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# This is a True Story: Confession and Discourse in Marcel Proust's *La Prisonnière*

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THIS IS A TRUE STORY: CONFESSION AND DISCOURSE  
IN MARCEL PROUST'S *LA PRISONNIÈRE*

by

JEFFREY JOSEPH BELLOMI

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we  
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards  
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

Bellomi, Jeffrey Joseph (M.A., Comparative Literature)

This is a True Story: Confession and Discourse in Marcel Proust's *La Prisonnière*

Thesis directed by Assistant Professor Ruth Mas

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the relation between the Foucauldian concepts of truth and confession and their place within modern literature. By focusing on Marcel Proust's *La Prisonnière* in particular, the intention is to examine how confession operates as a productive source of truth in an art form that by its very definition appears to resist the categorization of "truthful". What makes Proust's work especially critical to this analysis is how its autobiographical elements and rhetorical devices entwine themselves with the art of confession and both expand as well as complicate the notion of truth and its function in modern society. The novel is a perfect crystallization of Foucault's conception of the productive power of confession and discourse that appears in the realm of a person questioning another subject in search of truth.

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

At one point in his treatise on the relationship between humans and animals titled *L'animal que donc je suis*, Jacques Derrida takes a moment to offer a brief thesis on the status of autobiography in the contemporary age. He states:

L'autobiographie devient confession quand le discours sur soi ne dissocie pas la vérité de l'aveu, donc de la faute, du mal et des maux. Et d'abord d'une vérité qui serait due, d'une dette, en vérité, dont il faudrait s'acquitter. Pourquoi *devrait-on* la vérité ? Pourquoi appartiendrait-il à l'essence de la vérité d'être due, et nue ? et donc confessée ? Pourquoi de devoir de s'acquitter de la vérité, si cacher la vérité, feindre la vérité, feindre aussi de se cacher, feindre de se cacher ou de cacher la vérité n'était pas déjà l'expérience de mal et des maux, d'une faute possible, d'une culpabilité, d'une passibilité, d'une dette—d'une tromperie et d'un mensonge ?<sup>1</sup>

Derrida's analysis of the point where autobiography becomes an art of confession introduces a fascinating problem with regards to not only the process of writing but also life as a whole. To reiterate one of his questions on the matter: At what point did "truth" become an object of obligation and duty on the part of human beings? It would appear that at some point in human history, this abstract notion of truth was reified into a concrete concept, as if to say that the act of confession is merely the revelation of a "truth" that always has and will always exist. Confession becomes the stripping of all barriers and veils that would hide truth, and, as Derrida notes, even the simple act of hiding the truth has become in and of itself a crime worthy of confession. To highlight the truly strange and cyclical nature of this particular instance: The choice to not readily confess something is a crime that one should confess, i.e. perjury.

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida, Jacques. *L'animal que donc je suis*. Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2006. pp. 40-41

If the categories of “truth” and “confession” have fully permeated cultural consciousness, as Derrida appears to suggest, then it follows that something as purely subjective as an autobiography would in turn contain heavy traces of confession in its basic construction. Human beings as subjects have been conditioned to prioritize truth as a virtue and confession as its vehicle. Hence, the autobiography exists as a formal and recorded account of the truth of a subject’s experience, and it often reads as a long form confession of life events in the guise of an unveiling of as yet unknown truths, whether they are scandalous or benign in nature. One need not rest in the realm of theory for proof of Derrida’s assertion. For example, one can look back at the national scandal that surrounded the book *A Million Little Pieces*<sup>2</sup> to see a clear example of how deeply this “debt of truth” is ingrained into the American consciousness, at the very least. The fallout from the incident in particular exposes not only this entrenched prioritization of truth, but also a fundamental problem with the category of “truth” in and of itself.

The concept becomes intensely problematic when it is examined in the context of a work that blurs the lines between non-fiction and fiction. Can one find truth in a semi-fictional or even fully fictional account that has potential aspects of the author’s life interspersed throughout? If one posits “truth” as an unchanging concept that exists autonomously, then the answer to this question is certainly, “No.” However, to assume that “truth” exists as an unshakable and independently sustaining force is to place full faith in what could be a problematic assertion. It is certainly not the viewpoint of Michel

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<sup>2</sup> Upon its release in 2003, James Frey’s purported memoir *A Million Little Pieces* was met with wide acclaim and fame due in no short part to an appearance on the Oprah Winfrey show touting its significance. Several major inconsistencies and apparent falsehoods were discovered in the text shortly afterward, resulting in a national scandal that concluded with a public apology and refund offers for anyone who purchased the book under the assumption that it was a non-fiction work.

Foucault, whose theories and explorations of what constitutes the subject and truth themselves add a fascinating dimension to the question of fictional accounts. When discussing the presence of self-examination and confession in ancient philosophy at a lecture, Foucault stated that, “The objective of this truth-game is to turn the individual into a place where truth can appear and act as a real force through the presence of memory and the efficiency of discourse.”<sup>3</sup> Rather than a transcendental object floating outside of experience, Foucault asserts that truth itself is in fact a total product of everyday human experience, as it is produced (or revealed) through discourse. Memory and discourse shape and *create* truth through the vehicles of self-examination and confession in this particular instance, so the very concept is fundamentally flipped: the subject his or herself is now the locus, essentially.

So, if truth is indeed to be considered as a fluid concept, and one that is the result of production through a series of techniques and technologies, then the original question of how truth relates to fiction is opened up anew. If a work is at its core an autobiographical piece loaded with exaggeration and embellishment on the part of the author, what else is he or she doing but producing a new truth through memory and further discourse? While a possibly elementary remark, it bears noting that had no investigation taken place, then Frey’s account of his life as mentioned earlier would remain, for all intents and purposes, the “truth”. A key idea to note is that writing is in itself a productive act, and if it takes the form of autobiography or confession, then it is a very pregnant act indeed in terms of the production of discourse and, in turn, truth.

Literature, then, finds itself in a unique position with regards to the Foucauldian concept

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<sup>3</sup> Foucault, Michel. “Subjectivity and Truth”. *The Politics of Truth*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext: 1997. pp 164



of truth and subjectivity. If a work of literature fashions itself in an autobiographical style; if it structures its plot through a series of endless confessions; if it utilizes memory and interpersonal discourse as the main driving force for its plot; and yet, if it contains all of these aspects but *refuses* to offer a singular indication of its source (i.e. whether or not it is a purely autobiographical account on the part of the author or simply a totally fictional account), then the concepts of truth and confession themselves are dramatically problematized for the reader and critic. Furthermore, the idea of truth has a tenuous if not diametric relation to fiction at a fundamental level, as the form of fiction lies within the domain of the unreal and fabricated. That being said, critical discussion of the status of fictional novels which are based on truthful events as well as those that blur the line between fiction and non-fiction still occur, more so in the contemporary moment than ever before. Hence, if the idea of truth has been reshaped in relation to fiction in the modern critical moment, then a pertinent question comes to the forefront. Simply asked: What place does truth hold in the realm of autobiographical fiction?<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the relation between the Foucauldian concepts of truth and confession and their place within modern literature. The intention is to examine how confession operates as a productive source of truth in an art form that by its very definition appears to resist the categorization of “truthful”. For the purposes of this analysis, the major work in question will be Marcel Proust’s seminal *À la recherche du temps perdu*, focusing specifically on the volume *La Prisonnière*. Proust’s novel shapes itself into the form of an autobiographical account of a fictional character, and is characterized by a presence of confessions and realizations conditioned by failed

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<sup>4</sup> An apparent oxymoron if there ever was one.

relationships. What makes Proust's work especially critical to this analysis is how these autobiographical elements entwine themselves with the art of confession and complicate the notion of truth and its function in modern society.

The first objective is to examine how the idea of confession as detailed by Foucault<sup>5</sup> relates to the construction of *À la recherche...* and in turn how it relates to the production of truth and identity within the text for its protagonist, Marcel, as well as his lover Albertine. A significant number of observations within the novel take the form of apparent confessions, and their relation to how Marcel develops and produces varying subjectivities must be carefully examined. Following this, the second objective will require stepping out of the text and looking at the implications of this construction with regards to the relationship between the text and the reader. Proust's novel is constructed in a highly complex autobiographical form, wherein the ability to even distinguish the true narrator can become a difficult task. What is key is that this form allows for the work to act as a large-scale confession, and this aspect must be examined with precision as well. Autobiographical writing accesses new discursive dimensions and, in turn, new ways to produce truth, and these are put to great use by Proust throughout the breadth of his work.

Hence, this thesis will conclude with the argument that due to these phenomena, the novel is a perfect crystallization of Foucault's conception of the productive power of confession and discourse that appears in the realm of a person questioning another subject in search of truth. The search for truth becomes a multi-layered procedure that begins within the novel itself and extends outward into the analytical work on the part of

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<sup>5</sup> Self-examination and confession in the sense of ancient philosophy and confession in the sense of pastoral power, respectively

the reader. In turn, this notion of truth is fragmented and multiplied indefinitely, and this essentially mimics the manner in which truth is produced as a whole within the realm of modern society. As Foucault would argue, truth and power are both fluid and ever changing, and *À la recherche du temps perdu* is a literary crystallization of this claim.

