
H-France Salon

Volume 13, Issue 13, #10

Charlus at Home, or the Verbal Pursuit of Pleasure

Adeline Soldin
Dickinson College

In one of the final passages of *Le Côté de Guermantes*, the narrator pays a visit to the baron de Charlus in the intimacy of his home. The baron has invited him to his house with a specific agenda. On the surface, he confronts the narrator for having rejected his favors and defamed him to others. With further scrutiny, however, it becomes clear that Charlus stages this meeting as part of an erotic game in which his own tirade arouses himself. The narrator plays an important role in this dialogue, that of the insolent, inferior bourgeois, and he does so quite well. The success of this exchange relies on the articulation of certain words in a particular style and context, a method that appears in other explicitly sexual scenes. This passage differs, though, from the more frequently referenced Montjouvain and brothel scenes in which the narrator witnesses carefully choreographed physical and verbal exchanges between characters. In those scenes, the narrator participates only as a spectator whereas in this instance he is directly and perhaps unwittingly implicated in the baron's unconventional effort to self-seduce. What is more, this experience leads to the narrator's own first tastes of a similarly spoken pleasure that relates to both storytelling and performance. This study examines the significance of this understudied passage as it pertains to the portrayal of both auto-erotica and narrative pleasure in *À la Recherche du temps perdu*.¹

This inquiry begins with the narrator's carriage ride to the baron's residence during which he describes a giddy sensation that has completely consumed him. Having just left the duc and duchesse de Guermantes's dinner party, he expresses a sort of overexcitement characterized by both exaltation and melancholy (II, 836). The narrator had high expectations for his first *soirée chez les Guermantes*, and yet he was rather disappointed by the caliber of conversation, finding it generally boring and old-fashioned (II, 836–38). He compares his exchanges with the duchess to the knowledge one might find in an ancient castle library: outdated and incomplete (II, 838). Rather than experience simple disenchantment by the unexpectedly drab company, however, he senses the possibility of pleasure, even if brief, through the recounting of these stories. Specifically, he is dying to tell them to Charlus:

¹ Henceforth, I will refer to *À la Recherche du temps perdu* as *la Recherche*. All references to *la Recherche* will cite the following edition: Marcel Proust, *À la Recherche du temps perdu*, ed. by Jean-Yves Tadié, 4 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1987–89).

J'avais un tel besoin que M. de Charlus écoutât les récits que je brûlais de lui faire, que je fus cruellement déçu en pensant que le maître de la maison dormait peut-être et qu'il me faudrait rentrer cuver chez moi mon ivresse de paroles. (II, 840)

The narrator is intoxicated with words and burning with desire to retell the stories he has just heard to the baron. If M. de Charlus is already in bed, he will be forced to go home and sleep off this drunken excitement. Distinguishing between internal and external forces, the narrator precisely associates his current state with the latter as it stems from his recent social interactions. This external force is not naturally accompanied by pleasure (contrary to the internal force associated with creation), “mais nous pouvons lui en ajouter un [plaisir], par choc en retour, en une ivresse si factice qu'elle tourne vite à l'ennui, à la tristesse” (II, 836). The aftermath of this shocking dissatisfaction produces a fleeting possibility of exalted pleasure that risks turning quickly into sadness. Exploiting this potential pleasure requires recounting these conversations, as boring as they were when first communicated: “je m'émerveillais de mon bonheur, non ressenti par moi, il est vrai, au moment même, d'avoir dîné avec quelqu'un qui connaissait si bien Guillaume II” (II, 837). Having penetrated him, these stories are now “impatientes d'en sortir”: “En attendant, elles faisaient trépider mes lèvres qui les balbutiaient et j'essayais en vain de ramener à moi mon esprit vertigineusement emporté par une force centrifuge” (II, 840). It is as if his mind has been overtaken by an external power and the only way to exorcize it is through a verbal vomiting of the conversations absorbed at the Guermantes's dinner. We can only hope this centrifugal force does not cause his head to spin.

