

# 3

## Choses Normandes

The title of this chapter is that of an article which Proust contributed to *Le Mensuel*, a short-lived journal edited by a fellow student at the École Libre des Sciences Politiques.<sup>1</sup> The piece appeared in the final issue of the magazine, in September 1891; it was the first published work by Proust to be signed with his full name, ‘Marcel Proust’, as opposed to initials or a pseudonym. The epigraph to ‘Choses Normandes’ cites the *Guide Joanne* (a standard guide of the period) to the effect that the Normandy resort of Trouville has 6,808 inhabitants but can lodge more than 15,000 visitors in summer.<sup>2</sup> However, as Proust tells us at the start of the article, most of these visitors have left, ‘puisqu’il est élégant de quitter les plages à la fin d’août pour aller à la campagne’ [since it is fashionable to leave the seaside at the end of August to go to the country]. It is in sympathy with the sparse year-round inhabitants, therefore, that Proust evokes the beauty of landscape, seascape, and moonlight; one of his favourite phrases from Baudelaire, ‘le soleil rayonnant sur la mer’ [the sun shining radiantly upon the sea], makes its debut here, in a scene which anticipates Marcel’s impressions of the coast at Balbec.<sup>3</sup> Among several anticipatory touches of the Normandy of *A la recherche*, the English note is not lacking:

Enfin il y a quelques habitations tout à fait désirables . . . Je ne parle point des maisons “orientales” ou “persanes” qui plairaient mieux à Téhéran, mais surtout des maisons normandes, en réalité moitié normandes moitié anglaises, où l’abondance des épis de faitage multiplie les points de vue et complique la silhouette, où les fenêtres tout en largeur ont tant de douceur et d’intimité, où, des jardinières

<sup>1</sup> ‘Choses normandes’, in *Écrits*, 63–5; for *Le Mensuel* see Tadié, 111–21.

<sup>2</sup> Fifteen years later this number had quadrupled: see below.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Baudelaire, ‘Chant d’Automne’ II, 4, in *Les Fleurs du mal*; twice cited in *A la recherche* (II, 34, 67; II, 291, 331); see *Pléiade* note, II, 1354–5.

faites dans le mur, sous chaque fenêtre, des fleurs pleuvent inépuisablement sur les escaliers extérieurs et sur les halls vitrés. (*Écrits*, 64–5)<sup>4</sup>

[Lastly there are a few eminently desirable houses . . . I am not speaking of “Oriental” or “Persian” houses which would be more pleasing in Tehran, but rather of Norman houses, in reality half-Norman half-English, where the abundance of roof-top turrets multiplies the viewpoints and complicates the silhouette, where there is such a gentle and intimate look to the wide windows, where, from window-boxes built into the wall, beneath each window, flowers rain down inexhaustibly on the outer staircases and the glazed hallways.]

In the pastiche of the Goncourts’ journal which sparkles in the opening pages of *Le Temps retrouvé*, Proust made an oblique act of contrition for his own juvenile snobbery and preciosity; Mme Verdurin, as the ‘Goncourts’ report her, goes into ecstasies over ‘cette Normandie qu’ils ont habitée, une Normandie qui serait un immense parc anglais, à la fragrance de ses hautes futaies à la Lawrence . . . une Normandie qui serait absolument insoupçonnée des Parisiens en vacances . . .’ [the Normandy in which they once lived, a Normandy, so she says, like an immense English park, with the fragrance of tall woodlands that Lawrence might have painted . . . a Normandy absolutely unsuspected by the Parisian holiday-makers . . .] (IV, 291; VI, 27). The image of Normandy as ‘un immense parc anglais’ is stigmatized here as the product of a particularly odious form of snobbery, in which the Verdurins specialize, the snobbery of inside knowledge and privileged access denied to the common herd.<sup>5</sup> But an English Normandy does exist in *A la recherche*, though not as it is here projected by Mme Verdurin’s self-regard and naïvely relayed by the ‘Goncourts’. We need to look for it elsewhere, and to begin with in the very places where the despised Parisians, including Marcel, go ‘en vacances’, the seaside towns of the *Côte Fleurie*: Trouville, Deauville, Cabourg—and Balbec.

<sup>4</sup> The epithet ‘persan’ was transferred to the church at Balbec, as Swann describes it to Marcel (I, 378; I, 463). ‘Hall’ was one of the least obtrusive English imports into French: it was used first in the sense of a medieval or baronial hall, then to designate a hallway; both usages date from the 18th cent., but the second only became common in the 19th.

<sup>5</sup> Once again, Proust includes his own earlier tastes in his criticism of others’: in *Les Plaisirs et les jours*, the poem on Gluck in ‘Portraits de musiciens’ begins: ‘Temple à l’amour, à l’amitié, temple au courage | Qu’une marquise a fait élever dans son parc | Anglais’ [Temple to love, to friendship, temple to courage, which a marquise has had built in her English-style park] (JS 82).

*Balbec as found*

Marcel first hears of Balbec from Legrandin, the neighbour at Combray whose sister has married a Norman nobleman. I have discussed Legrandin's snobbery in Chapter 1; what concerns us here is the double image of Balbec for which he is partly responsible. In his unwitting rhapsody on Balbec (unwitting because he doesn't realize that Marcel's parents are planning to send him there on holiday and may therefore ask him for a letter of introduction to his ennobled sister) Legrandin evokes an image of primitive wildness which is, as such images tend to be, intensely literary:

Balbec! la plus antique ossature géologique de notre sol, vraiment Ar-mor, la Mer, la fin de la terre, la région maudite qu'Anatole France—un enchanteur que devrait lire notre petit ami—a si bien peinte, sous ses brouillards éternels, comme le véritable pays des Cimmériens, dans l'*Odyssee*. De Balbec surtout, où déjà des hôtels se construisent, superposés au sol antique et charmant qu'ils n'altèrent pas, quel délice d'excursionner à deux pas dans ces régions primitives et si belles.