## CHAPTER II

### An Archaeology of Subjectification

Before addressing Proust, it is pertinent and necessary to trace the perspective with which Foucault views the concepts of both subjectivity and truth. The purpose is to establish a clear framework within which one can view the position of literature as it relates to the issue of the production of truth through discourse and subjectivity. In the aforementioned lecture titled “Subjectivity and Truth”, Foucault seeks out one of the earliest instances of the formation of the subject and locates it in the realm of ancient Greek philosophy. What he finds is a form of confession and subjectification that appears to stand against the common interpretation of the role of confession in the Western world. He states, “To declare aloud and intelligibly the truth about oneself—I mean, to confess—has been considered for a long time in the Western world either a condition for redemption for one’s sins or an essential item in the condemnation of the guilty.”<sup>6</sup> Foucault asserts here that confession has for some time been seen as nothing more than a means to an end. Regardless if the act of confession produces truth in these situations (which it certainly does), the production of truth itself is often glossed over as a function that serves the purpose of another body or function. While a subject indeed must commit the act of confession, the act is often seen as being as a tool that serves a greater system or body of power.

Judith Revel has taken up the question of confession for judicial and ecclesiastical ends amongst others in her book *Foucault, une pensée du discontinu*, a sweeping

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<sup>6</sup> Foucault, Michel. “Subjectivity and Truth”. *The Politics of Truth*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext: 1997. pp 148

narrative of the major points of Foucault's thought throughout his career. Working in a broader scope, she explains the theoretical methods through which Foucault sees the process of subjectification take place, with confession fitting in as a vehicle for this effect. When defining the two major methods that create subjects according to Foucault, she states:

Le terme de « subjectivation » désigne par conséquent chez Foucault un processus par lequel on obtient la constitution d'un sujet, ou plus exactement d'une subjectivité. Les « modes de subjectivation » ou « processus de subjectivation » de l'être humain correspondent en réalité à deux types d'analyse distincts. D'une part, il y a l'analyse des modes d'objectivation qui transforment les êtres humains en sujets—ce qui signifie qu'il n'y a de sujets qu'objectivés, et que les modes de subjectivation sont en ce sens des pratiques *d'objectivation* [emphases added]...<sup>7</sup>

Revel interprets Foucault to have divided the processes of subjectification into two major domains, one being a type of purely self-reflexive subjectification akin to self-editing or curation, and a second that involves the presence of another entity influencing and directly shaping another subject through the process of *objectification*. This second form is the most critical with regards to analyzing Proust, and further explanation of this idea is necessary. To use Foucault's example, in the case of a confession in a legal setting, the act of confession in most cases results in a conviction by a court. Upon being convicted, a person is designated a criminal and made into an object of the penal system's power by way of incarceration, punishment, etc. In this very instance, said person's subjectivity has now been transformed into that of a criminal as well, and in being made an object of penal power, the person is now a criminal subject. Confession, in this particular case, allows the act of subjectification by way of objectification to occur. However, this is not

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<sup>7</sup> Revel, Judith. *Foucault, une pensée du discontinu*. France: Mille et une nuits, 2005. pp. 227

the only channel through which the act of confession can result in the creation of a new subject.

Before heading into a deeper analysis of this claim, one must first look at the type of self-reflexive subjectification from which the technique of objectification finds its genesis. Foucault argues that there indeed exist reflexive methods with which one can develop his or her own subjectivity. This is to say that a subject can utilize specific techniques with the purpose of transforming and augmenting his or her own position as a subject. After explaining that at one point he assumed that techniques of domination were the most critical to the study of the subject, Foucault states:

But, analyzing the experience of sexuality, I became more and more aware that there is in all societies, I think, in all societies whatever they are, another type of techniques: techniques which permit individuals to perform, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, on their own conduct, and this in such a way that they transform themselves, modify themselves, and reach a certain state of perfection, of happiness, of purity, of supernatural power, and so on.<sup>8</sup>

Essentially, what Foucault asserts here is that there are methods to developing subjectivity that do not necessarily require a secondary party to helm the process, such as the prior example of the court room. In this situation, no objectification takes place, as it is the subject that transforms his or herself into what effectively amounts to a greater and better subject. Revel once again offers insight into the matter, summarizing Foucault's thought by stating, "...il y a l'analyse de la manière dont le rapport à soi travers un

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<sup>8</sup> Foucault, Michel. "Subjectivity and Truth". *The Politics of Truth*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext, 1997. pp 153-154

certain nombres de *techniques de soi* permet de se constituer comme sujet de sa propre existence.”<sup>9</sup>

When looking to the aforementioned example of the ancient Greeks, Foucault focuses upon one such subjectifying technique and refers to it as self-examination. He cites an instance from Seneca’s *De Ira* wherein he takes stock of any incorrect behavior from the day and makes note of what must be changed in order to better himself.<sup>10</sup> Noting that this moment appears to be a point where Seneca plays both “the judge and the accused”<sup>11</sup>, Foucault then refines his analysis of the passage and reaches a fascinating conclusion. He claims:

But, if we look more closely, we see that the vocabulary used by Seneca is much more administrative than judicial. It is the vocabulary of the direction of goods or territory... With regard to himself, he is not a judge who has to punish; he is, rather, an administrator who, once the work has been done or the year’s business finished, does the accounts, takes stock of things, and sees if everything has been done correctly.<sup>12</sup>

In this case, Seneca views his problematic actions and decisions for the purpose of monitoring and discovering what flaws need to be fixed. It is a confession in the sense that Seneca is apparently confessing his flaws to himself, however it appears to not be one that is connected to any type of punishment or penance. Rather, the purpose is to see what was done wrong and in turn never do it again but without an attached penalty to endure. Punishment has no place when the drive to self-perfection is ostensibly an effective motivational force.

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<sup>9</sup> Revel, Judith. *Foucault, une pensée du discontinu*. France: Mille et une nuits, 2005. pp. 227-228

<sup>10</sup> Foucault, Michel. “Subjectivity and Truth”. *The Politics of Truth*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext, 1997. pp 158

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid* pp 158

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*. pp 162

Moving from this instance, Foucault takes notice that the specific act of confessing to another person also appears to lack the discursive tone of a judge standing before the accused. Looking to another text of Seneca's, he focuses on a scene in which a character named Serenus decides to make a confession to Seneca himself, with the results being somewhat peculiar. Foucault notes that Serenus does not confess "faults, secret thoughts, [or] shameful desires"<sup>13</sup>, but rather mundane details about his daily life and the things that he likes to do. What is critical about this confession for Foucault is that the activities correspond to the three domains of activity in which a free citizen could take part<sup>14</sup>. He concludes that in talking about these activities, Serenus speaks less about his everyday experience with them and more towards his attitude to these three domains by way of commenting on how he personally functions within them.<sup>15</sup> Foucault elaborates:

In describing what pleases him, Serenus is not seeking to reveal what are his deepest desires. His pleasures are not a way of revealing what Christians will later call *concupiscensia*. For him, it is a question of his own state and of adding something to the knowledge of the moral precepts. This addition to what is already known is a force, the force capable of transforming pure knowledge and simple consciousness into a real way of living.<sup>16</sup>

By merely speaking aloud about what he likes and dislikes, Serenus is augmenting his subjectivity by positioning himself within the domains of activity in particular ways. This crimeless confession serves the purpose of allowing Serenus to shape his subjectivity as he sees fit through discourse.

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<sup>13</sup> <sup>13</sup> Foucault, Michel. "Subjectivity and Truth". *The Politics of Truth*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext, 1997. pp 159

<sup>14</sup> "the domain of riches, the domain of political life, and the domain of glory..." *Ibid* 162

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid* 162

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid* 162-163



However, there are greater implications in this act with regards to the idea of truth. As Foucault notes, the development of Serenus's subjectivity through his confession also adds new knowledge to the idea of how to live everyday life. In other words, Serenus's way of living adds a new dimension to already existent claims about how one should live life within the aforementioned domains of activity, and in turn a new dimension of truth is produced. Foucault concludes his exploration by stating that, "First, in this game between Serenus's confession and Seneca's consultation, truth, as you see, is not defined by a correspondence to reality but as a force inherent to principles and which has to be developed in a discourse."<sup>17</sup> This self-reflexive confession is productive not only of subjectivity, but also more general truths pertaining to, in this case, social environments. This idea of the production of truth is critical to the method of subjectification that follows, namely that of objectification. Utilizing established categories of subjectivity and truth that have themselves been produced through the process, subjects can be created and shaped by way of being classified as members of these domains. How confession relates to this process is the key point at hand, and it is one that will be explored presently.

