

Proust, Bakhtin, and the Dialogic Albertine:
Voice and Fragmentation in *The Captive*

Jesse Kavadlo
Winona State University

A Bakhtinian reading of Proust is also a Proustian reading of Bakhtin: the language of Proust's *The Captive*, the fourth novel of *In Search of Lost Time*, employs different voices in dialogic relationships, as Bakhtin describes in *The Dialogic Imagination*; and Proust's fragmentation of consciousness and character reflexively describes literature, analyzes the act of writing, and comments on the novel's own characteristics in a way that can truly be called Bakhtinian. And at the same time, Bakhtin's own descriptions of "heteroglossia," or the "interrelationships between utterances and languages" (263),¹ come to life in Proust's modern, self-conscious novel in a way that Bakhtin himself only begins to speculate upon. The dialogic relationship between Proust and Bakhtin, in this way, can be seen best through Proust's narrator in his conception of Albertine, with whom he is living in his mother's apartment in Paris. The narrator analyzes conversations and characters, particularly Albertine, in a way that I would describe as Bakhtinian, creating an intertextual link with Bakhtin's work. And although Bakhtin never applied his theories to a modern work such as *Search*, Proust's narrator is both storyteller and literary critic in one, even from the confines of *The Captive's* text.

An important term to clarify for this discussion is Bakhtin's "dialogism." Bakhtin uses it often, but the meaning isn't always clear or consistent, a reflection of his own ambiguities and his attempts to open up the possibilities of the novel. One of his

clearest definitions, however, sounds almost like a characterization specifically of Proust: “the author utilizes now one language, now another, in order to avoid giving himself up wholly to either of them; he makes use of this verbal give-and-take, this dialogue of languages, at every point in his work” (314).

Part of dialogism, then, is the instability or the “give-and-take,” and an incompleteness: the author, deliberately, never fully reveals himself. The different languages—or voices and discourses—are a way of masking the authorial presence: the author “might remain as it were neutral with regard to language” (314). As a result, this allows “the prose writer [to] distance himself from the language of his own work” (299). Meanings are not fixed but open, freed by the ambiguity created through multiple languages and ever-shifting dialogic tensions.

Bakhtin draws many of his examples of this writerly distance from nineteenth- rather than twentieth-century novels, probably a result of political pressure and the closed door of the Soviet Union’s policies during his lifetime (Holquist xv). But Proust’s narrator, even from within the novel, often echoes Bakhtin’s analyses, noticing, as Bakhtin does, the distance of the writer from his works. And like Bakhtin, the narrator comments on the nineteenth-century novel in a way that underscores this instability. But for the narrator, the dialogism is incomplete, resulting in a beautiful flaw:

I thought how markedly . . . these works partake of that quality of being—albeit marvelously—always incomplete, which is the characteristic of all the great works of the nineteenth century, that century whose greatest writers somehow botched their books, but, watching themselves work as though they were at once workman and judge, derived from this self-contemplation a new form of beauty, exterior and superior to the work itself, imposing on it a retroactive unity, a grandeur which it does not possess. (207)

The narrator’s commentary on the nineteenth-century novel can be seen as an extension of or an addition to Bakhtin’s reading. What Bakhtin finds fascinating about these novels is their multiplicity of voices, but Proust’s narrator notices an important voice that seems missing: the “retroactive” language that only

comes through a critical self-consciousness. The writers of the nineteenth century were unable to incorporate this particular language into the text (or context) of their own novels, and so, the narrator says, they added “prefaces, that is to say pages written after the books themselves, in which [they] consider the books” (207). In a self-referential way, Proust is declaring what he is doing in his own twentieth-century novel—he is incorporating the present-tense text of the novel, the story itself, with the voice and language of self-consciousness, a distance only achieved after the work itself has been completed. *In Search of Lost Time* is both novel and critical commentary, an attempt to capture a “grandeur” only possible through the “retroactive” consciousness of story-telling itself.

Bakhtin only briefly discusses the dialogic nature of narrative with narrative self-consciousness when he writes, in one of his last essays, that “metalanguage,” or language that comments on itself-as-language, “is not simply a code; it always has a dialogic relationship to the language it describes and analyzes” (*Speech Genres* 136). This relationship is crucial to understanding Proust—there is the language of the text, the characters, and the mechanisms of plot, and then there is the “metalanguage,” the voice of “retroactive unity” which analyzes the narrative present of the *fabula*, as reflected in the passage from *The Captive* quoted above.