Indeed, he describes his state of mind as an “ivresse de paroles” and likens this sentiment to that of “un littérateur” who is able to appreciate antiquated, aristocratic dialogue to the extent that it functions like a historical dictionary preserving the past (II, 839–40). The narrator develops this idea further, specifying that a writer who enjoys this type of banter should be wary of believing that “les choses du passé ont un charme par elles-mêmes” (II, 840). Despite the appeal of excellent French on display, the narrator warns that recording these conversations “telles quelles dans son œuvre” would be tantamount to giving birth to a still born (II, 840). While this is an unfortunate metaphor, it resonates with Proust's later comparison of the narrator's impending novel to a child he needs to overfeed (IV, 610). Proust's insistence on writing as a form of translation in *Le Temps retrouvé* is well known, and he alludes to this notion here when he stresses the inadequacy of mere repetition or transcription. The author, thus, associates the narrator's urge to expel these stories in his own words, whether verbally to Charlus or in written form, with his forthcoming inspiration to write. In fact, the narrator explicitly compares this carriage ride en route to the baron's home to two other drives, both noteworthy for their internal, artistic impressions: the first in Dr. Percepied's carriage and the second in Mme de Villeparisis's coach. In the first instance, the young narrator experiences intense pleasure and joy after rendering his visual perception of the Martinville steeples into words on paper, denoting therefore his first attempt at becoming a writer. Whereas the narrator “[se] mi[t] à chanter à tue-tête” after having textually expressed the sight of these steeples (I, 180), he “riai[t] tout haut” on his way to the baron's residence as he recollects the conversations at the Guermantes's dinner party (II, 837). Similarly, the landscape view of three trees in Hudimesnil provokes “un bonheur analogue à celui que m'avaient donné, entre autres, les clochers de Martinville. Mais cette fois il resta incomplet” (II, 76–77). This happiness remains incomplete because the narrator does not outwardly express it, verbally or textually, yet it carries nonetheless the sensation of being in a

fictional world, in between the past and present moment (II, 77). In this third vehicle, it is the conversations gleaned from the Guermantes's dinner table that have captured his attention and wait anxiously to be verbally articulated (II, 836). Unfortunately for the narrator, the baron is also excited to communicate his own views and desires, and may not be in the mood to listen to him babble about his own family.

As stated in the introduction, Charlus invites the narrator to his home with specific aims. He intends to berate the narrator about his allegedly rude and inconsiderate behavior vis-à-vis the baron's advances, and he endeavors to do so within a particular context and using particular language so as to arouse himself (and perhaps the narrator too, if he is lucky). Proust intimates as much in his presentation of the scene *chez* Charlus. To begin, it is implied that the baron's valets stall the narrator while they wait for the baron to return home, telling the former that the latter is occupied with other guests. While giving the impression that the baron is very busy, they nonetheless prevent the narrator from leaving the moment he suggests it is getting too late. When the narrator attempts to leave a second time, he is then immediately brought to see the baron who, despite evidence that he just returned home, is posed "en robe de chambre chinoise, le cou nu, étendu sur un canapé" (II, 842). He therefore quickly changed into a more intimate ensemble and positioned himself seductively on the couch before receiving the narrator. This suggestion that Charlus hastily situated himself "étendu sur un canapé" recalls Mlle de Vinteuil who "se jeta sur un canapé" upon hearing the arrival of her girlfriend at Montjouvain (I, 158). By echoing this earlier passage, Proust frames this scene in Charlus's home as a similarly prepared performance between two characters of the same sex, enacted in the pursuit of pleasure. What is more, the tinge of orientalism in the depiction of the baron dressed in a Chinese robe *à l'Odette* exposing his naked neck both eroticizes and ridicules him as he stares glaringly at the oblivious narrator. Proust further emphasizes Charlus's dramatic tendencies while ironically insisting on the narrator's ignorance:

J'ignorais du reste que chez lui à la campagne, au château de Charlus, il avait l'habitude après dîner, tant il aimait à jouer au roi, de s'étaler dans un fauteuil au fumoir, en laissant ses invités debout autour de lui. (II, 842)