Returning to the aforementioned concept of objectification, one can see the source of a type of confession that aligns itself with common conceptions of the idea. This is namely the type of confession that is given with regards to a crime or secret that more often than not has negative implications. Foucault indeed spends much time discussing this type of confession in the Western world, but it would first be beneficial to locate the framework within which he addresses the idea of objectifying confession. In his article

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<sup>17</sup> Foucault, Michel. "Subjectivity and Truth". *The Politics of Truth*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext, 1997. pp 163

titled ‘The Subject and Power’, Foucault offers a systematic approach to addressing a modern model of power that has surprisingly older structural origins. He states:

But I’d like to underline the fact that the state’s power (and that’s one of the reasons for its strength) is both an individualizing and totalizing form of power... This is due to the fact that the modern Western state has integrated into a new political shape an old power technique that originated in Christian institutions. We can call this power technique “pastoral power”.<sup>18</sup>

Foucault effectively asserts here that the power of the state gains force in its ability to not only exercise its force over a totalized group, but also in its ability to affect the individual at some level as well. In fact, Foucault argues that it is *through* this very individualizing effect that the pastoral model of power acquires the ability to affect the totalized whole.

Here is where its Christian roots play a critical role in its formation. Foucault breaks down the key components of the model in its older, religious form, placing attention on the fact that it bases itself upon the concept of salvation. He lists:

1. It is a form of power whose ultimate aim is to assure individual salvation in the next world.
2. Pastoral power is not merely a form of power that commands; it must also be prepared to sacrifice itself for the life and salvation of the flock. Therefore, it is different from royal power, which demands a sacrifice from its subjects to save the throne.
3. It is a form of power that looks after not just the whole community but each individual in particular, during his entire life.<sup>19</sup>

There are two major implications in this analysis with regards to the idea of confession. First, the fact that the pastoral model bases itself upon the idea of salvation indicates that its prime goal is to offer a benefit to its subjects, which in this case is ultimate and

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<sup>18</sup> Foucault, Michel. “The Subject and Power”. *Power*. New York, NY: The New Press, 2000. pp 332

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid* pp 333

eternal. In promising this outcome, pastoral power appears to invite people to become the objects of its gaze, as in submitting to its power they allow themselves to enter a process that promises their salvation as its ultimate goal, rather than the preservation of the power structure itself. In pastoral power's apparent willingness to acquiesce to its own destruction for the purpose of preserving this salvation, the standard conception of a power structure maintaining its own strength by any means necessary is negated. Rather than directly and forcefully control, the pastoral model incites its subjects to submit and become part of the flock, so to speak.

Secondly, since the goal of communal salvation can only be achieved if every individual reaches it, pastoral power has a vested interest in monitoring and addressing each individual as exactly and in as prolonged of a manner possible. It is the way through which pastoral power achieves this level of investment into the individual that is key for the idea of confession. In his fourth point in the list, Foucault states, "Finally, this form of power cannot be exercised without knowing the inside of people's minds, without exploring their souls, without making them reveal their innermost secrets. It implies a knowledge of the conscience and an ability to direct it."<sup>20</sup> For the level of information needed to direct the individual with necessary efficacy, pastoral power must be able to access the inner world of a person's *consciousness*, let alone his or her conscience. Somehow it has to be able to effectively and efficiently glean the knowledge from each individual in order to be able to direct him or her in a fashion conducive to maintaining the trajectory of communal salvation. At heart, this process needs to objectify each

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<sup>20</sup> Foucault, Michel. "The Subject and Power". *Power*. New York, NY: The New Press, 2000. pp. 333

individual with the intent of fitting him or her into a unified subjectivity that is conducive to the goal of salvation itself.

It should be noted that this information is not easily won, as its very nature is to be kept away in secrecy. Thus, there is a level of truthfulness that must be achieved as well, and this truth is something that must be *produced* through techniques. Foucault himself states, that “[pastoral power] is linked with a production of truth—the truth of the individual himself.”<sup>21</sup> Following Foucault’s analysis of the ancient Greeks, one could conclude that discourse would be the most effective technique for producing truth in this situation. Certainly force could be an effective tool to elicit hidden secrets in its own way, however its power to establish truth on its own has always been suspect. Referring one of Foucault’s more striking analyses, information definitely might be revealed in the torture chamber, but it takes a willing confirmation of this information in the courtroom to establish it as truth.<sup>22</sup> Hence, if truth would be most effectively produced from a willing subject through discourse, and if the pastoral model has the means necessary to entice said willingness on the part of the subject (i.e. the promise of salvation), then one of the major techniques needed to produce this truth is all but evident. The subject must be enticed into divulging the contents of his or her own soul out of his or her own free will. Secrets must be confessed.

Now, eternal salvation certainly is not a fixed component of this equation. This is to say that it is not the only effective goal that can be used to promote confession.

Foucault notes that in modern times the pastoral model of power does indeed thrive,

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<sup>21</sup> Foucault, Michel. “The Subject and Power”. *Power*. New York, NY: The New Press, 2000. pp. 333

<sup>22</sup> See: Foucault, Michel. *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*. France: Éditions Gallimard, 1993.

however it has become essentially divorced from its religious affiliations. Rather, the modern state itself developed with the intention to continue this process of individualization albeit in a new, and ostensibly secular form.<sup>23</sup> Foucault remarks:

We may observe a change in its objective. It was a question no longer of leading people to their salvation in the next world but, rather, ensuring it in this world. And in this context, the word “salvation” takes on different meanings: health, well-being (that is, sufficient wealth, standard of living), security, protection against accidents.<sup>24</sup>

The modern state, then, takes the promise of a future benefit and gives it immediacy, which is to say that in this situation pastoral power extends its ability to entice subjects to engage with it. Salvation is divided into a multitude of temporally immediate gains that all require a specific set of information to fulfill, and in turn, power can vastly deepen the breath of its knowledge with regards to the mind of the subject. The concepts of discourse and confession find equal place in this modern model as they did in the older and more religiously oriented form. This is particularly evident within the medical complex, for example, where diagnosis and classification are critical tools. Consequently, where these techniques go, so does the process of objectification.

The realms of health and medicine appropriated the pastoral model quite effectively into their own administrative structures, and Foucault spends much time addressing this very issue. In his seminal book *Histoire de la sexualité I: La volonté de savoir*, he explores exactly how the concept of sexuality became one flashpoint for the exercising of pastoral power within the medical complex. By looking at a history of discursive representations of sexuality as well as the power relations that exist nearby, he

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<sup>23</sup> Foucault, Michel. “The Subject and Power”. *Power*. New York, NY; The New Press, 2000. pp. 334

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid* pp. 334

analyses the ways through which power structures heightened their ability to calculate and quantify information akin to the inner secrets and thoughts sought after by the Christian pastoral model. Essentially, sex at some point became something that was observed and analyzed for the purported purpose of ensuring a greater good. Foucault explains, “A travers l’économie politique de la population se forme toute une grille d’observations sur le sexe. Naît l’analyse des conduites sexuelles, de leurs déterminations et de leurs effets, à la limite du biologique et de l’économique.”<sup>25</sup> To summarize, the information necessary to fuel an observational exercise of this proportion became greater and greater, and the observation of sex in turn transformed into a multidisciplinary field of study that traced its sources and effects in a wide variety of functions.

The purpose behind this is, at its core, an ensuring of the well being of the community at large, which is something that rings familiar after having addressed Foucault’s analysis of pastoral power. He explains that, “on doit en [le sexe] parler comme d’une chose qu’on n’a pas simplement à condamner ou à tolérer, mais à gérer, à insérer dans des systèmes d’utilité, à régler pour le plus grand bien de tous, à faire fonctionner selon un optimum.”<sup>26</sup> Salvation in this particular case is the promise of a society that is able to reap the benefits of sexuality while at the same time being allowed to function with mechanisms that ensure that sex does not manifest itself in negative ways. The issue, however, is developing a means through which the necessary information could be drawn out of subjects when it concerns such an inherently private

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<sup>25</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Histoire de la sexualité I: La volonté de savoir*. France: Éditions Gallimard, 1976. pp. 37

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid* pp. 34-35

matter as sexuality. The key to this, incidentally, lies within the very quote cited above: subjects must be encouraged to *speak*. Foucault states:

Mais l'essentiel, c'est la multiplication des discours sur le sexe, dans le champ d'exercice du pouvoir lui-même : incitation institutionnelle à en parler, et à en parler de plus en plus ; obstination des instances du pouvoir à en entendre parler et à le faire parler lui-même sur le mode de l'articulation explicite et du détail indéfiniment cumulé.<sup>27</sup>

Rather than completely shun and prohibit sexuality within society, as the common perception tends to assume, institutions of power actually promoted the continuous discourse of sex and all things related to it. It should be noted that this does not apply only to instances of sexual paraphilia. Foucault qualifies:

Je ne parle pas de l'obligation d'avouer les infractions aux lois du sexe, comme l'exigeait la pénitence traditionnelle ; mais de la tâche, quasi infinie, de dire, de se dire à soi-même et de dire à un autre, aussi souvent que possible, tout ce qui peut concerner le jeu des plaisirs, sensations et pensées innombrables qui, à travers l'âme et le corps, ont quelque affinité avec le sexe.<sup>28</sup>

This results in a society that is flooded with discourse, and because of this it is also inundated with a production of new truth. In this sense, it would appear that this discursive overload would align itself with the type of confession illustrated in Foucault's analysis of the Greeks. By talking about all instances that relate to sex, a subject continues to shape his or herself while at the same time adding to the pool of data that produces general truths about sexuality in Western society. These very general truths are the types that pastoral power seeks to form and regulate at the communal level, and they are all sourced from the individual. Thus, the process of objectification is self-renewing in a way, as a by-product of creating subjects through objectification is the bolstering of

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<sup>27</sup>Foucault, Michel. *Histoire de la sexualité I: La volonté de savoir*. France: Éditions Gallimard, 1976. pp. 27

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid* pp. 29

existing categories of truth into which subjects are placed. These could be, as mentioned earlier, categories as apparently innocuous as fetishes and types of attraction, for example.