But the relationship between the language of the plot and the metalanguage of the critical, self-conscious narrator often has a more immediate dialogic interplay. In one early scene, Marcel pays a visit to the Duchesse de Guermantes, which the language of narrative necessity makes clear:

Looking mechanically at the clock to see how many hours must elapse before Albertine’s return, I would see that I still had time to dress and go downstairs to ask my landlady, Mme de Guermantes, for particulars of various pretty articles of clothing which I wanted to give Albertine. (30)

This language is concerned with the immediacy of time in the present (the clock) and with the business of the everyday—neighbors, clothing, and boredom. But soon after, during a con-

versation with the Duchess, another, interior language is spoken—that of critical analysis, the type Proust's narrator says is lacking in the nineteenth-century novel, and the language of this analysis is remarkably similar to Bakhtin's. The Duchess says to Marcel that carrying an umbrella is "much wiser—one can never be certain, I may find myself miles from home, with a cabman demanding a fare *beyond my means*" (31). The narrator then internally analyzes her words and her language:

The words "too dear" and "beyond my means" kept recurring all the time in the Duchess's conversation, as did also: "I'm too poor"—without its being possible to decide whether she spoke thus because she thought it amusing to say that she was poor, being so rich, or because she thought it smart, being so aristocratic (that is to say affecting to be a peasant), not to attach to riches the importance that people give them who are merely rich and nothing else and who look down on the poor. (31)

The narrator has picked up on the Duchess's voice shift, or her "hybrid construction," Bakhtin's term for "the mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance . . . separated from one another . . . by social differentiation" (358). In his examples from novels to demonstrate these shifts, Bakhtin adds his own italics to underscore the change; interestingly, so does Proust in this conversation. The narrator hears that the Duchess's introductory words speak the language of polite parlor discourse, the same sort of nonchalant conversation topics in which Marcel is prepared to engage. But once the Duchess utters the phrase "beyond my means," the narrator notices the shift in "social differentiation" that downplays, hides, or makes light of Mme Guermantes's obvious wealth. This phrase underlies the basic way in which languages can conceal issues of class, which Bakhtinian analyses attempt to reveal. In addition, the phrase is ambiguous: despite his analysis, the narrator cannot clearly pin down the Duchess's meaning or intent (is she trying to be amusing, smart, chic, or some combination?) because of the nature of hybridization—the sentence changes from civil utterance to class-conscious euphemism, and only analysis can illuminate the subtle shift.

Importantly, the narrator's commentary exists within the text of the novel itself (not in a separate preface or selection by Marcel Proust-as-author) so the relationship between Marcel the character, who is actually having the conversation with the Duchess, and the narrator, who is retroactively analyzing the Duchess's language, is dialogic. Proust the author is never present; he remains concealed behind the different languages of past and present, conversation and analysis. As Bakhtin puts it, "The author avoids giving himself up wholly to either [language]" (314). And so, after another paragraph of the narrator's analyses, Marcel's more plot-level narration resumes, but now he moves back to his chief concern, Albertine: "But on most evenings at this hour I could count on finding the Duchess at home, and I was glad of this, for it was more convenient for the purpose of discussing at length the particulars that Albertine required" (31). Albertine and her "particulars" are the most frequent subjects of the narrator's thoughts and commentaries. And as a result Albertine is the subject of the narrator's analysis as well: he wants to divide her, to break her down, in order to know her, understand her, and control her. To him, she is "many Albertines in one person" (87). In the same way that Bakhtin categorizes the word as existing in "other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions" (294), the narrator splits Albertine into separate personae with separate languages, and he must then decipher which of Albertine's words are her own, and more problematically, which of Albertine's words and actions belong to the real Albertine, if there is one.

The narrator's chronic jealousy over Albertine and his desperate investigations into who she really is (through whom she may or may not be sleeping with) lead him to lament that he may never really know her, and in not knowing her, he can never know anything:

One searches desperately among the insubstantial fragments of a dream, and all the time one's life with one's mistress goes on, a life that is oblivious of what may well be of importance to one, and attentive to what is perhaps of none, a life hagridden by people who have no real connexion with one, full of lapses

of memory, gaps, vain anxieties, a life as illusory as a dream.
(189)

The narrator's concern is with the search of memory. His life may ultimately be "as illusory as a dream," but that doesn't stop him from attempting the search itself in order to find, or to attempt to assemble, the true Albertine from the wreckage of the dream, to find some semblance of truth amidst the gaps and lapses of life and memory. In this way, his quest to find and capture Albertine takes on the same dimensions, and the same languages, as his search through memory. Albertine becomes the emblem of the fragmentary nature of memory, of truth, of love, of life itself.