[Balbec! the most ancient bone in the geological skeleton that underlies our soil, the true Ar-mor, the sea, the land's end, the accursed region which Anatole France—an enchanter whose works our young friend ought to read—has so well depicted, beneath its eternal fogs, as though it were indeed the land of the Cimmerians in the *Odyssey*. Balbec; yes, they are building hotels there now, superimposing them upon its ancient and charming soil which they are powerless to alter; how delightful it is to be able to make excursions into such primitive and beautiful regions only a step or two away!]

(I, 129; I, 156)

Legrandin is quite wrong, as we shall see, to suggest that the presence of hotels does anything to alter the 'primitiveness' of the landscape, but in any case Marcel pays the hotels no mind. He is swept away by Legrandin's confected lyricism; at home in Paris he dreams of Balbec as the epitome of wild nature, again reshuffling Legrandin's sonorous formulas which are themselves pastiches of Anatole France and Chateaubriand:

“On y sent encore sous ses pas, disait-il, bien plus qu'au Finistère lui-même (et quand bien même des hôtels s'y superposeraient maintenant sans pouvoir y modifier la plus antique ossature de la terre), on y sent la véritable fin de la terre française, européenne, de la Terre antique. Et c'est le dernier campement des pêcheurs, pareils à tous les pêcheurs qui ont vécu depuis le commencement du monde, en face du royaume éternel des brouillards de la mer et des ombres.”

["You still feel there beneath your feet," he had told me, "far more than at Finistère itself (and even though hotels are now being superimposed upon it, without power, however, to modify that oldest ossature of the earth) you feel there that you are actually at the land's end of France, of Europe, of the Old World. And it is the ultimate encampment of the fishermen, the heirs of all the fishermen who have lived since the world's beginning, facing the everlasting kingdom of the sea-fogs and shadows of the night."]

(I, 377; I, 462–3)<sup>6</sup>

There is a significant variation in this expanded version of Legrandin's words, the substitution of 'la terre française, européenne' for the vaguer 'notre sol' or the more general 'terre'. The boundaries of modern nations have nothing to do with 'la Terre antique'; 'la terre française', in particular, never existed in isolation from 'la terre anglaise'; the 'royaume éternel des brouillards de la mer' was an unromantic inconvenience in the way of war, trade, or migration. We might go further and point out that Normandy, of all places in France, ought to be the least susceptible to this kind of mythifying flummery, since its concrete historical circumstances have included owning, and being owned by, 'la terre anglaise'.

'La terre française' in this sense is like 'la langue française', an entity whose autonomy or purity is hard to establish outside the confines of myth. In the final chapter of this book I discuss the way in which *A la recherche* engages with contemporary debates about the French language, particularly Marcel's discovery that etymology breaks down the very concept of purity, whether racial, national, or aesthetic. One example from the academician Brichot's numerous, learned, prolix etymological explanations may be taken out of sequence for our purpose here, because it concerns the name of Balbec.

"Balbec est probablement une corruption de Dalbec, me dit-il. Il faudrait pouvoir consulter les chartes des rois d'Angleterre, suzerains de la Normandie, car Balbec dépendait de la baronnie de Douvres, à cause de quoi on disait souvent Balbec d'Outre-Mer, Balbec-en-Terre. Mais la baronnie de Douvres elle-même relevait de l'évêché de Bayeux . . ."

["Balbec is probably a corruption of Dalbec," he told me. "One would have to consult the charters of the Kings of England, suzerains of Normandy, for Balbec was a dependency of the barony of Dover, for which reason it was often styled

<sup>6</sup> For the parallels with Anatole France's novel *Pierre Nozière*, and with Chateaubriand's *Mémoires d'Outre-tombe*, see the *Pléiade* note (I, 1263–4).

Balbec d'Outre-Mer, Balbec-en-Terre. But the barony of Dover itself came under the bishopric of Bayeux . . .”]

(III, 327; IV, 388)

Proust made use of several scholarly treatises on etymology and place-name formation for this part of *A la recherche*, but the *Pléiade* editors note that he made up this particular derivation himself (III, 1529). The key word *corruption* tells us about the action of time on language and also the nature of that action, eroding and reshaping, preserving meaning through deformity and disguise. Having postulated ‘Dalbec’ as the original form, Proust was then able to draw on his sources for Brichot’s further explanations: both *dal* and *bec* are words of German origin, meaning ‘valley’ and ‘stream’ respectively;<sup>7</sup> Brichot (for once) doesn’t elaborate, but the reader will see that these are roots of common English words (‘dale’ and ‘beck’) which survive in French only in the form of place-names. Is ‘Balbec’, then, an English word? The matter is more complicated than that. Both historically and linguistically, Balbec ‘belongs’ both to England and France; it is both ‘en-Terre’ and ‘Outre-Mer’; the feudal ties which make its ownership so difficult to unravel exemplify the doubleness, the complexity which is intrinsic to the human condition. Brichot is over-optimistic if he thinks that being able to consult a royal charter would clear this matter up.

Swann, kindly and tactful, intimates that Balbec is a place not of nature and myth but of history and art; he sidesteps Marcel’s naïve question as to whether Balbec is the best spot for witnessing the most violent storms and proffers instead an urbane tribute to its celebrated church, ‘le plus curieux échantillon du gothique normand, et si singulière, on dirait de l’art persan’ [the most curious example to be found of our Norman Gothic, and so singular, one thinks of Persian art] (I, 378; I, 463).<sup>8</sup> Marcel is delighted to discover that the landscape he had thought of as timeless and immemorial actually features in the known sequence of historical periods, but it’s not enough to overthrow the imaginative construct which the name of Balbec evokes for him; indeed, the two forms of the romantic sublime, Nature and the Gothic, end by joining forces. By a powerful mental elision

<sup>7</sup> I report Brichot’s terms here: *bec* ‘la forme normande du Germain *Bach*’; *dal* ‘une forme de *Thal*’; the *OED* gives a Scandinavian origin for ‘beck’; ‘dale’ is from OE ‘*dael*’, related to Old High German ‘*tal*’ and Gothic ‘*dal*’.