That being said, from this discursive environment also form general truths concerned with what are in fact violations of sexual laws. As Foucault notes, this situation does not hold similarity with the idea of a violation leading to immediate penance or punishment. Rather, modern society takes those who violate these laws and turns them into specimens of study. In this sense, the incitement to speak about anomalous sexuality takes on the characteristics of confession, as the act is done in the presence of a figure that records and prescribes action based upon what is observed. It is not penance, *per se*, but a confessing of internal desires that results in a type of subjectification by way of objectification on the part of a institution of power. This has ramifications for the idea of discourse in general, and it is a critical form of confession for the analysis at hand. Foucault notes that this formalized method of confession can be clearly observed in the relationship between the psychologist and the patient with regards to the aforementioned violation of sexual codes. He states:

...[notre civilisation] est la seule, sans doute, à pratiquer une *scientia sexualis*. Ou plutôt, à avoir développé au cours des siècles, pour dire la vérité du sexe, des procédures qui s'ordonnent pour l'essentiel à une forme de pouvoir-savoir rigoureusement opposée à l'art des initiations et au secret magistral : il s'agit de l'aveu.<sup>29</sup>

Modern western society has essentially developed a tool set with the purpose of eliciting and managing sexual confessions in the most efficient manner possible. This type of confession indeed allows the production of subjects that are primarily created through the

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<sup>29</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Histoire de la sexualité I: La volonté de savoir*. France: Éditions Gallimard, 1976. pp. 77-78



act of speaking about oneself in a certain manner. However, what is critical is that this ritual also includes the processes of identification that occur when a confessor<sup>30</sup> takes the information offered and uses it to classify a patient and further develop a particular subjectivity. This is objectification at its purest.

It should be noted that Foucault is quite clear in his description of this type of confession as being a ritual in nature. He notes:

Or, l'aveu est un rituel de discours où le sujet qui parle coïncide avec le sujet de l'énoncé ; c'est aussi un rituel qui se déploie dans un rapport de pouvoir, car on n'avoue pas sans la présence au moins virtuelle d'un partenaire qui n'est pas simplement l'interlocuteur, mais l'instance qui requiert l'aveu, l'impose, l'apprécie et intervient pour juger, punir, pardonner, consoler, réconcilier ; un rituel où la vérité s'authentifie de l'obstacle et des résistances qu'elle a eu à lever pour se formuler ; un rituel enfin où la seule énonciation, indépendamment de ses conséquences externes, produit, chez qui l'articule, des modifications intrinsèques : elle l'innocente, elle le rachète, elle le purifie, elle le décharge de ses fautes, elle le libère, elle lui promet le salut.<sup>31</sup>

The ritual of confession is loaded with the production of truth and subjectivity and it travels in many vectors. In confessing an deed or a thought, malicious or otherwise, the subjectivity of an individual is modified as he or she becomes identified and transformed into a particular subject that aligns itself with the what was confessed. Based upon the reaction and prescriptions from the listening confessor, the individual's subjectivity can be further modified according to general types of subjects that exist within the framework of modern medical or psychological tropes, in the case of sexuality. Abnormal, typical, criminal. etc.: the individual's sexuality is defined within objectifying terminology and the production of subjects enters into a process that is akin to an assembly line in nature.

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<sup>30</sup> In this case, the person who listens to the confessions

<sup>31</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Histoire de la sexualité I: La volonté de savoir*. France: Éditions Gallimard, 1976. pp. 82-83

Furthermore, regardless if the confession results in condemnation or validation of regularity, it always results in the individual experiencing a degree of relief at the prospect of having relieved his or herself of a burdening secret. Due the promise of salvation, be it through medical assistance or penal service, a psychological component of pleasure is programmed into the act of confession, and this effectively keeps the mechanism running. Confession rewards those who take part in its ritual and in turn fuels its replication. Its popularity as a technique is a testament to this claim.

The critical point is that this particular type of confession is no longer restricted to the church or the psychologist's couch. On the contrary, confession has infiltrated a vast array of institutions and relationships in modern society, so much so that it has become one of the *de facto* techniques of producing truth and subjectivity. Foucault asserts:

En tout cas, à côté des rituels de l'épreuve, à côté des cautions donnés par l'autorité de la tradition, à côté des témoignages, mais aussi des procédés savants d'observation et de démonstration, l'aveu est devenu, en Occident, une des techniques les plus hautement valorisées pour produire le vrai. Nous sommes devenus, depuis lors, une société singulièrement avouante. L'aveu a diffusé loin ses effets : dans la justice, dans la médecine, dans la pédagogie, dans les rapports familiaux, dans les relations amoureuses, dans l'ordre le plus quotidien, et dans les rites les plus solennels ; on avoue ses pensées et ses désirs, on avoue son passé et ses rêves, on avoue son enfance, on avoue ses maladies et ses misères ; on s'emploie avec la plus grande exactitude à dire ce qu'il y a de plus difficile à dire ; on avoue en public et en privé, à ses parents, à ses éducateurs, à son médecin, à ceux qu'on aime ; on se fait à soi-même, dans le plaisir et la peine, des aveux impossibles à tout autre, et dont on fait des livres... L'homme, en Occident, est devenu une bête d'aveu.<sup>32</sup>

Confession is literally everywhere in the western world, as the idea of truth has become intrinsically linked to it due to its popularity and effectiveness as a technique. Admitting a thought or secret to anyone and in any situation, including to oneself, initiates the ritual

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<sup>32</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Histoire de la sexualité I: La volonté de savoir*. France: Éditions Gallimard, 1976. pp. 79-80

of confession and the objectifying process continues with each utterance. Confessions no longer need to be attached to any idea of guilt as well, for that matter. Simply talking about oneself to another person, *especially* someone who holds a position of power, often appropriates a confessional tone and, in turn, functions as one. Considering the dimension of pleasure attached to it, it is easy to see how this technique could so easily find its place in all forms of relationships, power-based or otherwise. The western individual has adopted confession as a primary technique of objectification because the modern state has been conditioned to function with it as an integral component. Further, the deeper and more personal that a secret is, the more cathartic and pleasurable the feeling of confessing and, in turn, producing a subject becomes. This is a drastic leap from Seneca's idea of confession, which seems almost innocuous by comparison.

What is interesting about this passage is that Foucault suggests that confession is not something that is restricted to spoken discourse. He notes that even those things that remain too difficult to speak aloud often become “things people write books about”<sup>33</sup>, and this introduces an interesting dimension to the discussion of subjectivity. Even though the ritual of confession, so to speak, often times is composed of two people in dialogue, the idea of literature as holding confessional value establishes a type of confession in which the listening confessor becomes a multiplicity. Foucault remarks:

De là sans doute une métamorphose dans la littérature : d'un plaisir de raconter et d'entendre, qui était centré sur le récit héroïque ou merveilleux des « épreuves » de bravoure ou de sainteté, on est passé à une littérature ordonnée à la tâche infinie de faire lever du fond de soi-même, entre les mots, une vérité que la forme même de l'aveu fait miroiter comme l'inaccessible. De là aussi, cette autre manière de philosopher : chercher le rapport fondamental au vrai, non pas simplement en soi-même—dans

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<sup>33</sup> Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990. pp 59

quelque savoir oublié, ou dans une certaine trace originaire—mais dans l'examen de soi-même qui délivre, à travers tant d'impressions fugitives, les certitudes fondamentales de la conscience.<sup>34</sup>

The act of confession has become entwined in the world of literature so much so that the method of self-examination has become a driving force for the production of both a plot as well as “truth” within the pages. However, like the process of spoken confession, the “truth” produced is merely a step in a perpetual mechanism of objectification, wherein “*les certitudes fondamentales*” are realized in a process.