By prefacing this statement with "j'ignorais," Proust shrewdly reminds the reader that, regardless of the narrator's unawareness in the moment, he *now* knows nearly everything about Charlus, from his predilection for "playing king" to his unspoken attraction to men and what these two characteristics indicate about this very scene. Although the narrator continues to remain silent on the topic of Charlus's sexual preferences, he does draw our attention to his affinity for performance. Indeed, before leaving the baron's home on this very evening, he realizes that not only did Charlus plan to stage this entire scene, but he also invited his valets to eavesdrop "par amour du spectacle" (II, 847).

In accordance with his love of spectacle and his seductive costume, the baron infuses this scene with arousing language — language that is tacitly and sometimes oddly carnal as well as language that insists on the baron's superior social position by disparaging the young narrator. To be sure, invectives and social transgressions excite the baron; these inclinations are made evident in the passage that takes place at Jupien's brothel in *Le Temps retrouvé*. In that context,

Jupien hires strong and handsome men to take turns acting as violent, low-class hoodlums who assault Charlus with both a whip and words.

In this scene at his home, the Charlus enjoys playing the sadist who asserts his social and cultural superiority by lecturing the narrator with colorfully harsh speech. For his part, the narrator proves to be a perfect target for the baron's disdain, exhibiting initially a combination of incomprehension and obliviousness. After confusing *Directoire* style furniture for Louis XIV décor, the narrator describes the embellishment on the book that Charlus gifted him earlier in *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* as "[d]e très jolis entrelacs historiés," when, in fact, he had distinctly recognized the myosotis that adorned the cover at the time (II, 843; II, 126). That the narrator *forgot* the forget-me-not flower on the leather-bound book is quite suspicious. Is he really that absentminded or does he prefer to misremember this incident in which the baron was so plainly hitting on him in Balbec, as he continues to do now? Whatever the reason, these blunders prompt the following insult from Charlus:

Je vois que vous ne vous y connaissez pas mieux en fleurs qu'en styles ; [...] vous offrez à votre derrière une chauffeuse Directoire pour une bergère Louis XIV. Un de ces jours vous prendrez les genoux de Mme de Villeparisis pour le lavabo, et on ne sait pas ce que vous y ferez. (II, 843)

The narrator's gaffes contribute to the success of the baron's performance as it allows him to spin this elaborate and vulgar offense depicting the narrator in a compromising position on Mme de Villeparisis's lap. The image is a provocative one owing to the baron's inspiring command of the French language, which links this conversation to those that the narrator heard at the duke and duchess's dinner party. Although the narrator found the content of those earlier conversations quite boring, he did appreciate the eloquent expression on display. Charlus, on the other hand, employs even more enticing language than his relatives to communicate much more titillating content. The narrator declares openly that the baron's beautiful words are capable of justifying the most heinous of crimes as reasonable and logical:

Mais de quelques belles paroles qu'il colorât toutes ses haines, on sentait que, même s'il y avait sous son discours tantôt de l'orgueil offensé, tantôt un amour déçu, ou une rancune, du sadisme, une taquinerie, une idée fixe, cet homme était capable d'assassiner et de prouver à force de logique et de beau langage qu'il avait eu raison de le faire. (II, 844)

In short, Charlus's speech, despite being hateful and motivated by pride, resentment, and sadism, among other things, is quite simply irresistible. Reminiscent of Barthes who claims that "[il] goûte ici un excès de précision, une sorte d'exactitude maniaque du langage, une folie de description," Proust draws attention here to the seductive power of articulate language.² Yet, whereas Barthes declares: "Je m'intéresse au langage parce qu'il me blesse ou me séduit," Proust seems to be suggesting that "il s'intéresse au langage parce qu'il blesse *et* séduit" insofar as erotic scenes in *la Recherche* are often structured around cruel verbal exchange.³

² Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973), p. 44.

³ Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte*, p. 62.

Indeed, the baron himself shows signs of being beguiled by his own hurtful words.