Because the narrator blurs the lines between art and life and between past and present, Albertine soon ceases to be a person, instead becoming a "series of events" and "problems" completely represented by the languages of memory and artistic description. She is dialogic tension, between the present of the novel's plot and the future of the narrator's commentary, made flesh, only to be turned from a person into an abstraction by the narrator's analysis:

And yet it did not occur to me that I ought long ago to have ceased to see Albertine, for she had entered, for me, upon that lamentable period in which a person, scattered in space and time, is no longer a woman but a series of events on which we can throw no light, a series of insoluble problems. . . . (131)

Albertine has become "scattered in space and time," a phrase recalling Bakhtin's "chronotopes," or "the organizing centers for the fundamental narrative elements of the novel. . . . Time becomes, in effect, palpable and visible; the chronotope makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh, causes blood to flow in their veins" (250). His definition creates a dialogic irony between his work and Proust's: for Bakhtin, the chronotope allows the novel to come alive, to become embodied, which it specifically does here in the person of Albertine, a human being made chronotopic. None of Bakhtin's own examples of chronotope—the road, the parlor, the threshold—can capture this definition as well as Proust's Albertine does. But for Proust, the narrator's

abstraction of the living Albertine into a representation of time and space strips her of flesh and body—she is a series of words, fragments, and memories floating through the time and space of the narrator's mind and through the novel. Bakhtin's goal for the chronotope is to concretize these abstractions of time, space, and language in a palpable, bodily way ("flesh," "blood," and "veins"), and this directly meets Proust's dissipation of the now noncorporeal Albertine, her body transformed and "scattered" throughout the narrator's consciousness. Albertine is caught between Bakhtin and Proust, as both a living embodiment of the narrative and a temporal abstraction for the narrator. Albertine, as a chronotope, makes the novel bodily for Bakhtin but disembodied and abstracted for Proust, capturing the duality and complexity with which Bakhtin hopes to imbue the term "chronotope."

In this way Albertine is always more than a woman (or at least more than *one* woman) in the narrator's mind, leading to his continued fascination and jealousy. She is "at once as a mistress, a sister, a daughter, and as a mother too" (140); she is "several persons in one" (453); she is "a work of art . . . a wild heart tamed, a rosebush . . . the trellis of life," and the total of her shoulders, fingers, throat and other body parts that the narrator separately describes at length (515-16). That Albertine can be all of these yet none of these shows her ultimately to be the narrator's projection of his own dialogic tensions between love and jealousy, past and present, representation and reality.

The narrator's ambivalencies and dialogic tensions manifest themselves most clearly in one particular analysis of Albertine:

For I possessed in my memory only a series of Albertines, separate from one another, incomplete, a collection of profiles or snapshots, and so my jealousy was restricted to a discontinuous expression, at once fugitive and fixed, and to the people who had caused that expression to appear upon Albertine's face. (192)

Again, Albertine is a "series," but this time, importantly, she remains "incomplete," just as the nineteenth-century novel is also "always incomplete" (207). For the narrator, the form of beauty

“superior to the work itself” comes from “self-contemplation”—here, the narrator provides the contemplative distance required to complete Albertine’s beauty. Without his expression of jealousy, he is bored with her; with it, although he is miserable, the narrator can unify the series of Albertines into a singular beautiful expression in the form of the novel. He uses the separate fragments to create a dialogue between her “fugitive” and “fixed” forms of beauty. (Interestingly, this split of “fixed” and “fugitive” is represented by the titles of his novels about Albertine, *The Captive* and *The Fugitive*.) As a collection of profiles or snapshots, Albertine becomes the embodiment of the narrator’s own tensions—between the fleeting nature of time, space, and memory, and the clouded residue of image that remains behind even when the specifics of the recollection fade. In separate points, Albertine is fixed in the narrator’s mind like a single photograph, but taken together like a chain of memories and run through the mind like a collection, the pictures move, strung along like the frames of a film reel. The narrator’s mind replays these scenes, these moving images, continuously throughout *The Captive*, and Albertine, at once a still snapshot and a series of moving pictures, has now become fully Bakhtinian: intertextual (tied to photography and film), chronotopic (scattered through time and space as a living embodiment of the narrative) and dialogic (many Albertines in a series).

Not content to analyze Albertine’s person and character, the narrator also attempts to separate the voices and languages of their conversations in a Bakhtinian way as well. More specifically, the narrator sorts through the various lies that they regularly exchange. In the same way that Bakhtin’s dialogism allows different languages to neutralize that author’s true presence, the lies exchanged by the narrator and Albertine are all encoded with different meanings, which the narrator attempts to decode:

Sometimes the script from which I deciphered Albertine’s lies, without being ideographic, needed simply to be read backwards; thus this evening she had tossed at me casually the message, intended to pass almost unnoticed: “I may go and see the Verdurins tomorrow. I don’t really know whether I will go, I don’t particularly want to.” A childish anagram of the admis-

sion: "I shall go to the Verdurins tomorrow, it's absolutely certain, I attach the utmost importance to it." This apparent hesitation indicated a firm resolution and was intended to diminish the importance of the visit while informing me of it. Albertine always adopted a dubitative tone for irrevocable decisions. (112)