For the reader, the development of subjects before his or her eyes by way of written confessions allows him or her to act as the listening confessor, judging and analyzing what is given in discourse and in turn producing some sort of truth from it. Perhaps, in creating a subject through the form of confession, the author can glean the inherent cathartic pleasure of the act and realize a “*certitude fondamentale*” of consciousness in his or her own right. This is a claim that is admittedly based on a fair share of conjecture at this point, so it is now pertinent to turn to a primary source of evidence. *À la recherche...* essentially reads as a long form confession in the Western sense, with a constant stream of admitted thoughts, opinions, and desires delivered from the narrator, Marcel. It is through this type of confession that Marcel develops and produces his own subjectivity, as it is essentially the only technique through which the reader learns about his thoughts and circumstances. There are then three major loci of discourse that play off of each other in this confessional environment: Marcel, the reader, and Proust himself. This triangular relationship of truth and subjectivity thus promotes some tricky questions. For whom is this confession made? To whom is this confession

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<sup>34</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Histoire de la sexualité I: La volonté de savoir*. France: Éditions Gallimard, 1976. pp. 80

given? Simply put, for what purpose is this confession made? These are questions that must be addressed carefully, as the snares of truth and fiction prove to be quite unavoidable when addressing something as evasive as potential authorial intent. A solid critical foundation is required, and this must be established by analyzing how both confession and objectification *function* within Proust's novel. In looking at how they operate, one can see what they produce.

### CHAPTER III

#### *Verité Involontaire*

In one of his more esoteric articles titled “*La vie des hommes infâmes*”, Foucault offers a claim of the status and purpose of literature in the modern world. He notes that:

Une sorte d’injonction à débusquer la part la plus nocturne et la plus quotidienne de l’existence (quitte à y découvrir parfois les figures solennelles du destin) va dessiner ce qui est la ligne de pente de la littérature depuis le XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, depuis qu’elle a commencé à être littérature au sens moderne du mot. Plus qu’une forme spécifique, plus qu’un rapport essentiel à la forme, c’est cette contrainte[...]qui la caractérise et en a porté jusqu’à nous l’immense mouvement : devoir de dire les plus communs des secrets<sup>35</sup>

This is to say that literature developed alongside of the judicial and medical techniques of scrutinizing over the even the most inconsequential detail of the human mind (or “soul”) with power in mind. Literature at some point turned away from adventure narratives, for example, and instead looked more towards the intricacies and hidden truths located within the mundane occurrences of everyday existence. With that said, there are few literary works that explore the mundane with such grand scope as *À la recherche du temps perdu*. It is due to Proust’s bracing attention to detail that the work reaches its grand length, and it is through these very details that one can find a link between Foucault’s idea of confession and the production of “truth” in the novel as a whole. *La Prisonnière* in particular revolves around the rapid degradation of a romantic relationship, beginning *in medias res* with the feeling of love all but nonexistent for the couple. It is within this tense atmosphere that the mundane drama of human life can reach

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<sup>35</sup> Foucault, Michel. “*La vie des hommes infâmes*”. *Dits et écrits II 1976-1988*. France: Éditions Gallimard, 2001. pp 252

a climax, and this is due in no small part to the natural presences of suspicion and confession that take place in such an environment.

It is, however, the narrative style that allows a piercing view into the processes of confession and subjectification more than anything else. Written with a heavy autobiographical tone, *La Prisonnière* (and the whole of Proust's work, for the matter) almost automatically incorporates a significant amount of objectification into the process of reading. As Marcel continues to explain his inner thoughts and confessions to the reader, he or she is essentially forced into the position of an listening confessor, analyzing and objectifying the narrator based upon each new event or admission in the narrative. It is as if Marcel is placed under a microscope, and the reader has the power to determine and extract the type of subject into which Marcel transforms throughout the course of the volume. This seems to be an effect that goes hand in hand with autobiography as genre due to the very nature of its form. Derrida offers insight into this issue, stating:

L'autobiographie, l'écriture de soi du vivant, la trace du vivant pour soi, l'être pour soi, l'auto-affection ou l'auto-infection comme mémoire ou archive du vivant serait un mouvement immunitaire (donc un mouvement de salut, de sauvetage et de salvation du sauf, du saint, d'immun, de l'indemne, de la nudité virgine et intacte) mais un mouvement immunitaire toujours menacé de devenir auto-immunitaire, comme tout *autos*, tout ipséité, tout mouvement automatique, automobile, autonome, auto-référentiel. Rien ne risque d'être aussi empoisonnant qu'une autobiographie, empoisonnant pour soi, d'abord, auto-infectieux pour le présumé signataire ainsi auto-affecté.<sup>36</sup>

This is to say that the autobiography is an intended exercise in preserving a crystalline portrait of the untainted truth of a person. It is an attempt by a person to subjectify themselves in the purest manner that he or she deems possible, and in having full control

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<sup>36</sup> Derrida, Jacques. *L'animal que donc je suis*. Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2006. pp. 72-73

over what is the “truth”, the autobiography should theoretically “immunize” the subject from any outside perversion.

However, this is rarely the case. In establishing a demarcated and closed off space for “truth” and the produced subject, the autobiography actually opens up infinite possibility for objectification by way of the analysis and critique of readers. It essentially crystallizes confession into an accessible mode of discourse, albeit one wherein the autobiographical subject has no ability to speak in return. The autobiography “auto-immunizes” the subject in the sense that the very attempt to preserve a particular subject allows for an endless process of objectification to ensue, and in turn the production of new subjectivities based upon the judgment of the reader. Hence, when Marcel confesses within the literary autobiography of Proust’s novel, the same process of objectification ensues. The subject that Marcel attempts to construct through his confessions is filtered and reconfigured through the process of objectification, resulting in a new dimension of truth regarding the character.

For example, at one point during *La Prisonnière*, Marcel explains why the act of watching Albertine sleep brings him so much pleasure. He narrates, “En fermant les yeux, en perdant la conscience, Albertine avait dépouillé, l’un après l’autre, ses différents caractères d’humanité qui m’avaient déçu depuis le jour où j’avais fait sa connaissance.”<sup>37</sup> Here, Marcel explains that the only during the act of sleeping would Albertine lose the constructed personalities with which she had always engaged Marcel, effectively exposing the “true” Albertine in the single moment wherein she cannot speak or think. Marcel’s constant desire for the truth is satisfied in this moment, and it is

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<sup>37</sup> Proust, Marcel. *La Prisonnière*. Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1987. pp. 68



through his confession that the reader can see that his or her desire to find truth is matched by the very narrator from he or she seeks it. He seeks to objectify Albertine and construct her as a desired subject much in the way that the reader tries to find a coherent subjectivity for him by way of the same process. This, however, is a phenomenon that must be explored with more precision in due time.

What is important for the analysis at hand is what Marcel admits shortly after this passage. He states:

Parfois il me faisait goûter un plaisir moins pur. Je n'avais besoin pour cela de nul mouvement, je faisais prendre ma jambe contre la sienne, comme une rame qu'on laisse traîner et à laquelle on imprime de temps à autre une oscillation légère pareille au battement intermittent de l'aile qu'ont les oiseaux qui dormant en l'air...Le bruit de sa respiration devenant plus fort pouvait donner l'illusion de l'essoufflement du plaisir et quand le mien était à son terme, je pouvais l'embrasser sans avoir interrompu son sommeil.<sup>38</sup>

To unpack his euphemistic diction, Marcel admits that he sometimes stimulates himself by rubbing against Albertine's sleeping body until he reaches orgasm. This is effectively a clear sexual confession, noted by Marcel's self-awareness of the acts "impurity", and the implications of its presence in the text are striking. It does not appear to further develop his affinity for Albertine's lack of subjectivity, if you will, while she is sleeping. Rather, it seems that in an attempt to portray a total and complete crystallization of his thoughts on Albertine's sleep, he elaborates upon every connected desire and act that takes place. In order to satisfy his desire to autobiographically "immunize" himself, to use Derrida's words, it appears as if he is *compelled* to include every detail, and further, he places a significant amount of emphasis on this sexual episode. It is a peculiar instance, but a telling one. Following Foucault's idea that the compulsion to speak about

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<sup>38</sup> Proust, Marcel. *La Prisonnière*. Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1987. pp. 70

sex has become a foundational trait of modern society, it is quite understandable that autobiography would preserve a special place for confessions of the sort. If sex has become a key factor in the processes of subjectification and objectification, then its place within autobiography is secure.

What is more striking about this instance is what it opens up with regards to the process of objectification on the part of the reader. A careful eye would note that this is not the first time that Marcel mentions being sexually stimulated by rubbing himself against a woman. A similar confession takes place in the second volume of *À la recherche...*, wherein Marcel inadvertently experiences his first orgasm during a playful wrestling match with his childhood romantic interest, Gilberte.<sup>39</sup> Thus, his entry point into the realm of adult sexuality occurred during a moment that echoes the act that willingly takes place at Albertine's side later in his life. Hence, his confessions of these two instances begin to constellate into a fragment of "truth" regarding his nature as a sexual subject. While Marcel appears to confess these instances simply out of a sense of embarrassment or guilt, the production of this sexual subjectivity lies in the mind of the reader. As if acting as a psychologist, he or she is prompted to draw the connection between these two instances much like this very analysis does. From here, Marcel can be objectified, which is to say that these instances can be used to draw an overarching conclusion about his sexuality, in turn placing him within a particular sexual domain and developing a subjectivity from it. He is *subject* to the reader's analysis, and it is his seemingly innocuous confessions that allow, if not promote, this process to occur. To step in with an example of said process, it would appear that Marcel has a sexual affinity, if

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<sup>39</sup> Proust, Marcel. *Within a Budding Grove*. New York, NY: The Modern Library, 2003.

not a full fetish, for frottage. Now, the purpose of this thesis is not to offer a character study of Marcel by any means. However, through articulating one such example of the objectifying process, the importance of confession can be highlighted.