Similar to the narrator who describes his lips as trembling impatiently to recount the stories that he heard that evening, Charlus exhibits physical excitement in the form of facial agitation. It begins with convulsions and a whitening of his complexion that the narrator describes as a curious seascape of “mille serpents d’écume et de bave” (II, 843). Charlus is undeniably on the verge of drooling. After insinuating that the narrator would find himself sitting on Mme de Villeparisis’s lap one day “un jus olivâtre, hépatique, semblait prêt à sortir de sa bouche mauvaise” (II, 843). From oral excretion to verbal articulations, the focus on the mouth in this scene cannot be overstated.⁴

It is not only the meaning of the words that contribute to the baron’s autoerotic endeavor, but also the way in which he manipulates his voice. As the baron continues to insult the narrator for his various shortcomings, he raises his voice to an extremely high pitch only to lower it slowly, “comme s’enchantant, au passage, des bizarreries de cette gamme descendante” (II, 845). Charlus charms himself further with “des caresses vocales de plus en plus narquoises et qui faisaient flotter sur ses lèvres jusqu’à un charmant sourire” (II, 845). This combination of contemptuous, coarse language and fanciful vocal maneuverings seems to build up strength and momentum inside the baron, recalling the centrifugal force experienced by the narrator just a few pages earlier:

(La force avec laquelle il parlait d’habitude, et qui faisait se retourner les inconnus dehors, était centuplée, comme l’est un *forte*, si, au lieu d’être joué au piano, il l’est à l’orchestre, et de plus en plus se change en un *fortissimo*. M. de Charlus hurlait.)
« Pensez-vous qu’il soit à votre portée de m’offenser ? Vous ne savez donc pas à qui vous parlez ? Croyez-vous que la salive envenimée de cinq cents petits bonshommes de vos amis, juchés les uns sur les autres, arriverait à baver seulement jusqu’à mes augustes orteils ? » (II, 846)

The loudness of Charlus’s voice increases one-hundred-fold in his final verbal assault on the narrator. Maintaining still the musical theme when describing the baron’s strident utterances, the narrator equates the amplification of his voice to the power of an orchestra playing *fortissimo*. Moreover, Charlus intensifies his domineering tone with bellicose, ribald language that further emphasizes the motif of oral secretion. Painting another stimulating visual with his imaginative words, he positions himself on a figurative pedestal high above hundreds of nobodies, including the narrator, who could only dream of drooling on his majestic toes. The image is at once ridiculous, arrogant, and crude, a winning combination to arouse the baron. And, Charlus is actually salivating while saying all of this.

⁴ Several scholars have emphasized the focus on oral pleasure in Proust’s work, namely Kaja Silverman in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992). I aim to draw attention to the expansive notion of oral pleasure in *la Recherche*, which goes beyond physical interactions with partners and includes various forms of verbal articulation, both written and vocal.

If there is any doubt in the reader's mind as to whether Charlus attains physical satisfaction in this scene, the narrator confirms as much in *Sodome et Gomorrhe I*. In this chapter of *la Recherche* that is dedicated entirely to the discussion of same-sex love and denotes the narrator's total enlightenment on the subject, Proust substantiates the notion that Charlus reached a climax during his confrontation with the narrator at his home:

Par simples paroles la conjonction était faite aussi simplement qu'elle peut se produire chez les infusoires. Parfois, ainsi que cela lui était sans doute arrivé pour moi le soir où j'avais été mandé par lui après le dîner, l'assouvissement avait lieu grâce à une violente semonce que le baron jetait à la figure du visiteur, comme certaines fleurs, grâce à un ressort, aspergent à distance l'insecte inconsciemment complice et décontenancé. (III, 30)

Michael Lucey aptly points out that the approximation between the words *semonce* and *semence* is not necessary for Proust to make clear the baron's erotic gratification, but it certainly eliminates any doubts on the matter.⁵ This association among semen, plant seeds, and vocal reprimands is quite fitting, in fact, for several reasons. To begin, the botanical metaphor depicting flowers that spray insects with pollen from a distance clearly recalls Charlus who nearly spewed “un jus olivâtre” on the narrator during his animated diatribe, which he also essentially heaved at him. What is more, it is precisely the *semonce* — the harsh, vocal remonstrance — that excites the baron, leading to the expression of *semence*. Charlus's language, in other words, is emblematic of his sexuality.