The narrator refers to Albertine's lies as a "script," (although it's unclear whether she's reading from it or he is), while her forced "hesitations" and "dubitative tone" are the devices of the actor: Albertine's words and gestures, plus the language of drama that the narrator uses to explain the scene, demonstrate the dialogic tension between the real and the represented. The narrator separates Albertine's languages, even translating her words, her "childish anagram," into his own language of jealousy and possession, using the terms of the jailor: "pass unnoticed," "admission," and "informing me." The languages are those of lying lovers, parent and child, and captive and keeper, but the overwhelming sense remains that the narrator's interpretation of Albertine's words is the zealous (and jealous) inquisitor's search for truth combined with the literary critic's search for meaning in language. Her sentences seem innocent enough until they are broken apart by the narrator's analysis, which turns her words completely around.

Later on, during their trip to the market, Albertine and Marcel enact scenes from Racine's *Esther* while the voices of the lower-class vendors fill the air. Many languages are spoken during this scene: the plebeian songs of the salespeople (one of the few instances in *The Captive* to include a class-diversity of voices, aside from a few scenes with Françoise), the acted and quoted lines from the play, and the mixture of truth and lies exchanged between Albertine and Marcel, all undercut by the retroactive commentary of the narrator:

To show that I was mollified, I added, still enacting the scene from *Esther* with her, while in the street below the cries continued, drowned by our conversation:

In you alone a certain grace I see
That always charms and never wearies me
(and to myself I thought: "Yes, she does weary me very often").
And remembering what she had said to me the night before, as

I thanked her extravagantly for having given up the Verdurins, so that another time she would obey me similarly with regard to something else, I said: "Albertine, you distrust me although I love you and you place your trust in people who don't love you" (as though it were not natural to distrust the people who love you and who alone have an interest in lying to you in order to find out things, to thwart you), and added these lying words: "It's funny, you don't really believe that I love you. As a matter of fact, I *adore* you." She lied in her turn when she told me that she trusted nobody but myself and then became sincere when she assured me that she knew quite well that I loved her. (152)

As in the earlier passage, both characters are playing roles like actors, but here they are actually quoting lines from a play in order to lie in a more concealed yet acceptable manner. The narrator analyzes the dialogue from behind the curtain of his parentheses, almost like asides, stopping after each line to separate the language of truth from the lies spoken, and punctuating the lines with his own language of jealousy ("obey," "distrust," and "thwart"). Albertine's actual words in response to Marcel's statement that he "adores" her are left out of the narrator's account of the scene as well; instead, the reader gets the narrator's account, a Bakhtinian translation, of her hybrid construction that switches from a lie (that she trusts him) to the truth (that she knows that he loves her). Albertine's own language has been captured by the narrator, concealed behind the representation and fragmentation of memory.

In addition, the cries of the vendors echo throughout the scene, reminding the reader through their songs and voices ("Winkles, winkles, a ha' porth of winkles!" and "Who'll buy my snails, fine, fresh snails?" among others [148]) that Marcel, Albertine, and all of the characters are always speaking the language of the elite, upper middle-class of Paris, and that the two of them have, for the only time in the novel, stepped outside of the parlors and posh living rooms in which all of the action takes place. The vendors are also out trying to make sales, and in a way, in addition to acting, the narrator and Albertine are selling versions of themselves in their attempts to be believable; they are trying to sell each other the lies of love, trust, and commitment as they wander through the marketplace to the sounds of

the peddlers. All of them attempt to speak the language of believability in their own ways, and these multiple languages loom and swirl throughout the scene and in the mind of the narrator. The characters, conversations, and scenes are all at the mercy of his memory and the scrutiny of his analysis.

Bakhtin's discussions of language, voice, dialogism, and chronotope sound as though they were made with Proust and the modern novel in mind, but Bakhtin may have been surprised to see ideas so similar to his used within the actual text of a novel. And his heteroglossia seems to be a term of empowerment, a way of thinking that can hide that author's intent behind multiple discourses. But here, what may have been to his surprise, Proust's narrator uses an almost-Bakhtinian analysis to capture Albertine's words; he uses an almost-chronotopic description to take Albertine's body rather than to give the novel flesh. Bakhtin, for his part, doesn't draw any of his examples from Proust, but the dialogue between the voices in *The Captive*—this self-referential, self-conscious text—almost provides its own Bakhtinian analyses, and in doing so, enriches the meaning of Bakhtin's own language and writing. And to read Proust with Bakhtin in mind allows the reader to make new perspectives out of what can be a difficult reading experience. That, I think, is something that would not have surprised Bakhtin.

Note

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations of Bakhtin are from *The Dialogic Imagination*.

Works Cited

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