Another occurs when Marcel describes the nature of his relationship with Albertine. He explains, “Ce n’était plus l’apaisement de baiser de ma mère à Combray que j’éprouvais auprès d’Albertine, ces soirs-là, mais au contraire l’angoisse de ceux où ma mère me disait à peine bonsoir, ou même ne montait pas dans ma chambre, soit qu’elle fût fâchée contre moi ou retenue par des invités.”<sup>40</sup> At this point, Marcel himself offers a type of bridging confession that links his current feelings back to some of his childhood. The moment to which he refers occurs in the first volume of *À la recherche...*, and this episode, wherein which his mother does not come to kiss him goodnight, appears to mark one of the first moments wherein he experiences disappointment from a female figure.<sup>41</sup> This disappointment is certainly a recurring theme throughout the novel as a whole, of course, so the reader’s analysis could very well be drawn into the objectifying process anew with this new confession. Marcel’s inner thoughts and concerns are laid bare in confessional form, allowing the reader to interpret them and attempt to locate a psychological pattern or source that would further define his subjectivity, much like the sexual confession earlier noted. However, unlike his confession related to sexual habits, there appears to be no sense of guilt or shame attached to this one, and this brings up an important point.

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<sup>40</sup> Proust, Marcel. *La Prisonnière*. Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1987. pp. 99

<sup>41</sup> Proust, Marcel. *Swann’s Way*. New York, NY: The Modern Library, 2003.

It bears restating that confession does not necessarily have to be attached to an inherent sense of guilt. As Foucault is clear to note, confession has infiltrated most aspects of life in which a power relationship holds force, and thus even the speaking of potentially benign internal thoughts can appropriate the confessional form. To confess is not to universally reveal an internal sin, if you will, but rather to reveal the workings of the self from their most hidden and protected origins. Marcel certainly shows little visible guilt in *La Prisonnière* when he discusses how little he loves Albertine. These confessions are merely statements of internal thoughts, and yet they still maintain the same potentiality to fuel the objectifying process as a confession of a crime or impure thought. For instance, Marcel quite clinically describes his reasoning behind remaining with Albertine at the beginning of the volume, stating, “D’Albertine en revanche, je n’avais plus rien à apprendre. Chaque jour elle me semblait moins jolie. Seul le désir qu’elle excitait chez les autres, quand, l’apprenant, je recommençais à souffrir et voulais la leur disputer, la hissait à mes yeux sur un haut pavois”<sup>42</sup> If anything, Marcel portrays himself as a victim in this passage, stating that it is he who experiences pain due to the actions of others. That being said, the fact that it remains a revealed thought that he has until this point held within himself places it into the realm of confession. He could never say this to Albertine’s face, as his claim to her would be soon shattered, and so he chooses the reader as the recipient of the confession. Even without guilt or shame to affect the process of judgment, the confession is still transformed into a kind of frozen discourse through the autobiographical form, and Marcel’s subjectivity is in turn

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<sup>42</sup> Proust, Marcel. *La Prisonnière*. Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1987. pp. 37

augmented through the objectifying actions of the reader. The result of this process is clear: Marcel remains in the relationship in order to exercise control.

Now, control is a major theme of *La Prisonnière*, and when one looks at the methods with which Marcel attempts to maintain it, a truly fascinating phenomenon reveals itself. The objectifying process of interpreting confessions is not something that only exists outside of the novel and in the realm of the reader. Objectification and confession are both driving narrative themes *within the plot of the novel itself*. Much of the tension and drama in *La Prisonnière* occurs during scenes wherein Marcel and Albertine engage in discursive battles of sorts, trying to elicit and dodge confessions, respectively. This significantly problematizes the manner in which confession operates within the novel, as it essentially transforms the search for “truth” into a triangulation, wherein its determination must be calculated from three angles, those being Marcel, Albertine, and the reader him or herself. For example, Marcel expresses great frustration with the fact that he no longer can get satisfactory information from Albertine, explaining:

Il y avait une seule chose qu'elle ne ferait jamais plus pour moi, qu'elle n'aurait faite qu'au temps où cela m'eût été indifférent, qu'elle n'aurait faite aisément à cause de cela même, c'était précisément avouer. J'en serais réduit pour toujours, comme un juge, à tirer des conclusions incertaines d'imprudences de langage qui n'étaient peut-être pas inexplicables sans avoir recours à la culpabilité.<sup>43</sup>

The fascinating aspect of this quote is the fact that it reveals a significant new dimension to Marcel's subjectivity. He remains a confessing subject in this passage, as he is clearly confessing one of the deeper secrets of his mind with regards to his feelings for Albertine.

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<sup>43</sup> Proust, Marcel. *La Prisonnière*. Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1987. pp. 59

However, he also establishes himself as an *analyzing subject* as well, one who is driven to discover and hear the confessions of Albertine in order to gain satisfaction. It would seem that the locus of his misery is the very fact that Albertine no longer readily confesses to him, and with this in mind, it appears that Marcel has developed a borderline unhealthy obsession with prying confessions from her mind.

One could then postulate that Marcel acts as an exaggerated double of the reader and imports a similar desire to hear confessions as how he or she desires to read them in the novel. Considering the fact that *À la recherche...* is a plot narrated through the form of confession, the reader naturally becomes accustomed to being handed confessions around every corner. Hence, akin to Marcel's frustration when Albertine fails to reveal the "truth", so to speak, an element of like frustration can occur when Marcel (or Proust for that matter) fails to fully explain the "truth" of the narrative as well. This is an aspect that will be covered in detail in due time, though, as the idea of Marcel as an analyzing or "reading" subject demands deeper analysis. Specifically, the issue of technologies of power (to use a Foucauldian temper) resonates soundly within *La Prisonnière* as well. To combat Albertine's reticence<sup>44</sup> to confess, Marcel develops and articulates an analytic technology of sorts to decipher the "truth" behind her words or lack thereof. He explains:

J'avais suivi dans mon existence une marche inverse de celle des peuples qui ne se servent de l'écriture phonétique qu'après n'avoir considéré les caractères que comme une suite de symboles ; moi qui pendant tant d'années n'avais cherché la vie et la pensée réelles des gens que dans l'énoncé direct qu'ils m'en fournissaient volontairement, par leur faute j'en étais arrivé à ne plus attacher au contraire d'importance qu'aux

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<sup>44</sup> It is worth noting that the characterization of Albertine as being reticent to speak could be seen as nothing more than another objectifying construction on the part of Marcel. Since her characterization is essentially constructed by Marcel in the writing of his novel, one must always keep in mind that her apparent character traits are products of discursive processes as well. This idea will be picked up in more detail momentarily.

témoignages qui ne sont pas une expression rationnelle et analytique de la vérité ; les paroles elles-mêmes ne me renseignaient qu'à la condition d'être interprétées à la façon d'un afflux de sang à la figure d'une personne qui se trouble, à la façon encore d'un silence subit.<sup>45</sup>

Marcel has developed the strategy of analyzing not only the things that are said to him, but also *the way in which they function as discourse*. Much like the reader analyzing Marcel's written confessions and producing truth through objectification, Marcel spends much time interpreting the dimensions of truth that lie within the various layers of spoken discourse and looking into the character of the person.

The fact that Marcel explains his techniques in terms of looking at irrational expressions of truth as if they were "*silences subits*" brings up an interesting facet to the production of truth from confession. Granted, that which is spoken or coerced to be spoken is the privileged form of information in the confessional form of objectification, however this is not to say that silence or accidental utterances have no place as well. Returning briefly to Foucault, he makes clear that silence is in many ways a necessary component of the act of objectification, stating:

Le mutisme lui-même, les choses qu'on se refuse à dire ou qu'on interdit de nommer, la discrétion qu'on requiert entre certains locuteurs, sont moins la limite absolue du discours, l'autre côté dont il serait séparé par une frontière rigoureuse, que des éléments qui fonctionnent à côté des choses dites, avec elles et par rapport à elles dans des stratégies d'ensemble.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, that which is selectively hidden or unspoken augments and expands the process of objectification, as both that which is confessed and that which is withheld are both taken into consideration and analyzed as a whole in order to produce an element of truth.

