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Ami ou protégé: Balzac, Proust and the Variability of Friendship
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In the final section of Honoré de Balzac's *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* (1847), there are a few moments where the choice a speaker makes of a word to refer to the perhaps questionable nature of the relationship existing between two men is highlighted in intriguing ways. These moments occur after the death of Lucien de Rubempré, and the relationships in question are those between Lucien and Jacques Collin, aka Vautrin, in the first instance, and between Collin and a young prisoner sentenced to death, Théodore Calvi, in the second. In the first instance, it is the wife of the examining magistrate, Camusot, who is speaking to one of her aristocratic patrons, the Duchesse Diane de Maufrigneuse, regarding copies of some compromising letters between the Duchesse and Lucien that may still exist. The Duchesse was under the impression that all the letters found in Lucien's possession had been burned:

— Mais, madame, Lucien était doublé de Jacques Collin ! s'écria la femme du juge. Vous oubliez toujours cet atroce compagnonnage, qui, certes, est la seule cause de la mort de ce charmant et regrettable jeune homme ! Or, ce Machiavel du baigne n'a jamais perdu la tête, lui ! M. Camusot a la certitude que ce monstre a mis en lieu sûr les lettres les plus compromettantes des maîtresses de son ...

— Son ami, dit vivement la duchesse. (6:878)

The editors of the Pléiade edition of Balzac's *Comédie humaine* append a note to the moment where the three dots indicate that the duchess has interrupted Mme.

Camusot: “L’interruption de la duchesse prouve qu’elle craint d’entendre quelque chose comme « son amant »” (6:1490). Is “amant” the only other word Mme Camusot could have used? Is it a word she *would* have used? Are there other candidates? What words would someone like her not only have at her disposal, but also think of using under these circumstances? “Son instrument” perhaps, or “son ganymède,” or “son mignon,” or “son giron,” or maybe “son camarade,” or “son compagnon,” or even, why not, “son protégé”? What is at stake in the selection she was about to make from the pool of possible, vaguely synonymous options?

Indeed, we might further wonder if the duchess and Mme. Camusot each have the same range of possible options available to them. That is, do they both know all, or at least the same subset, of the relevant possible words one might use in such a situation? Given that sets of words of this kind are often organized into registers, do the two women associate the various options at their disposal with the same registers, and do they have the same sense of which register they should appropriately be using when speaking to each other? Here is how the linguistic anthropologist, Michael Silverstein characterizes the general problem Balzac is illustrating in the scene in question:

[F]or speakers of any language, there seem to be alternative ways of saying what counts for them as more-or-less the same thing—communicating denotational content in-and-by using one from among a set of forms such that one’s identity is revealed as a user of the form, or such that the social characteristics of one’s interlocutor are indexed in-and-by its use, or such that something else about the context is

rendered interactionally salient. ("Voice" 512)

That is, to an appropriately informed and experienced listener, word choice carries information not only about nuances of meaning, but also about the person doing the choosing, as well as about that person's sense of their interlocutor(s) and of the particulars of the speech situation in which they are involved. When the choice between options is vexed, or diplomatically perilous in some way, as this choice appears to be, it is not simply because of the denotational content of the word that is spoken, but because of its pragmatic implications, because of other information about the larger cultural situation that somehow risks being actualized when the word is spoken. Because this additional cultural information is transmitted pragmatically rather than semantically, it is perhaps less easily recoverable at a later date—that is, unless some explicit metapragmatic commentary (such as novelists are allowed to introduce if they wish) is provided to explain, for instance, the word that Madame Camusot had on the tip of her tongue, or the word Diane de Maufrigneuse thought she had on the tip of her tongue, and the reasons why it would have been unseemly for such a word to be pronounced. Such metapragmatic commentary is a prominent feature in Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Balzac, alas, leaves it to his reader's own cultural competence (or imagination) to establish what is interactionally salient here, and therefore what kinds of knowledge circulate in this culture regarding possible paradigms for relationships between men.