In her study of the evolution of same-sex love in Proust's work, Mireille Rosello asserts that, although the narrator displays a deafening silence on homosexuality, in the end, homosexuality *is* language, that goes beyond the narrator's voice.⁶ She insists on the fact that gay characters, and Charlus in particular, do not talk so much about same-sex attraction, as it expresses itself through a coded language that is homosexuality itself: “Charlus lui *est* langage. Il n'a pas le choix. Quoiqu'il essaie d'exprimer, il finit toujours par *se* dire. Il ne fait qu'un avec son code.”⁷ Rosello does not address Charlus's tirade in the scene under examination here, but her theory speaks to many aspects of this verbal exchange. On the one hand, Proust underlines the narrator's overt refusal here to admit knowing anything about Charlus's sexual preferences before the big reveal in *Sodome et Gomorrhe I*. As mentioned earlier, the narrator shares other information that he could only have learned after the fact, but not a word about Charlus's attraction to men. Indeed, there is a strange tension here between the narrator's resounding silence and Charlus's excessive language — excess being the key to *jouissance*.⁸ One might even say that Charlus's words

⁵ Michael Lucey, *Never Say I: Sexuality and the First Person in Colette, Gide, and Proust* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 240.

⁶ Mireille Rosello, “L'embonpoint du Baron de Charlus,” *French Forum* 10.2 (May 1985), 189–200 (p. 192): “Au-delà de la voix du narrateur, il y a dans le texte un langage qui correspond à celui de la fleur rare orientant ses étamines et ‘arquant coquettement ses styles.’ Ce langage, c'est l'homosexuel lui-même, qui *est* plutôt qu'il ne parle, un langage de désir, un appel incessant et éloquent aux orchidées de notre monde.”

⁷ Rosello, “L'embonpoint du Baron de Charlus”, p. 194.

⁸ “C'est la gageure d'une jubilation continue, le moment où par son excès le plaisir verbal suffoque et bascule dans la jouissance.” Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte*, p. 17.

eclipse the narrator's as the one prevents the other from pursuing his own satisfaction by recounting the stories that he heard around the Guermantes's dinner table. On the other hand, it is the narrator who artfully conveys how the baron articulates the unspeakable and achieves his pleasure by speaking. Where exactly does Charlus's language end and the narrator's start? Has the latter not found pleasure in translating this episode for his readers? What does this experience witnessing Charlus's vocal performance teach the narrator about his own verbal pursuits?

To answer these questions, we must return to the scene at Charlus's home to examine how it concludes. When we last left it, the baron's outburst was peaking at its most intense and obnoxious degree. Throughout his harangue, the narrator makes several attempts to convince the baron that he never intended to affront him nor has he ever talked offensively about him to anyone, behavior of which the baron is accusing him. By the time Charlus is boasting about his august toes, the latter has lost all patience and is consumed by "une rage folle" that he is incapable of containing:

D'un mouvement impulsif je voulus frapper quelque chose, [...] je me précipitai sur le chapeau haut de forme neuf du baron, je le jetai par terre, je le piétinai, je m'acharnai à le disloquer entièrement, j'arrachai la coiffe, déchirai en deux la couronne, sans écouter les vociférations de M. de Charlus qui continuaient et, traversant la pièce pour m'en aller, j'ouvris la porte. (II, 847)

Undeniably overpowered by the strength and venom of Charlus's words, the narrator resorts to exorcizing his rage physically by attacking the baron's shiny new top hat. Proust insists on its glistening brilliance when describing it earlier as an "haut de forme 'huit reflets,'" a term indicating one could see eight reflections in the shimmering fabric (II, 842). As an iconic emblem of class, Charlus's pristine top hat represents his elevated position in the social hierarchy, the very position about which he has been bragging to the narrator. The French word, *couronne*, contributes to the classist connotation of this object. By tackling his sartorial status symbol, the narrator metonymically tackles the baron, and he does so with intense determination. He throws the hat on the ground, stomps on it, does everything possible to tear it to pieces, disconnects the cap and rips the rim in two — all while remaining completely silent. What is more, in the midst of this violent skirmish with the hat, the narrator manages to disregard the baron's outcries, ultimately ending his aggressive tirade.