<sup>8</sup> The last phrase is my translation; *Vintage* has ‘so singular that one is tempted to describe it as Persian in its inspiration’.

Marcel situates the church at Balbec at the very edge of the ocean, as though it 'grew' on the cliff top, so that he can indulge two fantasies at once, mingling 'le désir de l'architecture gothique avec celui d'une tempête sur la mer' [the desire for Gothic architecture as well as for a storm upon the sea] (I, 378; I, 464). The power of such a fantasy can only be broken by personal experience, not another's opinion—especially when that opinion is delivered by a master of the received idea and the conventional phrase such as M. de Norpois. When Marcel meets the old Ambassador at dinner, he learns that Balbec has made great strides in recent years—'On commence à y construire des villas fort coquettes' [They are beginning to build some very attractive little villas there] (I, 456; II, 41)—and that the church is nothing special, chiefly notable for the tomb of Tourville, a seventeenth-century admiral (which is actually in Paris). Marcel ignores these disenchanting hints that Balbec belongs to the modern social world, and he is right to do so, because even disenchantment, to have any lasting value, must be experienced first-hand.

Accordingly, it is only when Marcel travels to Balbec that he feels the full force of the collision between his fantasy and the reality. The first thing he discovers is that there are two Balbecs—Balbec-le-Vieux, also known as Balbec-en-Terre, and Balbec-Plage—and that the church which he had situated at the ocean's edge is inland, in the middle of a town square, miles from the sea; he had always assimilated its bell-tower to a sheer cliff face, beaten by the waves, whereas in reality 'il se dressait sur une place où était l'embranchement de deux lignes de tramways, en face d'un café qui portait, écrit en lettres d'or, le mot "Billard" . . .' [(it) stood on a square which was the junction of two tramway routes, opposite a café which bore, in letters of gold, the legend "Billiards" . . .] (II, 19; II, 273). This concentrated image of vulgar modernity, which Marcel will learn from the painter Elstir *not* to despise, is marked on the one hand by mobility and interchange (the junction of the two tramway routes is one of the many prefigurings of the 'two ways' which unite at the end of the novel) and on the other by the solid, static facts of French provincial life. But Marcel cannot yet read the golden letters in which this vision is offered to him.

From Balbec-le-Vieux Marcel gets back on the train and travels on to Balbec-Plage, since it is (of course) the modern hotel, not the medieval church, which is next to the sea, if not perched gothically on a cliff-top. With his aesthetic disappointment exacerbated by physical and mental

fatigue, and by the terror of having to adjust to a new dwelling, Marcel must now confront the hotel which Legrandin had dismissed as being merely 'superimposed' on the ancient soil of France.

