thinking about the incident retrospectively, we realize that Proust has made himself our narrative and epistemological "entremetteur" who satisfies our desire to know, just as, in his hotel, Jupien provides for all of Charlus' sexual needs.

La recherche obliges readers to be self-conscious about the kind of project both we and Proust have undertaken. The narrative assumes a readerly complicity in the activity taking place within the novel itself: an epistemophilic quest in search of self and other. Opening up a private perspective on exclusive Parisian society of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Proust's text makes its eavesdropping readers privy to the particularly intimate world of desire and sexual identity. At the same time, the narrative constructs the very world and personae which it seems merely to expose, and in doing so, places the readers of *La recherche* in the same sort of hermeneutic quandary as its protagonist: how to make sense of (and hence, articulate, place into narrative form) the partial, often equivocal information which our reading or eavesdropping provides us.¹³

Yet Proust does not suggest that we remain mere eavesdroppers, vicarious readers of other people's experience. As early as 1906, Proust expresses how reading is, like eavesdropping, a liminal activity, on the threshold of a deeper understanding; "la lecture est au seuil de la vie

spirituelle; elle peut nous y introduire; elle ne la constitue pas" (*Pastiches* 178). Reading should afford an entrance into self-exploration, so that "chaque lecteur est quand il lit le propre lecteur de soi-même" (*Temps* 217).¹⁴ Just as his novel makes us reflect about the changing, elusive nature of his characters, Proust also makes us examine our own activities and desires, our motives and motivations. *La recherche* entices us to eavesdrop and thus, assume a critical distance on (and tantalizing proximity to) the most fascinating, if most perplexing space for any good reader: the human psyche.

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NOTES

¹ Numerous studies focus on the influence of Ruskin on Proust's work, on the predominance of visual imagery, description, and perception in his novel, and Proust's theories about visual art in *La recherche*. For critical work tracing Proust's debt to Ruskin, see Ronald Hayman's biography (138). For critical studies which concentrate on visual means of perceiving reality in Proust's novel, see Roger Shattuck and Howard Moss. Margaret Gray assumes the predominance of Proust's visual sensibility and discusses his project in terms of a visual vocabulary.

² *La prisonnière* (19). For example, Shattuck's study devoted to Proust's "optics" merely mentions in passing how "it is equally meaningful to speak of the hypersensitivity of his olfactory sense or of his hearing" (20).

³ For example, he subscribed and listened regularly to the telephone performance service, or Théâtrophone, which enabled him to listen to performances of the Opéra, Opéra-Comique, the Comédie Française, etc. via the telephone; he had an enduring passion for music; he continually complained about noises from disturbing neighbors, and eventually had his room lined in cork in 1910; he tested what he had written by reading it aloud (Hayman 89, 279, 337, 343, 366, 369, 381, 422).

⁴ Critical attention focusses on music as a formal structuring element, rather than as an experience with its own psychological weight

and sensory affectivity. See Forster's discussion of Vinteuil's "petite phrase" which represents for him "the function of rhythm in fiction" (167). For an example of the role that sound plays in Proust, see *Le côté de Guermantes I*, where the narrator's description of his grandmother's phone call to him emphasizes the importance the telephone in isolating the voice and making us aware of its singular role in the revelation of character (125-26).

⁵ I borrow this term from Luce Irigaray's critique of male oculocentrism (48).

⁶ Freud initially wrote his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* in 1905, but only added the section on the sexual theories of children and the pregenital organization of the libido in 1915, about the time Proust was working on the preliminary version of *Sodome et Gomorhe* (1912-16), which was in complete manuscript form as of 1916. See Straehely 126 and Compagnon, *Sodome* xxvii-xxviii.

⁷ Although recent studies in child development place this stage earlier than Freud suggests, they corroborate his observations of humans as inherently inquisitive. Although Freud believed this "instinct to know" manifested itself initially between the ages of two to five years, Burton White asserts that infants start gathering information as early as the first few weeks of life, and that the period from eight to fourteen months is a "period of life virtually dominated by curiosity" (232).

⁸ Although Freud also refers to the phantasy of "overhearing" one's parents engaged in sexual intercourse, he emphasizes the visual component of such activity, as his term "scopophilia" suggests (226).

⁹ Significantly, this second eavesdropping scene serves as the prelude to "La race des tantes," the section of the novel which discusses the life of "invertis," a life of continuous subterfuge, where a single "imprudent" act can produce disastrous consequences for one's public life. In this episode, what betrays the invert is the intonation of his voice, which makes disguise virtually impossible (63).

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, among others, also signals the "proximité (identité) de la jouissance et de la peur" (77).

¹¹ By evoking the plant of the same name outside Marcel's room in an earlier scene of onanism, the cassis obliquely links the reader's vicarious experience of sexual pleasure with the narrator's.

¹² This passage recalls the moment when Albertine telephones Marcel to announce that she will not be coming for their planned, late-night assignation (129). Listening to the sounds behind her voice which

carry over the wire, he realizes that she inhabits a world which he neither knows completely nor controls, which is separate from the part of her life which joins his own (*Sodome* 130-1).

¹³ See Gray's recognition of the difficulty of "any critical act" in a work which generically "scrambl[es] confession, autobiography, and fiction" (9).

¹⁴ Proust repeats this idea slightly differently toward the end of his novel: his readers "ne seraient pas, selon moi, mes lecteurs, mais les propres lecteurs d'eux-mêmes" (*Temps* 338).

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