Charlus shows no anger regarding his mutilated hat, but desperately begs the narrator not to leave. He quickly excuses his behavior, stating "qui aime bien châtie bien," a revelatory admission if ever there was one (II, 848). Not only does Charlus punish those he loves, but he loves to punish and be punished. In fact, the narrator's vicious assault on his hat may have corresponded precisely to the type of reaction he sought. We already know that this exchange pleases the baron, but it stimulates the narrator's senses as well. In addition to provoking his fury, the narrator manipulates the conversation to his benefit. The two men continue to converse relatively amicably after the hat incident while the baron makes a few more attempts to seduce the narrator. He has arranged for musicians to play Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* and repeatedly urges the narrator to join him for a moonlight ride to the Bois de Boulogne. The baron's efforts fail while the narrator succeeds in directing the conversation towards one of his preferred topics of discussion: the aristocracy. His excitement to recount the stories gleaned from

the Guermantes's dinner seems to have dissipated, but he now delights in hearing Charlus ramble on about his familial and social connections. His vocal meanderings eventually lead him to acclaim the residence of the princess de Guermantes as the most beautiful around, even more impressive than the duke and duchess's home. While expounding upon the prestige of the princess's property, Charlus stresses repeatedly that only invited guests have access to this extraordinary place, and "on n'invite jamais *personne* à moins que [il] intervienne" (II, 853). The narrator remains unphased by the baron's repeated efforts to convince him of the utility of his companionship, yet the baron's words nevertheless arouse his imagination:

Beaucoup de choses que M. de Charlus m'avait dites avaient donné un vigoureux coup de fouet à mon imagination et, faisant oublier à celle-ci combien la réalité l'avait déçue chez la duchesse de Guermantes [...], l'avaient aiguillée vers la cousine d'Oriane. (II, 856)

Proust's use of the expression *donner un coup de fouet* to describe the effect of Charlus's talk on the narrator's thoughts further links this passage to the baron's future role-playing games at Jupien's brothel where he is beaten with a martinet whip. In both instances, an effective use of language is required to stimulate the imagination. In the brothel scene, the baron's counterparts must assail him not only with *les coups de martinet*, but also with convincing insults. In this passage, Charlus speaks in such a way that the narrator forgets his disappointing experience at the duchess's house and rekindles his fascination with the aristocracy by aiming his attention at the princess de Guermantes. We can only infer that his forthcoming invitation to her salon is indeed prompted by the baron's intervention. In addition to the opportunity to visit the princess's incredible property, this encounter with Charlus leaves other lasting effects on the narrator. Most notably, the desire to attempt his own auto-erotic performance.

Later in *La Prisonnière* when the narrator instigates a faux break-up with Albertine, he admits specifically to have been inspired by Charlus's numerous misleading performances. The narrator intentionally incites this separation with the hopes of frightening Albertine into staying with him. In other words, he adopts the same type of reverse psychology that the baron uses in his home and elsewhere: enact a powerful display of disregard towards the object of desire in hopes that this contempt will attract them. In the process of arguing with Albertine, though, the narrator actually arouses himself:

Comme un homme qui n'avait d'abord que des motifs peu importants de se fâcher se grise tout à fait par les éclats de sa propre voix et se laisse emporter par une fureur engendrée non par ses griefs, mais par sa colère elle-même en voie de croissance, ainsi je roulais de plus en plus vite sur la pente de ma tristesse, [...] et avec l'inertie d'un homme qui sent le froid le saisir, n'essaye pas de lutter et trouve même à frissonner une espèce de plaisir. (III, 860)