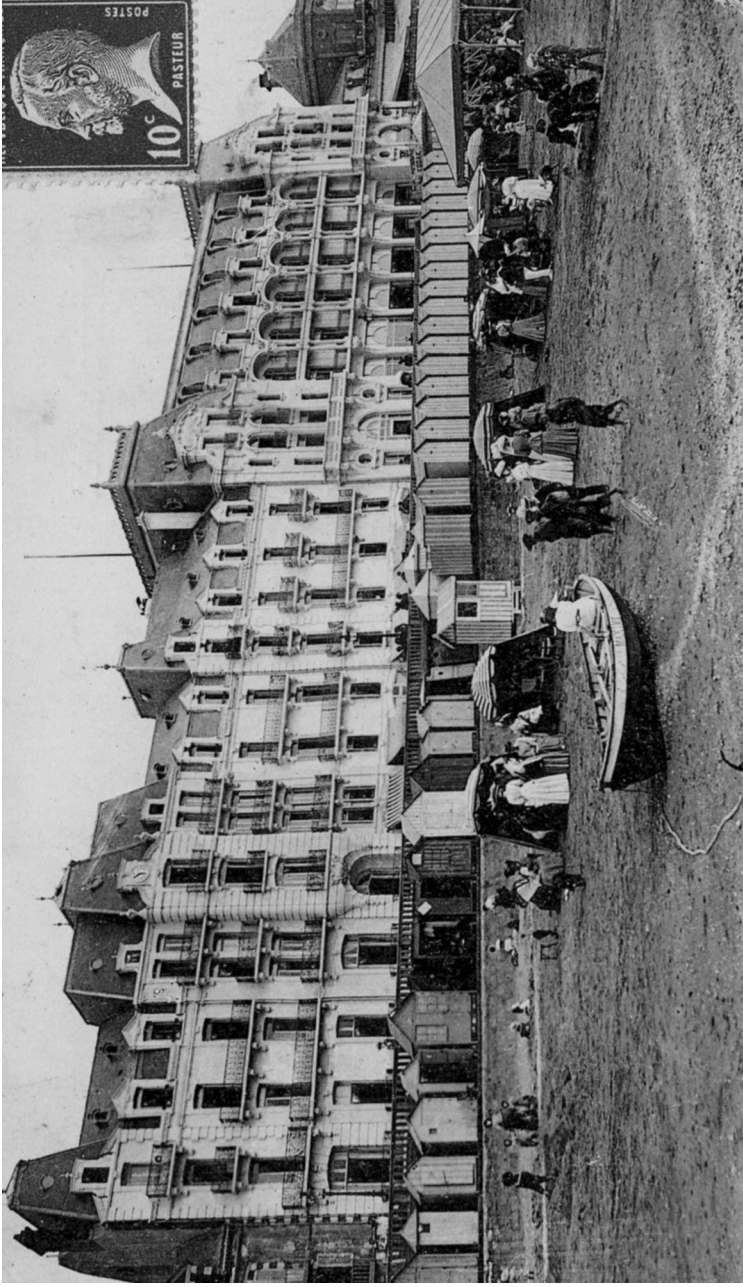
*Le Grand-Hôtel de Balbec-Cabourg*

Balbec is based largely (though by no means exclusively) on Cabourg, and its Grand Hotel corresponds (with fewer variations) to the Cabourg hotel which now features in *les pèlerinages proustiens en France*.<sup>9</sup> Life (or commerce) has hastened to conform to art, as Christian Pechenard records in *Proust à Cabourg*: the famous 'digue', the seafront promenade on which Marcel first glimpses the 'jeunes filles en fleurs', has become 'la promenade Marcel-Proust', though with commendable resistance, and a greater degree of Proustian authenticity, it is still referred to as 'la digue'.<sup>10</sup> The Grand Hotel itself has rooms named after 'Guermantes' and 'Cambremer', and of course a 'chambre Marcel Proust', a unique feature of the hotel, as its website ([www.cabourg-web.com/grandhotel](http://www.cabourg-web.com/grandhotel)) declares: 'le décor de cette magnifique chambre a été reconstitué scrupuleusement suivant la description qu' en faisait l' auteur. La Pléiade y est disponible, le temps semble s'y être arrêté' [the décor of this magnificent room has been scrupulously reconstituted following the description of it made by the author. The Pléiade edition is available in it, and time seems to have stopped there]. Needless to say the unique room is also uniquely expensive. Whatever Proust would have felt about all this—that last phrase especially—the one emotion he would probably not have experienced is surprise.

Pechenard points out that whereas Proust stayed in two hotels at Cabourg, Marcel stays in only one at Balbec. The hotel where the 10-year-old Proust stayed with his maternal grandmother, Mme Nathé Weil, in 1881, had been built in 1861 with the intention of making Cabourg a rival of Deauville; but twenty years later Cabourg was still, in Pechenard's pitying phrase, 'une plage de famille, formule dont on ne comprend pas ce qu'elle peut avoir de consternant' [a family resort, a phrase whose full awfulness is hard to grasp] (p. 20). Proust returned to Cabourg for several

<sup>9</sup> I borrow the phrase from Proust's article 'Pèlerinages ruskiniens en France' which appeared in *Le Figaro*, 13 Feb. 1900 (CSB 441).

<sup>10</sup> The 'digue' had formerly been 'la promenade de l'Impératrice' but after the fall of the Second Empire in 1870 was renamed 'la promenade des Anglais'; that would have been its official name when Proust stayed there.



10. The Grand Hotel at Cabourg, the model for the Grand Hotel at Balbec.



childhood holidays, but after 1886 we know of only two brief visits, in 1890 and 1891, during neither of which he stayed at the hotel. In 1892 another attempt was made to redevelop Cabourg. Pechenard: 'Le passé est une ruine. Proust le reconstruira. Charles Bertrand aussi. À partir de 1892, Charles Bertrand achète. Il achète tout. Il deviendra maire de Cabourg' [The past is a ruin. Proust will rebuild it. So will Charles Bertrand. Charles Bertrand starts buying in 1892. He buys everything. He will become Mayor of Cabourg] (p. 22). Pechenard records the progress of 'improvements' at Cabourg through the bulletins of *L'Écho de Cabourg*, from electric light to pedalos. More significant was the spread of those attractive little villas mentioned by M. de Norpois. Eventually M. Bertrand got round to the Grand Hotel; it was demolished and rebuilt in 1907.

Bertrand knew about modern publicity; he made sure the new hotel got noticed. *Le Figaro* ran a daily column of seaside news and gossip, but this wasn't enough; Bertrand (I guess) arranged for a long article, exclusively devoted to the opening of the Grand Hotel, and modestly titled 'Une brillante inauguration', which appeared on 10 July 1907.<sup>11</sup> We know that Proust, who wrote occasionally for *Le Figaro*, read it every day, and we can be reasonably sure that he read this article. He responded with (for him) extraordinary promptness and decision—it took him a mere three and half weeks to leave for Cabourg. But if he was making a pilgrimage to the Cabourg of his childhood, he would have found as violent a clash between image and reality as Marcel at Balbec.

To quote from André Nède's article is to seem to pastiche it, so completely does it belong to its time and type; its splendid, empty flourishes remind you of M. de Norpois. Cabourg is 'ce décor charmant que connaissent tous les Parisiens, et qui a fait, depuis longtemps, surnommer cette coquette petite ville, la Reine des Plages' [this charming setting which all Parisians know, and which for many years has given this pretty little town the title of Queen of the Seaside]. The Grand Hotel offers 'à sa brillante clientèle de baigneurs et touristes toutes les perfections et toutes les merveilles que le progrès moderne a pu réaliser' [to its brilliant clientele of bathers and tourists all the perfections and all the marvels which

<sup>11</sup> The article is signed André Nède. It seems a fair bet that it was placed and paid for by Bertrand, judging by the general conditions in which such press coverage was obtained in France: see Zeldin, II, 513. It is pleasing to note that advertisements which did not pretend to be anything else were known as 'English advertisements'; they were (of course) the cheapest. The main part of the article is reprinted in Pechenard, 27–30.