The editors of the Pléiade edition assume that what must not, according to the duchess, be said out loud, is a word that would render explicit the sexual

intimacy that has probably existed between Lucien de Rubempré and Jacques Collin. Is that the only possibility, or even the most likely one? Could she, for instance, hardy and worldly sexual adventurer that she obviously is, perhaps have been concerned more about social status, about hearing a word that might elevate Collin while denigrating Rubempré -- for example *protégé*, which might suggest that Collin was entitled to be the protector of someone like Lucien? Or a word that would somehow simply shame and denigrate Lucien, say *complice* (accomplice) or *associé* (associate)? Balzac's genius in this scene is to produce a situation and describe it in such a way that none of these possibilities actually excludes any of the others. Often, Balzac obviously knew, when we make snap linguistic choices, the reasons for them are complex rather than simple.

Balzac is offering here, we might say, a microsociological perspective on a set of issues that are both sociological and historical: How do people view friendship between men? What functions have the institutions of friendship served at different times and in different places? How have those institutions evolved in the ways they have in different times and places, and why? When the editors of the Pléiade edition (and who is to say they may not be right?) suggest that what must not be spoken is a word that would reveal a sexual component to the relationship between the two men, they enter into a vexed historical debate regarding ways of thinking about intimacy and friendship, which includes an effort to take into account the possibility that modern Western ways of being preoccupied with sexuality might distort the view one takes on historical materials or materials from other locations. Alan Bray offered one sophisticated and compelling statement of this problem at the outset of

his posthumously published *The Friend* (2003), a volume that dealt mostly with materials from early modern England, when he wrote of an extant ethics of friendship in the materials he studies:

The ethics of friendship operated persuasively only in a larger frame of reference that lay *outside* the good of the individuals for whom the friendship was made. To pose the historical question in terms of the essential good or ill of sexuality therefore, the question that has come to dominate the corresponding modern debates, operates necessarily by contrast *within* the friendship. The inability to conceive of relationships in other than sexual terms says something of contemporary poverty; or, to put the point more precisely, the effect of a shaping concern with sexuality is precisely to obscure that wider frame. (6)

We might ultimately that the material from Balzac captures a moment of hesitation, when the terms under which friendships were lived or discussed were conflicted, when the concerns that shaped the relevant discussions and the relevant lives were open to question, when different attitudes regarding the degree of pertinence of sexual intimacy to these discussions sometimes came into conflict with each other.

In a helpful discussion of some of the implications of Bray's work, Valerie Traub observes that "if eroticism is always embedded in other forms of social relations, if acts of bodily intimacy are rendered intelligible only from within a precise social location, if the power of eroticism to signify is

variable and uncertain, if we cannot always be confident that we have interpreted its presence or absence correctly, then eroticism, like sodomy and friendship, is apprehensible only as a relational structure—not only between people, but between people and history” (350). What we can find in the scenes from Balzac and Proust that I look at here are the representations of moments when people’s relationship to the history of friendship comes into question because the relational structure that is friendship is somehow put momentarily into play, and when a concern with sexuality in particular seems to provoke a sense of the instability of friendship’s relational structure.

SUGGESTED FIRST SECTION BREAK

Let us return to Balzac, and to another moment from *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*, roughly a dozen pages after the one we have already looked at, where Camusot himself is speaking to the Comte de Grandville, the Attorney General, about Collin’s current activities in the Conciergerie prison:

— Il est en ce moment auprès de votre condamné à mort, qui fut jadis au bague pour lui, ce que Lucien était à Paris... son protégé !

(6:891)

The three little dots, among other functions, serve to link this passage to the one we looked at above. The two passages are structured similarly, both dealing with a verbal exchange between two people from different social strata about a potentially delicate subject: two men of divergent and complicated social provenances whose relation may have included a sexual component. How do you convey certain kinds of

information deferentially (assuming you are inclined to be deferential, as the Camusots appear to be to a large extent when speaking to the aristocrats with whom they come into contact)? Notice, however, that Camusot is not interrupted by Grandville. The three dots would seem to indicate a pause or a tonal effect that print cannot fully register, but that suffices to add an implication or a weight or a nuance to a word (*protégé*)—a nuance that the word in question has the capacity to carry, but might not always do so. But is the salient feature of the word in this instance of its use that it carries a sexual nuance, or is it that it takes an aristocratic social institution and somehow debases it? Again, there is no reason multiple effects cannot be achieved simultaneously.