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<sup>45</sup> Proust, Marcel. *La Prisonnière*. Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1987. pp. 82

<sup>46</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Histoire de la sexualité I: La volonté de savoir*. France: Éditions Gallimard, 1976. pp. 38

Marcel, then, possesses and utilizes a highly sophisticated technique of objectification on both what Albertine speaks and what she hides, and the majority of *La Prisonnière* revolves around what knowledge he gains from this process. This is a very problematic aspect of the text for the reader, as the truth that he or she produces is inherently filtered through two lenses. Marcel constantly objectifies Albertine throughout the text and in turn produces a subjectivity of her as being a pseudo-sinister artist of deception. The “hidden truth” of Albertine is thus produced through Marcel’s techniques, and then communicated to the reader through his own confessions and psychological dimensions. The reader then can only extract any truth about Marcel’s relation to Albertine through both analyzing his confessions that are *themselves a product of confessional analysis*.

A turn to the text would help to elucidate this claim. Near the end of *La Prisonnière*, Marcel and Albertine engage in a climactic battle of discourse and deception wherein the processes of objectification and confession come to the forefront of the narrative. After Albertine expresses irritation at Marcel’s night out at the Verdurin’s, Marcel’s temper is provoked and the two begin to bicker. Marcel takes the opportunity to slyly draw the truth of Albertine’s romantic affairs out of her, while Albertine, ever mobile in the game of objectification, begins to offer various alternate confessions to disrupt his intentions. Fully aware of what Albertine is attempting to do, Marcel appears to diffuse to situation with the knowledge that it will go nowhere, only to inadvertently anger her to the point that she accidentally lets slip a vulgar turn of phrase to her immediate shock and embarrassment.<sup>47</sup> It is within Marcel’s analysis of this phrase

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<sup>47</sup> Albertine expresses indignation at Marcel’s suggestion to spend money with the intent to woo the Verdurin’s, and uses a slang phrase in her rebuttal, specifically “*me faire casser le pot*”. This is a form of vulgar French that has fallen out of use in the



(something that occupies no less than four pages) that something remarkable happens.

Marcel laments:

Et ainsi je vis qu'elle n'avait pas dit « casser » , mais « me faire casser ». Horreur ! c'était cela qu'elle aurait préféré. Double horreur ! car même la dernière des grues, et qui consent à cela, ou le désire, n'emploie pas avec l'homme qui s'y prête cette affreuse expression. Elle se sentirait par trop avilie. Avec une femme seulement, si elle les aime, elle dit cela pour s'excuser de se donner tout à l'heure à un homme.<sup>48</sup>

Within this passage, one can see Marcel's process of objectification in one of its clearest representations. Albertine's potential homosexuality always exists as an anxiety within Marcel's mind throughout the bulk of *À la recherche...*, but it is in this moment that the reader is allowed to see into the deductive and analytic processes of Marcel's mind with regards to this issue.

By looking at one slip of the tongue, he examines the social conditions and psychology discursively connected to it and develops a subjectivity for Albertine that supports the utterance of the phrase. Marcel objectifies Albertine by way of her confession, and in turn produces truth and a subjectivity that is delivered to the reader. Hence, any truth regarding Albertine's intentions is a product of the process of objectification once through the locus of Marcel's analysis, and then twice over when it is sent through the objectifying process on the part of the reader due to the status of his analysis as a confession. Marcel confesses that he is horrified at understanding the phrase and what feelings it provokes in him, and the reader is forced to take these into consideration when reading Marcel's own interpretation. The idea of truth is splintered

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contemporary moment, and her statement essentially translates to, "I'd rather be sodomized!"

<sup>48</sup> Proust, Marcel. *La Prisonnière*. Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1987. pp. 273

and fragmented through this process, and the reader must remain aware that he or she is the latest step in the line of objectification.

If this was not complicated enough already, Marcel reveals an even greater problem with regards to the idea of truth in this section when he himself explains the function of his own confessions. After his revelation, Marcel tells Albertine that they must separate as the relationship is irreparably damaged, only to turn around and confess to the reader that this is not his intended result at all. He admits, “De sorte que, si j’écrivais à Gilberte que je ne la verrais plus et dans l’intention de ne plus la voir en effet, je ne le disais à Albertine que par pur mensonge et pour amener un réconciliation. Ainsi nous présentions-nous l’un à l’autre une apparence qui était bien différente de la réalité.”<sup>49</sup> If the narrative of *La prisonnière* can be seen as an autobiography and in turn a confessional exercise in long form, then at this point the novel presents a confession as framed within a larger confession. Further complicating the issue, it is a confession that reveals that the larger confession, which is to say the narration of the action, is incongruous with the intention and in turn what could be seen as a *false* confession.

Marcel attempts to unpack this problem himself within the text, and makes a direct address to the reader in order to contextualize his reasoning behind this narrative dissonance. He explains:

Mes paroles ne reflétaient donc nullement mes sentiments. Si le lecteur n’en a que l’impression assez faible, c’est qu’étant narrateur je lui expose mes sentiments en même temps que je lui répète mes paroles. Mais si je lui cachais les premiers et s’il connaissait seulement les secondes, mes actes, si peu en rapport avec elles, lui donneraient si souvent l’impression d’étranges revirements qu’il me croirait à peu près fou.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Proust, Marcel. *La Prisonnière*. Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1987. pp. 275

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid* pp. 278

As far as preserving the comprehensibility of the text, this explanation suffices at a basic level. However, when examined in relation to the question of confession and truth, a truly galvanizing technique reveals itself. It must be noted that the framing device of *À la recherche...* is key to this point, as it explains why such a direct address occurs. At one level, the novel as a whole is a life story told through a first-person narrative, often through the form of confession. However, Marcel himself is a writer, and the novel is framed as an autobiographical project that he is himself writing. Separate from a first-person novel with no address to its own construction, Marcel frequently steps away from the events of the narrative in order to comment on them or how they are being written. It is an autobiography that is aware of its own construction and the narrator makes a point within the confines of the text to address the fact that it is being written in the present and that these events are being viewed and discussed in retrospect.

In confessing to the reader that his intentions differ from his actions and attempting to reconcile this dissonance, Marcel is essentially looking at his past confessions (i.e. that he no longer loves Albertine) and parsing the meaning that lies beneath them in order to deliver the “truth” to the reader. When looking at the method with which he deduces the “truth” behind Albertine’s confessions or lack thereof, one can see that the process is at the core a similar one. Thus, one could argue that Marcel, in glossing his own words and actions and in turn revealing the truth behind them, is *objectifying himself* in order to develop his own subjectivity. He is looking at past deeds and analyzing what he meant then, only to turn around and confess this deduction to the reader and establishing a discursive chain of truth akin to the manner of how he analyzes Albertine. What complicates the issue is that both pieces of information are offered to the

reader concurrently, wherein Marcel's original confessions and his own interpretation of them are delivered simultaneously. This is the very "immunizing" gesture of autobiography about which Derrida speaks, as in the attempt to preserve an "untainted" subjectivity, the narrator enters and confesses hidden motives as means to cut the reader off at the pass, so to speak. The reader in theory has no need to analyze and objectify the narrator by means of his actions, as the narrator himself has already done the work. It is a bracing gesture, as Marcel essentially states that whatever actions he describes throughout the course of the novel should only be understood through the lens of his own analyses and in turn his own confessions about what he truly feels. He assures the reader that he or she knows "the real Marcel".

But to what degree? Whatever existing truth about Marcel by its nature detaches itself from the truth that Marcel offers within the narrative. The critical reader is left to recognize Marcel's confessions concerning his inner truth as meticulously produced admissions on his part, and in turn this factor amongst a litany of others come into play when developing any truth about the character through the objectifying process. In his attempt to "immunize" his subjectivity through self-analysis, Marcel still initiates the "auto-immunizing" gesture that allows for readers to objectify the character even further. In fact, he opens the door to a vast new realm of analysis due to these very "immunizing" gestures, as now his various levels of confessions can be taken into consideration as a whole for the purposes of objectification and the production of truth. The question that remains, however, is how "truthful" could any of these claims actually be? Granted, the discursive production of truth is exactly that, which is to say that whatever truth is created becomes truthful by its very nature. If truth were a mobile object due to its status as a

product, then whatever subjective result of a reader's analysis would be for all intents and purposes "truthful".