modern progress has brought about]. The brochure phrases roll on: ‘un ameublement du goût le plus riche et le plus recherché’ [furnishings in the richest and most sought-after taste], ‘les magnifiques jardins du Casino’ [the magnificent gardens of the Casino], ‘toutes les commodités que l’hydrothérapie, chaude ou froide, rend aujourd’hui si agréablement pratiques’ [all the conveniences which modern hydrotherapy, both hot and cold, makes both pleasant and practical].<sup>12</sup> Naturally an English phrase, ‘un déjeuner ultra-select’, pops up to describe the snob-appeal of the inaugural lunch.<sup>13</sup> But there are also passages of greater resonance for Proust and for readers of *A la recherche*: the paradoxical image of the hotel as ‘un véritable palais des Mille et une Nuits’ [a veritable Arabian Nights palace], for example, or the way in which the sea is described as a theatrical backdrop seen from the entrance hall. The theatrical motif would in any case be evident in Nèdè’s treatment from the presence of words such as ‘programme’, ‘décorations’, and ‘façades’, but this image directly compares the setting of the hotel to a painted spectacle:

on aperçoit la mer comme tableau de fond—je pourrais dire comme toile de fond, si l’on songe que ce merveilleux panorama qu’offre l’horizon de Cabourg . . . a été maintes fois porté au théâtre . . . Preuve évidente—car les auteurs dramatiques s’y connaissent—que c’est le plus joli décor que l’on puisse imaginer . . .

[you perceive the sea as a background—I might almost say a painted backdrop, if you think that the marvellous panorama offered by the horizon at Cabourg . . . has frequently been used in the theatre . . . Proof positive—for playwrights know their business—that it’s the prettiest scene you could imagine . . . ]<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The hotel prospectus which Marcel miserably peruses on the day of his arrival has the same tone and some of the same details: his eye falls on phrases such as ‘un séjour de délices’, ‘la chère exquise’, and ‘le coup d’œil féérique des jardins du Casino’ (II, 25).

<sup>13</sup> When the dowager marquise de Cambremer attends a Balbec party, the proud family plants an item in *Le Gaulois* about ‘la matinée ultra-select’ (III, 163; IV, 192). The sculptor, Ski, tries to dissuade the Verdurins from admitting M. de Charlus to their ‘salon si “select”’ (III, 296; IV, 349). Bonnaffé’s first citation for ‘select’ in the sense of ‘choisi, élégant’ dates from 1869; his next, from *Les Morts qui parlent*, a novel by vicomte Eugène-Melchior de Vogüé published in 1899, sneers at a social-climbing banker: ‘Aussi voyait-on chez lui ce défilé de cinématographe que les journaux à sa dévotion proclamaient “une réunion très select”’ [Thus his house was filled with a cinematographic stream of people, which the newspapers who supported him proclaimed as ‘an ultra-select gathering’]. The same phrase (‘une sorte de défilé cinématographique des choses’ [a sort of procession of things upon the screen of a cinematograph]) occurs in *Le Temps retrouvé*, where it denotes naïve literary realism (IV, 461; VI, 237).

<sup>14</sup> Pechenard, 28. ‘Panorama’ is a Greco-English word, coined by a Scotsman, Robert Barker, in 1789; in his 1787 patent he called it *La Nature à coup d’Œil* (OED).

Proust responded to this image, not just in the stage-entrance of Robert de Saint-Loup against the backdrop of the sea, which I quote later in this chapter, but in a longer passage in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, during Marcel's second visit to Balbec:

Je comprenais très bien le charme que ce grand palace pouvait offrir à certaines personnes. Il était dressé comme un théâtre, et une nombreuse figuration l'animait jusque dans les cintres. Bien que le client ne fût qu'une sorte de spectateur, il était mêlé perpétuellement au spectacle, non même comme dans ces théâtres où les acteurs jouent une scène dans la salle, mais comme si la vie du spectateur se déroulait au milieu des somptuosités de la scène. Le joueur de tennis pouvait rentrer en veston de flanelle blanche, le concierge s'était mis en habit bleu galonné d'argent pour lui donner ses lettres. Si ce joueur de tennis ne voulait pas monter à pied, il n'était pas moins mêlé aux acteurs en ayant à côté de lui pour faire monter l'ascenseur le lift aussi richement costumé.

[I could well appreciate the charm that this great hotel might have for certain persons. It was arranged like a theatre, and was filled to the flies with a numerous and animated cast. For all that the visitor was only a sort of spectator, he was perpetually involved in the performance, not simply as in one of those theatres where the actors play a scene in the auditorium, but as though the life of the spectator was going on amid the sumptuosities of the stage. The tennis-player might come in wearing a white flannel blazer, but the porter would have put on a blue frock-coat with silver braid in order to hand him his letters. If this tennis-player did not choose to walk upstairs, he was equally involved with the actors in having by his side, to propel the lift, its attendant no less richly attired.]

(III, 170; IV, 200)

I will come shortly to the figure of 'le lift', and in the next section of this chapter to 'le joueur de tennis'; what I want to emphasize here is how the element of spectacle in the Grand Hotel actually works. It does not dissolve the boundary between real life and show, but gives the impression that real life is taking place within a show; the key word is *mêlé*, 'mêlé perpétuellement au spectacle . . . mêlé aux acteurs', as though the Grand Hotel performs itself, and the guests are caught up in this performance. This is not what Nède had in mind when he praised the hotel's contemporary feel—'Il est impossible de se figurer une plus complète compréhension de la vie moderne' [It is impossible to imagine a more complete grasp of modern life]—but to Proust the essence of modern life, at least in its social aspect, lies in such mixed effects, in which individuals find themselves spectators of a performance and part of its 'figuration'.