I am fairly convinced that Proust had these moments from Balzac in the back of his mind when he was composing part of the scene in *La Prisonnière*, the fifth volume of the *Recherche*, that takes place at the Verdurin salon. The long scene in question opens with people arriving at the residence of the Verdurins for a performance of the Vinteuil Septet featuring the dashing young violinist Morel. It ends with the rupture of the relationship between Morel and the Baron de Charlus, a rupture that has been carefully engineered by M. and Mme Verdurin. Consider the following passage, from shortly after the performance of the Septet has concluded, in which Charlus is speaking to a noblewoman from his circle of acquaintances, Mme de Mortemart:

« Il n’y aurait pas moyen que je donne une soirée pour faire entendre votre ami ? » dit à voix basse Mme de Mortemart [. . .] « Vous voulez dire mon protégé », rectifiait M. de Charlus, qui n’avait pas plus de

pitié pour le savoir grammatical que pour les dons musicaux de sa cousine. (3:774)

Could we, from this passage alone, deduce what the difference is between *ami* and *protégé* in the exchange in question, or more generally? How would we apportion the degree of difference between the two words that is semantic, and the degree which is pragmatic? Are these different forms of meaning shared evenly between differently positioned speakers? It would seem not, because, as the novel will reveal in the pages that follow, the difference between the words is not the same in every case of their use. One possible construal of the difference between them will be revealed by Mme Verdurin, who has overheard this exchange and will repeat an embellished version of it to Morel in her campaign to provoke him to break off his relations with Charlus:

Quelqu'un a cru lui faire plaisir en lui disant : "Nous admirons beaucoup votre ami Morel." Savez-vous ce qu'il a répondu, avec cet air insolent que vous connaissez : "mais comment voulez-vous qu'il soit mon ami ? Nous ne sommes pas de la même classe, dites qu'il est ma créature, mon protégé." (3:817)

We may or may not decide to trust that the information about usage patterns found in Proust or in Balzac, and about the implicit cultural information they carry, is reliable. It seems clear that both authors understand language to be a place in which the aristocracy and various segments of the bourgeoisie are constantly performing their distinction from each other, demonstrating that they belong to different cultural universes, with different frameworks for conducting, understanding, and

evaluating different kinds of relationships and the varied forms of intimacy they may encompass. How much, and in what ways it matters that sexual or other forms of intimacy might be a part of a relationship between two men is, of course, part of what is in the air in all these exchanges, just as is how much, and in what ways it matters that status differences exist between men who are intimate in some way.¹

The same words used by different people will not always carry the same implications; indeed, the same words used by the same person in different circumstances will not always carry the same implications. When, and in whose mouth, we might ask, does *protégé* carry the implication of a sexual relationship? Consider another passage from *La Prisonnière*, occurring a short while after the one just cited. Brichot is talking to the narrator about Charlus's relationships with men, in this case his relationship to a particular telegraph boy who had earlier been sexually involved with a colleague of Brichot's:

De notre collègue, dont la sagesse est d'or, mais qui possédait peu d'argent, le télégraphiste a passé aux mains du baron (“en tout bien tout honneur”, il faut entendre le ton dont il le dit). Et comme ce Satan

¹ Work in friendship studies, and on the intersection between friendship studies and the history of sexuality in France in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has dealt with numerous different class locations, all of which bring up slightly different issues. Jeffrey Merrick, writing about male friendship in a number of non-aristocratic locales, for instance, has noted that “friendship, as imagined and experienced, had multiple meanings in prerevolutionary France. It was one of many sites, and a notably unregulated site, in which expectations and contestations about social order played out in the troubled decades preceding 1789” (410). After the revolution, as Sarah Horowitz has shown, bourgeois friendship “had political functions and became a way to understand how solidarity could be reconstructed in the wake of the Revolution. [Friendship] was thus well suited to serve as a force for cohesion among free citizens” (3).

est le plus serviable des hommes, il a obtenu pour son protégé une place aux Colonies, d'où celui-ci, qui a l'âme reconnaissante, lui envoie de temps à autre d'excellents fruits. Le baron en offre à ses hautes relations ; des ananas du jeune homme figurèrent tout dernièrement sur la table du quai Conti, faisant dire à Mme Verdurin, qui n'y mettait pas malice : "Vous avez donc un oncle ou un neveu d'Amérique, M. de Charlus, pour recevoir des ananas pareils !" (3:832)

By *protégé* Brichot seems to mean a (younger) person who provides sexual favors in return for various forms of protection from someone wealthier, older, and probably of more elevated social status. This seems somewhat similar to what Camusot meant as well. Is it what Charlus meant, when he corrected Mme de Mortemart? That seems unlikely.