Similar to both Charlus's auto-erotic act in his home and the centrifugal force that intoxicates the narrator after the Duchess's dinner party, the narrator's manufactured anger and thundering voice generate increased energy, propelling him deeper into his performance. Rather than find himself roused by others' stories, his own vocal outbursts impassion him to the point of experiencing pleasure. Proust of course accomplishes his own verbal performance here by means of extensive circumlocution. Rather than identifying these sensations as the narrator's own, he constructs two

excessive metaphors that attribute these feelings to random men. When the narrator does admit directly to enjoying this dramatic scene, he justifies his sense of satisfaction by insisting on the qualities of his performance: “J’aurais eu tort d’être heureux de la petite comédie, n’eût-elle pas été jusqu’à cette forme de véritable mise en scène où je l’avais poussée” (III, 861). This compliment recalls the narrator’s impression of Mlle Vinteuil’s performance in Montjouvain, which he believes M. Vinteuil would have himself appreciated for its degree of perfection (I, 161). It is not, however, Mlle Vinteuil that the narrator recognizes as his model for this type of behavior, but M. de Charlus: “Car il était bien probable qu’à mon insu l’exemple de M. de Charlus m’eût guidé dans cette scène mensongère que je lui avais si souvent vu jouer, avec tant d’autorité” (III, 863). Charlus is the authority figure on this particular genre of auto-erotic performance, which the narrator attributes specifically to “la tendance profonde de sa race allemande” (III, 863). Putting aside characters’ preferences for partners of the same sex or the opposite sex, Proust undoubtedly privileges auto-erotic pleasure associated with performance in his work. In the scene examined here, the satisfaction associated with verbal articulation within a spectacular performance is emphasized further. However, it is undeniable that characters who exhibit a preference for same-sex partners act as the model examples for this type of verbal and performative pleasure. Specifically, Charlus performs a lesson in verbal pleasure in his home for the narrator, who later adapts this venture to his own love life.

Charlus is indeed the conspicuous model for verbal pleasure, but the narrator already sensed its possibility in the carriage ride to the baron’s house when his mouth trembled with excitement and impatience to retell the stories that he had heard at the Guermantes’s dinner party. In fact, he had already experienced the gratification of a beautifully written sentence when he translated his vision of the Martinville steeples into words on a page, “puisque c’était sous la forme des mots qui [lui] faisaient plaisir, que cela [lui] était apparu” (I, 179). The narrator attempts to emulate Charlus, who excels at orally articulated pleasure, when he invents the dispute with Albertine, but as we know, the narrator is not as vocal as the baron. Yet, he does ultimately take the baron’s advice, which is not that you must always speak, but that you can always write:

J’avais conçu pour vous des choses infiniment séduisantes que je m’en étais gardé de vous dire. Vous avez préféré refuser sans savoir, c’est votre affaire. Mais, comme je vous le dis, on peut toujours *écrire*. (II, 845; italicized in original)

Charlus claims to have concocted exceptionally seductive plans for the narrator, but he never quite manages to execute them. For one, he never explicitly tells the narrator what his exciting proposals are, and the narrator never shows enough interest to ask about them. The baron is insulted that the narrator did not at least write him a word in response to his overtures. If homosexuality is language, however, what would one word have suggested to the baron? The narrator clearly prefers silence as the means of communication in this instance. Nonetheless, it is clear from this scene that verbal pleasure is not unfamiliar to the narrator; rather, he excels in the written form whereas the baron has mastered excessive vocal articulation. The narrator does not talk as much as he writes, but he ultimately enjoys communicating that which is not said, evoking once again Barthes, for whom “le plaisir est dicible, la jouissance ne l’est pas.”⁹

⁹ Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte*, p. 36.

Adeline Soldin
Dickinson College

H-France Salon

ISSN 2150-4873
Copyright © 2021 by the H-France, all rights reserved.