The Grand Hotel may be especially ‘modern’ because the nature of its performance is not straightforward. There is something factitious about the ‘play’ which it puts on, and Proust’s imagination was always kindled by the fake and the nearly-real. It is a quality conveyed by the use of the English word ‘palace’ (pronounced in French with the accent on the second syllable: pa’láss). Jules Cesari, the manager of the Grand Hotel at Cabourg, came, as Nède emphasizes, from the Élysée-Palace in Paris; purists loathed ‘palace’ because it had re-entered French from English after dropping out in favour of ‘palais’; it was reserved for luxury hotels and cinemas, and represented a toxic mixture of the cosmopolitan and the modern. As a result, the interaction of ‘performers’ and ‘spectators’ in the Grand Hotel play is subject to dislocations which are the result, so to speak, of miscasting. In *A l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, when the genuinely aristocratic M. de Cambremer first visits the Grand Hotel at Balbec, he is badly treated by the staff who are ‘frais débarqué de la Côte d’Azur’ [freshly imported from the Riviera]: ‘Non seulement il n’était pas habillé en flanelle blanche, mais par vieille manière française et ignorance de la vie des Palaces, entrant dans un hall où il y avait des femmes, il avait ôté son chapeau dès la porte . . .’ [Not only was he not wearing white flannels, but, with old-fashioned French courtesy and in his ignorance of the ways of grand hotels, on coming into the hall in which there were ladies sitting, he had taken off his hat at the door . . .] (II, 43; II, 301).

Nède’s *Figaro* article is not addressed to M. de Cambremer, of course, but to readers who might themselves be fresh—if that is the right word—from the Côte d’Azur.<sup>15</sup> He does not mean to suggest that there might be something inauthentic about the whole performance, but Proust emphatically does. Nède describes the hall as being ‘d’aspect grandiose et d’une sobre décoration Louis XVI’ [imposing in appearance and soberly decorated in Louis XVI style]; when Marcel, by contrast, arrives in ‘le hall du Grand-Hôtel de Balbec’, he observes that the staircase is of imitation marble. The manager wears ‘[le] smoking du mondain’ [a smart dinner-jacket],

<sup>15</sup> Le Robert, who dates the appearance of ‘palace’ as designating a luxury hotel to 1903, adds that it is linked to the popularity of the Côte d’Azur among wealthy English travellers. From 1891 Queen Victoria chose to stay in hotels rather than private villas, though like Mme de Villeparisis she insulated herself within her own household, bringing her own china and linen with her (Howarth, 62). Proust compounds the indignity of ‘palace’ by using the word to designate the high-class brothel which opens near Balbec, and which is made the occasion of an elaborate joke about a traveller who mistakes it for a luxury hotel (III, 462; IV, 550).

and in his voice can be heard a variety of accents 'dus à des origines lointaines et à une enfance cosmopolite' [acquired from an alien ancestry and a cosmopolitan upbringing]. Like the other members of staff at the hotel, he is incapable of discerning the true social status of his guests, taking 'les grands seigneurs pour des râleux et les rats d'hôtels pour des grands seigneurs' [the grandees for haggling skinflints and the flashy crooks for grandees]; he relies on a code of dress and behaviour which consists in ostentatious mimicry of aristocratic bearing, 'comme de ne pas se découvrir en entrant dans le hall, de porter des knickerbockers, un paletot à taille, et de sortir un cigare ceint de pourpre et d'or d'un étui en maroquin écrasé' [such as not taking one's hat off when one came into the hall, wearing knickerbockers or an overcoat with a waist, and taking a cigar with a band of purple and gold out of a crushed morocco case] (II, 23–4; II, 277–8).<sup>16</sup>

The rebuilding of the Grand Hotel formed part of Bertrand's ambition to make Cabourg the peer of Trouville and Deauville. The number of summer visitors around the time of Proust's 1907 visit was between 6,000 and 8,000, compared to 20,000 at Deauville and 60,000 at Trouville; in 1908, the stake at the Casino amounted to 400,000 francs, far less than at Trouville.<sup>17</sup> A lot of energy went into this (ultimately unsuccessful) effort, and it was in full swing when Proust arrived. The hotel, and the town, to which he returned were therefore not those of his childhood, but it was this hotel and town, and not the former ones, which he reconstructed in *A la recherche*. The relationship between Marcel and his grandmother relates to the 1880s, but the stage on which it is acted out is that of 1907.<sup>18</sup> The Grand Hotel is the luxurious 'palace' of the early twentieth century, and the social scene both in the hotel itself and Balbec generally is dominated not by family values but by those of cosmopolitan fashion, centring on the Casino, the golf course, the racecourse, and the regatta. All of these—but especially the last three—are imbued with Englishness

<sup>16</sup> Bonnaffé traces *knickerbockers* to Cruikshank's illustrations of the old-fashioned Dutch knee-breeches in Washington Irving's *History of New York* (1809); Irving's comic pseudonym was 'Diedrich Knickerbocker'. By Proust's time they were not only fashionable, but identified with sporting and outdoor pursuits, for whose popularity at Balbec see below. I would guess that the crushed-leather cigar case is of English manufacture.

<sup>17</sup> Tadié, 491 and 882 n. 52.

<sup>18</sup> Marcel, in the novel, is older than Proust was by perhaps four or five years; it is a young adolescent, already sexually awakened, who goes to Balbec for the first time in *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, not a child.

(in spirit and vocabulary). Within the hotel the central means of communication—mechanical and personal—turns on a single English term, misapplied and mispronounced—*le lift*.

Marcel's room is high up in the Grand Hotel. It is one of the cheaper rooms; Marcel has already suffered the humiliation of his grandmother telling the manager that the prices are 'beaucoup trop élevés pour mon petit budget' [far too high for my little budget]—the only time an identifiably English word escapes her, 'sur une intonation artificielle' [in an artificial tone of voice] (II, 24; II, 278).<sup>19</sup> Marcel himself resorts to English vocabulary to signify his alienation: sitting on a bench while his grandmother chatters, he watches with a miserable sense of inferiority the other, posher guests, 'tous ces gens pour qui c'était regagner leur *home* que de gravir les degrés en faux marbre' [all these people for whom climbing those imitation marble stairs meant going home]. But Marcel does not climb the fake staircase:

le directeur vint lui-même pousser un bouton: et un personnage encore inconnu de moi, qu'on appelait "lift" (et qui au point le plus haut de l'hôtel, là où serait le lanternon d'une église normande, était installé comme un photographe derrière son vitrage ou comme un organiste dans sa chambre), se mit à descendre vers moi . . .