The relationship between Charlus and Morel is a complex one. There was a sexual phase in the relationship, but it seems to have passed by this point in the novel. As the narrator was arriving at the Verdurins in the company of Brichot and Charlus earlier that evening, he noted, "Les manières conjugales de M. de Charlus avec Morel auraient à bon droit étonné qui aurait su qu'il ne l'aimait plus" (3 :716). The implication of that observation seems to be that in the narrator's eyes Charlus is perfectly open about the fact that he and Morel exist together in the way a married couple does, but they pursue their sexual lives elsewhere. (The entire evolution of their relationship is apparently an unremarkable fact in the minds of both the narrator and Brichot--unremarkable, that is, in that it creates no particular obstacle to the rapport they have with either Charlus or Morel, even though it does

apparently remain the case that their knowledge of the nature of the relationship between the two men cannot be explicitly acknowledged to them.) Charlus supports Morel financially, and actively seeks to advance Morel's musical and social career. He has burnished his own piano skills so that he can accompany him on occasion; he seeks out new compositions for him to perform and texts for him to set to music. He hopes to arrange a suitable marriage and he participates in the planning of advantageous occasions for Morel to perform.

Mme Verdurin seeks to displace Charlus and to become Morel's artistic patron. In order to do this, she and her husband will be pretending that to their knowledge there has been no history of sexual intimacy between Charlus and Morel, and they will be endeavoring to create a conversational moment, a scene of talk, in which, by telling Morel in front of other witnesses that ugly rumors are circulating to the effect that Charlus is keeping Morel, Morel will be obliged to pretend to be shocked and somehow forced by the situation in which he will be trapped to agree to break off with Charlus. A skilled conversationalist could perhaps resist and evade the outcome they are trying to force upon him, as Mme Verdurin seems to instinctively realize, which is why she plays a dangerous trump card, depending on social rather than sexual shame to push Morel over the edge. Here is how the conversational moment cited earlier continues:

« Quelqu'un a cru lui faire plaisir en lui disant : "Nous admirons beaucoup votre ami Morel." Savez-vous ce qu'il a répondu, avec cet air insolent que vous connaissez : "mais comment voulez-vous qu'il soit mon ami ? Nous ne sommes pas de la même classe, dites qu'il est ma

créature, mon protégé.” » À ce moment s'agitait sous le front bombé de la déesse musicienne la seule chose que certaines personnes ne peuvent pas conserver pour elles, un mot qu'il est non seulement abject, mais imprudent de répéter. Mais le besoin de le répéter est plus fort que l'honneur, que la prudence. C'est à ce besoin que, après quelques légers mouvements convulsifs du front sphérique et chagrin, céda la patronne : « On a même répété à mon mari qu'il avait dit : “mon domestique”, mais cela je ne peux pas l'affirmer », ajouta-t-elle.

(3:817-818)

The secret about Morel's past, one that nobody can keep to themselves, that his father was a *valet de chambre*, is the one Mme Verdurin uses to greatest effect here. If we consider her imaginative embroidering (“Nous ne sommes pas de la même classe, dites qu'il est ma créature, mon protégé”) on what Charlus actually said to Mme de Mortemart (“Vous voulez dire mon protégé”), we see her insistence not only on class, but on a heady mixture of class, gender, and sex-- “créature”--that was not present in Charlus's original utterance. We might wager that he meant “protégé” in a way consistent both with his honor and with Morel's: that with appropriate aristocratic condescension and generosity he was helping a younger man of lower station but of enormous talent find his way in the world. Sexual intimacy is almost, it's tempting to say, neither here nor there in this construal of their relation.