That being said, any decisive conclusion about the truth gleaned from Marcel's confessions must stop in the realm of subjectivity. To elaborate: any statement made about Albertine's motives or nature has been heavily filtered through the process of Marcel's interpretations, and they must be taken as such. Furthermore, Marcel's own actions within the novel must be taken in consideration with his own analyses and explanations of what true meaning lies behind them. Thus, whatever truth about Marcel as a character must be recognized as being produced through a process of objectification, as any conclusions about his nature or motives must always be extracted by the things that he confesses and the context of said confessions. And like his attempts to do so with Albertine, the act of deduction and analysis is akin to a game, wherein one must develop a subjectivity and character of the analyzed subject in order to construct a coherent truth about him or her. So while the reader can likely never know anything conclusive about the "true" Albertine (as she never confesses her thoughts to the reader), the reader can indeed construct truth out of Marcel's confessions. The caveat is that it must be recognized as stemming from a discursive objectifying process and, in turn, that it is only deciphered insofar as Marcel fits into established categories of subjectivity already present in the reader's mind and the whole of critical discourse, for that matter. There is as much of the reader in who Marcel "truly" is as what is offered through his confessions. He sums this issue up himself quite nicely:

...car les images qui me faisaient agir, si opposés à celles qui se peignaient dans mes paroles, étaient à ce moment-là fort obscures, je ne connaissais qu'imparfaitement la nature suivant laquelle j'agissais, aujourd'hui j'en connais clairement la vérité subjective. Quant à sa vérité objective, c'est-

à-dire si les intuitions de cette nature saisissaient plus exactement que mon raisonnement les intentions véritables d'Albertine, si j'ai eu raison de me fier à cette nature et si au contraire elle n'a pas altéré les intentions d'Albertine au lieu de les démêler, c'est ce qu'il m'est difficile de dire.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Proust, Marcel. *La Prisonnière*. Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1987. pp. 278

## CHAPTER IV

### The Fourth Dimension (Conclusion)

How, then, does one account for the still quite prominent attempts to locate objective truth within this novel? To clarify, much ink has been spilled in various attempts to connect the narrative of *À la recherche...* to Proust's own life, with some critics going so far as to explain the entire narrative as being a reproduction of his life story as a whole. This argument requires the assumption that character names are feminizations of Proust's own male lovers throughout his life amongst other alterations, and it attempts to bend the narrative into an objectively truthful mold even at the expense of creating inherent contradictions between the two sources. It should be noted, however, that this is not a claim that such attempts are reckless flights of fancy, as Proust himself has a large hand in the creation of these theories. At various times throughout the novel, a mysterious "author" jumps into the narration who is ambiguous enough in his observations to be plausibly identified as either the fictional character Marcel or Proust himself. For example, at one point during *La prisonnière*, a passage appears that reads:

Avant de revenir à la boutique de Jupien, l'auteur tient à dire combien il serait contristé que le lecteur s'offusquât de peintures si étranges. D'une part (et ceci est le petit côté de la chose) on trouve que l'aristocratie semble, proportionnellement, dans ce livre, plus accusée de dégénérescence que les autres classes sociales. Cela serait-il qu'il n'y aurait pas lieu de s'en étonner.<sup>52</sup>

While Marcel is privy to making observations such as these and using them to comment on the actions of the plot, the points made in this passage appear to be slightly different than other instances. There is a meta-critical aspect to these lines that appears to point

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<sup>52</sup> Proust, Marcel. *La Prisonnière*. Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1987. pp. 51

towards a higher authorial power looking at the text and glossing it for the reader. It is a direct address to the characterization and narrative structure of the text, and it hints at a transition into the real world of the time-period with the hypothetical conclusion concerning the degenerate state of the aristocracy. Simply put, this section could be plausibly identified as a moment where Proust steps in as the author rather than Marcel, and he is directly discussing how his construction of the novel could possibly accurately reflect the state of the world within which he is constructing it. This moment is not a simple clarification of the thoughts hiding behind actions, as earlier discussed, but rather a reference to the actual act of writing and how truth reflected from and produced by narrative structure.

However, it is not a safe theory to take as a given. While this passage would indeed be quite striking and revolutionary were it to be written from the perspective of Proust, there is no solid way to prove that this is the case. For all intents and purposes, the character Marcel narrates the novel without interruption, and any conclusions about the influence of Proust's presence within the narrative world of the text is a product of conjecture and, of course, discourse. Finding a mainline that connects information in the text to any sort of objective truth concerning Proust's life is thus rendered an impossible task, and any ideas of objective truth are in turn scrambled by this ambiguity. Returning to Foucault's article, "*La vie des hommes infâmes*", it would seem that the ambiguous nature of Proust's text would fall into his analysis quite clearly. Foucault states that "...la littérature, elle, s'instaure dans une décision de non-vérité : elle se donne explicitement comme artifice, mais en s'engageant à produire des effets de vérité qui sont



reconnaissables comme tels...”<sup>53</sup> This is to say that literature gains its strength from a particularly chosen paradox, that being the promise to deliver some sort of truth about the world while remaining clearly positioned in the realm of artifice and fictiveness. Hence, the answer to the question “What place does truth hold in the realm of autobiographical fiction” appears to be a given: none. While the form could promise and hint at the presence of truth within its borders, the very form of fiction denies truth a rightful place within, turning literature into a type of mirage of sorts. The closer one inspects it, the more that the image of truth begins to fragment and vaporize.

This is admittedly a disappointing conclusion, and it seems to do a disservice to what Proust attempted with his novel. Perhaps a deeper dimension exists within Proust’s techniques, and upon inspecting that, one can find some presence of an objective truth about modern society that is divorced from any direct observations about his own life or that way in which *his* particular society functions. Returning to the idea of Proust himself potentially entering the text and consequently evading any direct attempts at identification, one can see something far more complex at play. Foucault conceived of a process that he referred to as the “spirals of pleasure and power” that take place during any type of discursive interaction that involves either confession or the production of truth. To synopsise his thoughts on the matter, the two (or more) agents present in such discursive play appear to take on a self-replicating and cyclical action, wherein the interactions fuel each other and accelerate the production of truth. This is to say that the person offering confessions begins to take joy in scandalizing the listener, who then takes pleasure in hearing increasingly loaded confessions. Conversely, the listener then takes

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<sup>53</sup> Foucault, Michel. “*La vie des hommes infâmes*”. *Dits et écrits II 1976-1988*. France: Éditions Gallimard, 2001. pp. 252

joy in asking questions to assert his or her power, while the confessor takes pleasure in evading said questions and in turn claiming power by controlling the level of interest caused by increasingly scandalous confessions.<sup>54</sup> So, the players in this game of power experience degrees of pleasure, frustration, and fascination through being both the hunter and the quarry. More importantly, all agents in this game are charged with elements of power and in turn have some control over the production of truth.

With the factor of Proust himself added into the analysis of *À la recherche...*, what was once a triangulation of truth now becomes significantly more complex due to the addition of this fourth dimension. Marcel and Albertine are locked into a “spiral of pleasure and power”, which in turn brings the reader into one with Marcel himself, as he specifically delivers chosen confessions for their maximum narrative impact in his construction of his life story. But further, the reader is then caught in such a relationship with Proust himself, whose authorial intent potentially enters the fray due to ambiguous meta-critical passages such as the one described earlier, but is in turn fragmented by his evasion. The truth about each character is forced through multiple discursive filters<sup>55</sup> until it finally reaches Proust himself, whose intentions are forever obscure and unidentifiable. Thus, any act of reading or criticism of this novel is by its very nature playing into a “spiral of pleasure and power”, and the reader or critic is locked into the position of the listening confessor. The reader or critic can only interpret or, importantly, discuss.

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<sup>54</sup> Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

<sup>55</sup> Such as any truth about Albertine’s thoughts existing as filtered through Marcel’s own interpretations

This would of course be nothing shocking with regards to literary interpretation if the plot of Proust's novel were not so clearly fascinated with the production of truth by way of discourse. Rather, it would seem that the narrative structure of the novel is designed to push the reader into a discursive relationship with both the text as well as Proust himself, and this is reflected in the relationship between Marcel and Albertine. If the theory that Proust's novel is deeply concerned with the way in which both confession and discourse shape truth, then the fact that critics have attempted to use the novel to shed some light on Proust's life proves its larger point. If any objective truth can be drawn directly from *À la recherche...*, it is not going to be about Proust's life or his intentions. What it will concern is that fact that relationships and the production of truth are both dictated and governed by discourse and, more often than not, the act of confession. This should be a familiar point after having interacted with Foucault so much throughout this analysis, albeit one can see that it is one that was deduced decades before Foucault himself wrote about it. Furthermore, Proust develops this idea within a *fictional* work, and in observing the processes of power so evident in modern society, even Foucault might likely agree that this could not in good conscience be considered a "nontruth".

It would appear that this text draws its power to make this very point from its autobiographical nature, as it is through this form of writing that the potent acts of confession and interpretation become integral to the narrative structure. It is here that, perhaps, Foucault's ideas of the production of truth as well as its relation to literature can be expanded. The autobiographical form of Proust's novel as well as its reliance on confession as a mode of delivering truth appear to posit truth as being a product of

*narrative structure*. What is confession besides delivering a story through a vocalized inner monologue? In objectifying a person offering confessions, what is one doing besides fitting him or her into an existing character archetype, or potentially even developing a new one? The techniques for extracting and producing truth operate similarly across a plethora of realms: analyzing novels, forming literary genres, developing fields of study, diagnosis, forming subjects, state power, etc. Hence, discourse and confession have merged modern society with the realm of fiction in a nearly invisible way, but the effects are profound. People read each other like texts, extracting hidden meanings and intentions and producing their own truth from them. Every person is Marcel and Albertine in one, as he or she is always interpreting and in turn being interpreted. Furthermore, what constitutes truth in the modern world is always a product of such interpretation and production in such a way that it all appears to be an ever changing text, reshaping itself to match how it is read throughout time. So, what place does truth hold *within* the realm of autobiographical fiction? Well, none. Perhaps it is the very form through which truth itself is produced.

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