[the manager himself came forward and pressed a button, whereupon a personage whose acquaintance I had not yet made, known as "lift" (who at the highest point in the building, where the lantern would be in a Norman church, was installed like a photographer behind his curtain or an organist in his loft) began to descend towards me . . .]

(II, 25; II, 280)

We have already seen how the Grand Hotel at Balbec occupies the site which Marcel's fantasy had assigned to the church; Proust makes this substitution explicit here, and offers Marcel a peculiarly modern figure as guide. Bonnaffé's first citation for *lift* as a piece of machinery is dated 1904; its metonymic application to the employee who operated the lift was even more recent, the first citation being dated 1910.<sup>20</sup> As the lift passes each floor, Marcel glimpses the corridors of the hotel fanning out,

<sup>19</sup> For *budget*, see Ch. 1, n. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Proust only uses *lift* in this metonymic sense; when he refers to the machine itself he uses 'ascenseur' (e.g. II, 42; II, 300, where the correct translation of 'ascenseur' as 'lift' effaces this small distinction).

and chambermaids carrying bolsters; the only lighting comes from the windows of 'l'unique water-closet de chaque étage' [the solitary water-closet on each landing] (II, 26; II, 280). Sexual desire, shame, and secrecy fuse with social inadequacy, and Marcel babbles uncontrollably to the lift-boy, who keeps an enigmatic silence. When he reaches his room Marcel is intimidated by its furnishings and its size, which give it 'un caractère quasi historique qui eût pu la rendre appropriée à l'assassinat du duc de Guise, et plus tard à une visite de touristes conduits par un guide de l'agence Cook' [a quasi-historical character which might have made it a suitable place for the assassination of the Duc de Guise, and afterwards for parties of tourists personally conducted by one of Thomas Cook's guides] (II, 27; II, 282).

Marcel will gradually get used to his room—it will become, if not his *home*, then at least his *chez-soi*—and he will get used to *le lift*, too, who is also *le liftier* and *le liftman*, a character who contributes with surprising persistence not just to the atmosphere of the Grand Hotel but to the plot of the novel. His function deviates, you might say, from the vertical to the horizontal, as he brings messages and goes on errands for Marcel, almost always in a context which is suggestive of sexual desire or intrigue. The adolescent Marcel lives in a perpetual state of longing amongst a host of fleeting female shapes, among them a milkmaid who comes to the hotel from a nearby farm. One day he receives a letter, and the plebeian writing on the envelope convinces him it must be from this peasant girl; alas, it is only from the great writer Bergotte, who hadn't wanted to disturb him and had left 'un mot charmant pour lequel le liftman avait fait une enveloppe que j'avais crue écrite par la laitière' [a few charming lines for which the lift-boy had addressed an envelope which I had supposed to have been written by the milk-girl] (II, 74; II, 339). Bergotte and the *lift* are also joined in the sly comedy of Marcel's first encounters with M. de Charlus, in the course of which the baron lends Marcel a volume of Bergotte, then asks for it back; it is the 'liftier' who executes this commission (II, 126; II, 400–1).

It is not just the 'lift's' handwriting which is ill-educated; as befits a character tagged with an English name, his French is execrable, full of pretentious euphemisms which disguise the indignity he feels at being a servant (II, 157–8; II, 438–9); Marcel is able to record these euphemisms because, in a reversal of their relation on the night of his arrival, it is now he who keeps silent while the 'lift' chatters incessantly. This feature of his character, together with his message-bearing function, dominates his

appearances during Marcel's second visit to Balbec, in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*. Here we learn among other things that the 'lift' cannot pronounce the French word for lift, *ascenseur*, correctly (III, 187; IV, 220).<sup>21</sup> But his more important role now is to carry messages from Marcel to Albertine, even to fetch her and bring her to the hotel; in a virtuoso sequence Proust alternates Marcel's minute observation of the 'lift's' linguistic deformations with the progress of his own liaison with Albertine, a passage which leads directly to his account of the first occasion on which he became conscious of the possibility that Albertine might desire other women, might be the lover of Andrée (III, 186–90; IV, 219–25).

In *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, the 'lift' as the bearer of messages comes to the attention of Bloch, who announces that he will pay Robert de Saint-Loup a visit at the hotel, and adds: "Comme je ne peux pas supporter d'attendre parmi le faux chic de ces grands caravansérails, et que les tziganes me feraient trouver mal, dites au "laïft" de les faire taire et de vous prévenir de suite." ["As I cannot endure to be kept waiting among all the false splendour of these great caravanserais, and the Hungarian band would make me ill, you must tell the "light-boy" to make them shut up, and to let you know at once"] (II, 97; II, 367). Bloch's unspeakable vulgarity is constantly emerging in his speech, and Proust enjoys hoisting him with his own petard—in this instance the affectation of knowing how to pronounce English. Remy de Gourmont (p. 60 n. 8) makes fun of French people who can't, claiming to have asked several people to pronounce 'plum-pudding', with the following results: *plum*, *pleum*, *plome*, *ploume*; *poudigne*, *poudinègue*, *poudine*, *poudingue*.<sup>22</sup> But here the joke has a particular sting, as Marcel goes on to explain:

Pour ce qui est de "laïft", cela avait d'autant moins lieu de me surprendre que quelques jours auparavant, Bloch m'ayant demandé pourquoi j'étais venu à Balbec . . . comme je lui avais dit que ce voyage répondait à un de mes plus anciens désirs, moins profond pourtant que celui d'aller à Venise, il avait répondu: "Oui, naturellement, pour boire des sorbets avec les belles madames, tout en faisant semblant de lire les *Stones of Venaïce* de Lord John Ruskin, sombre raseur et un des

<sup>21</sup> Nor could Proust spell it, incidentally: see his letter to his father of September 1898, *Corr.* II, 256–7.