SUGGESTED SECOND SECTION BREAK

What I have been doing up till now is examining represented scenes of talk in novels

in which nuances and implications of word choices are presented as crucial features of the scenes, without those nuances and implications being elucidated for us. I have been trying to imagine the cultural concepts and also the positions and points of view from within a complex social field that might be ascribed to the various participants in these scenes in order to explain the word choices they make and that the novels emphasize for us.

Michael Silverstein suggests that “we feel—do we not?—that cultures, like languages, are fundamentally ideational or mental—or *conceptual*—insofar as in communicating people seem (at least at first) to be giving evidence of knowledge, feeling, and belief, even creating, sharpening, and transforming knowledge, feeling, and belief in themselves and others.” That is, part of what happens when people talk is that they create, or assert ways of knowing that their interlocutors either acquiesce to, or modify, or reject. We could say that the novelistic encounters we have been examining are scenes of social contestation, in which diverse ways of understanding are put forth in potentially conflictual scenes. Silverstein continues: “What, then, is the sociological condition of existence of such—as we should term them—‘cultural concepts’ of which cultures are constituted in the face of the very individual-centric assumptions that our own culture persists in having about knowledge, feeling, and belief? How can we see that language as used manifests such cultural concepts, ones specific to a sociohistorical group, notwithstanding the ‘freedom’ we think we manifest in saying what we want, as a function of what we, *as individuals*, ‘really’ believe we want to communicate about?” (“Cultural” 622). A version of Silverstein’s question directly related to the material we are examining

might be this: when two people such as the Duchesse de Maufrigneuse and Madame Camusot, or the Comte de Grandville and M. Camusot, or Charlus and Madame de Mortmart, or Mme Verdurin and Morel exchange words with each other, pursuing their communicative ends of the moment, how is it that they are also caught up in—that they are actors in—a social history of which they may be mostly unaware?

The scenes of talk in Balzac and in Proust are finally asking us to do more than interpret the impressive complexities behind the word choices made by various characters, to do more than make an effort to understand the local stakes of these scenes of verbal interchange. These scenes are presented to us as indexes of moments within larger historical processes and conflicts. Arguably, assuming Proust had Balzac in the back of his mind while he composed the section of his novel I have referenced, Proust's novel is even asking us to think about the historical trajectory from the moment just prior to 1830, when *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* is set, to the moment in the early years of the twentieth century when the Septet scene takes place. (In *Narrative Discourse* Genette suggests a date somewhere around 1901- 1902 [see Genette 90-92].) In both novels, shifting status distinctions between various fractions of the aristocracy, various fractions of the bourgeoisie, and various other social groups (e.g. domestic servants and convicts) have been given salience. These various social groups find themselves meeting within different kinds of institutions (the judicial system in *Splendeurs et misères*, Parisian salons in *La Prisonnière*), and it is clear that the novels are interested in the way those institutions are themselves evolving as a result of the cumulative effect of the kinds of interactions the novels represent to us.

But what is the relationship between a specific linguistic exchange taking place at a particular moment of time, and the much longer-term process of the evolution of various social institutions under the influence of shifts in the relative power and influence of different fractions of different social classes? Here we run into a problem of *typicality*, for we might decide to think that a novelistic scene of linguistic exchange is presented to us not as realistic in the sense of being something the novelist could actually have overheard, or not only that, but realistic in the sense of being *typical*, of being the condensation of innumerable such scenes that cumulatively contribute to determining the direction of social history. In life, single scenes of talk that fully capture the direction of a large social process probably stand out a bit less clearly than they do in novels that have as part of their project to represent such large social processes.

Novels invested in the realistic, or accurate, or informative, or analytically rich representation (and implicit or explicit analysis) of scenes of talk will know, for instance, that authority structures that arise and survive for the length of a given verbal exchange may not correspond in any accurate way to the authority embodied in the speakers in question at other moments or positions in the social field. People capable of assuming verbal authority at any given moment may not possess other kinds of authority, indeed may not, when considered more globally, be particularly authoritative at all. People incapable of exercising authority at some particular moment may, nonetheless, wield significant amounts of social power at other moments. Proust's *Recherche* is fascinated by the phenomenon of the misalignment between what happens at any particular moment of verbal exchange, and what is

happening on any number of larger scales. (This is apparent in any scene involving the “royals” who appear in the novel, the Queen of Naples, the Princess of Luxembourg, or the Princess of Parme, who infrequently exhibit any form of verbal dexterity despite their coveted social position and what we might refer to as their refined sociability—remembering that that word can mean many different things to different people in different times and places.) The moment at which Morel repudiates Charlus is thus particularly interesting on a number of levels. To start with, to what extent should we take it as offered to us as an index of a direction of movement within the more general social field? Here is a bit of what transpires at that moment in the novel:

« Laissez-moi, je vous défends de m’approcher, cria Morel au baron. Vous ne devez pas être à votre premier coup d’essai, je ne suis pas le premier que vous essayez de pervertir ! » Ma seule consolation était de penser que j’allais voir Morel et les Verdurins pulvérisés par M. de Charlus. Pour mille fois moins que cela j’avais essuyé ses colères de fou, personne n’était à l’abri d’elles, un roi ne l’eût pas intimidé. Or il se produisit cette chose extraordinaire. On vit M. de Charlus, muet, stupéfait, mesurant son malheur sans en comprendre la cause, ne trouvant pas un mot, levant les yeux successivement sur toutes les personnes présentes, d’un air interrogateur, indigné, suppliant, et qui semblait leur demander moins encore ce qui s’était passé que ce qu’il devait répondre. (3:820)

How is it that a person as arrogant as Charlus, someone even a king couldn’t

intimidate, could find himself stripped of verbal resources in a moment like this? Why is the narrator (who has known that this moment was coming for some time) so firmly on Charlus's side? It is an astonishing scene, since it is probably safe to say that next to no one left in the room had been in the dark about all the components of the relationship between Charlus and Morel, whatever name they might give to it. Indeed, Morel had an incredibly challenging role to play, forced by the Verdurins' way of addressing him to pretend (to them, to everyone present, and now to Charlus) that he had never noticed much of what was going on between him and Charlus. If he goes along with this, is it because he somehow lacked the verbal dexterity to avoid becoming ensnared by the nets in which the Verdurins have caught him? Or is it because references to his family's past history bring out irrational behavior in him? Or is it because, in some way, he recognizes or intuits (correctly or incorrectly) that it will be better for his career to switch his allegiances to the Verdurins at this point? Are the verbal nets the Verdurins weave particularly effective because a certain kind of sexual morality (of which it could hardly be said anyone in the room is an ardent supporter) itself is taking on more and more authority in the larger social field surrounding this scene? The novel carefully raises all these questions while leaving all definitive answers in abeyance.

Charlus is extricated from his predicament by the Queen of Naples. She departed earlier in the evening, but accidentally left behind a fan, and returns just at this moment to retrieve it. "On ne l'avait pas entendue entrer dans le feu de l'incident qu'elle avait compris tout de suite et qui l'enflamma d'indignation," the narrator tells us. Morel had wanted to be introduced to her. Seeing her now, his first

thought it that he can no longer ask Charlus to introduce them. Mme Verdurin offers to perform the introduction, but the Queen will have none of it:

La reine tendit son bras à M. de Charlus. Contre lui aussi elle était fâchée, mais seulement parce qu'il ne faisait pas face plus énergiquement à de vils insulteurs. Elle était rouge de honte pour lui que les Verdurins osassent le traiter ainsi. [. . .] « Vous n'avez pas l'air bien, mon cher cousin, dit-elle à M. de Charlus. Appuyez-vous sur mon bras. Soyez sûr qu'il vous soutiendra toujours. Il est assez solide pour cela. » . . . Et c'est ainsi, emmenant à son bras le baron, et sans s'être laissé présenter Morel, que sortit la glorieuse sœur de l'impératrice Élisabeth. (3:823-825)

We have here another expression, “mon cher cousin”, to list alongside “son ami” and “son protégé.” In one concise, compact, and pragmatically rich formulation, the Queen has indicated not only her kinship with Charlus, but their friendship; she has made utterly clear the status distinction between them and everyone else in the room, and has made equally clear that the Verdurins and Morel will never again be in her good graces. She has also made clear the irrelevance in her mind of any sexual behavior of Charlus or anyone else to all of these considerations.

SUGGESTED THIRD SECTION BREAK

We could perhaps think of friendship as an institution, as a house with many rooms, a building under constant renovation, some rooms being done over, some being maintained in their current state, some being demolished, others being added.

There are different kinds of doorkeepers, bouncers, we might say, many with different decision-making protocols, assigned to a good number of the rooms. What we perhaps observe in this scene from Proust, or in the intertextual relations between Proust and Balzac, is two novelists thinking about the evolution of this complex institution, and also two novelists having their characters *experience* this evolution. On what plane of experience does this evolution happen? For it certainly does seem that even though the Baron de Charlus is rescued from this disgraceful scene by his “cousin,” nonetheless, the Verdurins and Morel have made something happen. They have made some kind of a shaping contribution to social reality (or to that bit of social reality in the vicinity of their salon), and everyone who witnesses the scene seems to have experienced this. They have asserted something about friendship and sexuality, an assertion that has had immediate consequences, and whose extended consequences remain to be seen. That is, they have insisted that sexual intimacy between men *must*, when brought into the public domain, be seen as somehow socially disqualifying—even if we would probably be safe in surmising that they don’t actually believe this on a personal level. Simply they understand that the social world is now such that certain kinds of information can be used this way in certain kinds of scenes of talk.²

Balzac and Proust have carefully laid out for us how many different social

² I suggested in *Never Say I*, that one of the lessons Proust might have learned from the Eulenburg Affair had “to do not so much with sexuality per se, but rather with the intersection of a particular aristocratic sexual culture with an increasingly prevalent popular and bourgeois discourse *about* sexuality per se (about homosexuality more particularly)” (233-234). The scenes I am discussing here show Proust ruminating on these same issues.

characteristics contribute to the possibility of certain kinds of relationships between men that might be called friendship (although they might be called other things as well). Those characteristics—let’s call them pertinent variables or criteria—might include social status, class, wealth, age, sex, gender, preferred sexual acts, physical characteristics, religious affiliation, musical talents, aesthetic sensibilities, verbal dexterity, habits of sociability, professional competencies, etc. How do all these different criteria, different but interrelated variables, interact? How do we know which ones actually matter (and when), which ones are of major consequence, which ones minor, which ones insignificant? Is their weight identical in all contexts?

Proust and Balzac are, we might say, a bit like sociologists in that they are coding a transcription of reality for us. By the verbal interactions they “report” and the way they structure the scenes they represent, they pick out, render salient, certain elements of a more general social reality. Pierre Bourdieu writes that:

Coder est typiquement une opération de classement puisqu’il s’agit de distribuer des individus en classes, de leur attribuer des propriétés ; on a un individu qui est une réalité composite (n’importe lequel d’entre vous est un individu qui a un nom, un titre, des qualités, comme on dit en justice), et coder un individu, c’est en quelque sorte l’atomiser, le décomposer, l’analyser en une série de propriétés autonomes, indépendantes, et susceptibles d’être traduites dans une catégorie simple. (Sociologie 43)

Novelists such as Balzac and Proust not only offer a kind of coding of their characters for us (think of the function of the many details regarding a character’s

appearance, past history, and present situation, that Balzac usually provides each time he introduces a new character), they also show many of their characters always to be in the process of collecting information that is used in sorting people into different categories in order to know best how to interact with them. Bourdieu continues:

Le problème est de découvrir les critères pertinents. [. . .] Il faut trouver les critères qui, dans la réalité, divisent réellement les groupes plutôt que des critères formels construits pour les besoins de la cause.

(44)

The question that was coming up in the scene in which the narrator hopes to see Charlus grind Morel and the Verdurins into the dust for what we might call their impertinent way of treating him is precisely the question of the pertinence of certain criteria in enabling or disabling a relationship of friendship between two men—a pertinence that might be narrowly circumscribed (efficacious or applicable in a very tightly delimited social arena) or generally applicable. Why does Morel believe that the Verdurins have created a context in which his best next move is to disavow his friendship with Charlus? How might we understand the kind of calculation he makes? Is it a kind of sum? That is, thinking about “who” he is, and “who” Charlus is, does he think that new contextual information has caused all of the components of Charlus to add up in a new kind of way that means associating with him has suddenly become disadvantageous, and similarly that all the bits of himself need now to be reprioritized and reweighted so

that he is no longer quite the same person he was when he arrived at the Verdurins earlier that evening? If we choose to think of these kinds of calculations as a kind of summing up of variables whose weight shifts over time and from context to context, we might ask what sum of circumstances and properties puts people in a position to be friends, and what shift or what supplement or missing element makes things not add up any longer, makes a friendship untenable.

Sometimes sociological effects are taken to be understandable as an appropriately calculated sum of various criteria,³ and yet, there is clearly something more going on in the scene Proust has given us to contemplate, for in fact no new criteria, no new property, nothing in particular has been added to the make-up of either Morel or Charlus. No new information has been added to anyone's awareness. All that has happened is talk. But that talking has somehow reorganized the immediate social field. It is as if everything has been differently weighted all of a sudden and for an indefinite length of time. Frédéric Lebaron has noted that for Bourdieu, "social causality amounted to the global effects of a complex structure of interrelations, which is not reducible to the combination of the multiple 'pure effects' of independent variables" ("How Bourdieu" 12). Understanding the interrelations of variables means understanding their ability to function within a particular social space, a social space that has a certain construction to it. It also means

³ "Sometimes we show additive effects of particular factors using a common formula for regression analysis, where some effect of interest (Y) is produced by a combination of factors ($x_1, x_2, x_3 \dots$), coefficients that determine the size of the effect of each variable (b_1, b_2, b_3) a constant (c) and some error term (e): $Y = a + b_1x_1 + b_2x_2 + c + e$ " (Weldon 204-205).

understanding the ability of certain agents to make certain variables function, to draw them into salience we might say. And this is what talk seems to have done within the scene in question. Different variables have the potential to function differently within different spaces. What would seem to be happening in the Septet scene in Proust is that the Verdurins are asserting a set of conditions for those who would occupy the space they claim as theirs. “Sous peine de s’y sentir *déplacés*, ceux qui pénètrent dans un espace doivent remplir les conditions qu’il exige tacitement de ses occupants,” writes Bourdieu at one point in *La Misère du monde* (260). The Verdurins’ success is that they have, by talking, brought into existence a space in which Charlus is out of place because his friendship with Morel is out of bounds. How their success will ramify and whether and how far the kind of social space they have engineered will spread remain open questions. Bourdieu, Proust, and Balzac were perhaps similar in their intuitive grasp of the effects of social space on the individuals moving within it, and the effects of those individuals on social space itself, and this is, ultimately, what the scene of the end of the friendship between Morel and Charlus explores.

Conclusion

Lebaron writes in another essay on Bourdieu’s modeling techniques that “guided by a sociological frame-model, the sociologist does not presuppose any strong relation between two or three variables but tries to explore the entire system of interrelations among many variables and, simultaneously, to reveal the distance between agents (which can be individuals, enterprises in a market, etc.)” (“Pierre

Bourdieu" 100n.24). One might imagine that the story being told by drawing a connection between *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* and *La Prisonnière* would be that with the spread of social spaces dominated by bourgeois values, the relative importance of a personal history involving same-sex sexual practices on the one hand and aristocratic social status on the other was shifting so that the former would become potentially disqualifying for certain kinds of friendship between men. Not only Bourdieusian social theory, but a closer attentiveness to the novels in question might suggest that this is a bit of an oversimplification, since it limits the number of variables involved and generalizes too rapidly from specific local events to general trends. At one point, Bourdieu describes the social field as

un espace multidimensionnel de positions tel que toute position actuelle peut être définie en fonction d'un système multidimensionnel de coordonnées dont les valeurs correspondent aux valeurs des différentes variables pertinentes. ("Espace social" 295)

This is a more promising point of view for apprehending the full extent of what Balzac and Proust are up to, understanding the dynamism of the social world as related to struggles for pertinence within it, pertinence of variables as well as of individuals, the pertinence of this corner of the field as opposed to that. I would suggest that what was transpiring in the moments in Balzac and Proust that we've looked at is a novelistic image of people experiencing on some subliminal level the dynamism of the field(s) in which they are operating, the way social forces are mobile (but not random), the way the pertinence of certain variables is shifting in relation to other variables, and in relation to shifts in the structure of the social field

itself—all of this in particular as it relates to how friendship and intimacy between men might occur.

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