<sup>22</sup> When Hippolyte Taine, author of the standard *Histoire de la littérature anglaise* (1863), asked for potatoes in England, he got buttered toast (Zeldin, II, 104). On our side of the Channel the joke has been going since Chaucer's Prioress with her 'French of Stratford-atte-Bowe'.



plus barbifiants bonshommes qui soient.” Bloch croyait donc évidemment qu’en Angleterre non seulement tous les individus du sexe mâle sont lords, mais encore que la lettre *i* s’y prononce toujours *ai*.

[As regards the word “lightf,” I had all the less reason to be surprised at Bloch’s pronunciation in that, a few days before, when he had asked me why I had come to Balbec . . . and I had explained to him that this visit was a fulfilment of one of my earliest longings, though one not so deep as my longing to see Venice, he had replied: “Yes, of course, to sip iced drinks with the pretty ladies, while pretending to read the *Stones of Venighe* by Lord John Ruskin, a dreary bore, in fact one of the most tedious old prosers you could find.” Thus Bloch evidently thought that in England not only were all the inhabitants of the male sex called “Lord,” but the letter “i” was invariably pronounced “igh.”]

(II, 99; II, 369)<sup>23</sup>

Marcel refrains from pointing out that Bloch’s misjudgement of the value of *The Stones of Venice* is more serious than his mispronunciation of its title; it is as though he has taken on the identity of Swann, who would similarly confine himself to such ‘objective’ details and avoid as far as possible passing any judgement which came from his heart. In Marcel’s impassive phrasing, ‘laift’ and ‘Venaïce’ appear on a level; it is important not to commit such solecisms, not to expose oneself to ridicule, whether pronouncing the name of a hotel employee or a work of genius.

The context of the passage makes this anxiety easier to understand but harder to forgive. In between Bloch’s initial mispronunciation of *laift*, and Marcel’s comment which adds the Ruskin example, comes a passage

<sup>23</sup> In a letter to Antoine Bibesco of 3 Apr. 1903, which is packed with Ruskinian quotations and references to English friends, Proust (or, as I have heard many times in England, ‘Prowst’) attributes the mispronunciation ‘Venaïce’ to one of the two Henraux brothers, probably Lucien, the future curator of the Louvre, whom he seems to have known socially (*Corr.* III, 284–6). Another joke about *lords* occurs in Proust’s pastiche of Émile Faguet in *Pastiches et melanges*: ‘Un grand savant anglais, moitié physicien, moitié grand seigneur, un lord anglais, comme dit l’autre (mais non, madame, tous les lords sont Anglais, donc un lord anglais est un pléonasm; ne recommencez pas, personne ne vous a entendue) . . .’ [A great English scientist, half natural philosopher, half nobleman, an English lord as they say (no, no, Madam, all lords are English, therefore an English lord is a pleonasm; don’t do it again, no one heard you . . .)] (*CSB* 30). Francis Wey (p. 63) had fulminated for real on this point as far back as 1845: ‘Nous disons un *mylord*, c’est comme qui dirait *un mon seigneur*; car les Anglais disent *a lord*, un lord. Il n’est rien de pis, si ce n’est de dire comme les journaux: *un mylord anglais*, sans doute afin de le distinguer d’un *mylord turc*’ [We say *un mylord*, as who should say *un mon seigneur*; for the English say *a lord*, *un lord*. There is nothing worse, unless it is to say like the newspapers: *un mylord anglais*, no doubt to distinguish him from *un mylord turc*].

which links Bloch's vulgarity with his Jewishness, indeed with his belonging to a 'colonie juive' at Balbec. This Jewish colony doesn't mix with the other social groups at the resort; its members flash their money around and wear loud clothes; the men are irredeemably Jewish-looking 'malgré l'éclat des smokings et des souliers vernis' [despite the brilliance of their dinner-jackets and patent-leather shoes] (II, 98; II, 368). Bloch's language is thus of a piece with his unwelcome appearance at the hotel, and his intrusion into the high-minded friendship between Marcel and Saint-Loup is marked by his jumped-up put-down of Ruskin. Marcel's intolerance contrasts with Saint-Loup's generous embarrassment on Bloch's behalf; Saint-Loup blushes at Bloch's error because he knows, or thinks he knows, that Bloch would blush if it were pointed out to him; he himself attributes the error to a kind of lofty indifference on Bloch's part towards trivial social graces, yet he is simultaneously aware that Bloch himself would be far from indifferent to being laughed at:

Car il pensait bien que Bloch attachait plus d'importance que lui à cette faute. Ce que Bloch prouva quelque temps après, un jour qu'il m'entendit prononcer "lift", en interrompant: "Ah! on dit lift." Et d'un ton sec et hautain: "Cela n'a d'ailleurs aucune espèce d'importance."

[For he assumed that Bloch attached more importance than he to this mistake—an assumption which Bloch confirmed some days later, when he heard me pronounce the word "lift," by breaking in with: "Oh, one says 'lift,' does one?" And then, in a dry and lofty tone: "Not that it's of the slightest importance."]

(II, 99; II, 369)

Marcel knows perfectly well that this last phrase means the opposite of what it pretends; but isn't Bloch right despite himself? Saint-Loup understands that Bloch would be chagrined at being caught out in a social solecism even though it didn't really matter; Marcel, a few days later, teaches his comrade a lesson.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> I don't have space to go fully into the subject of the 'lift's' later appearances in the novel, both in *Sodome et Gomorrhe* and *Le Temps retrouvé*; these belong in any case more to the topic of 'Anglosexuality', to use Emily Eells's word. In the course of his prolonged, elaborate reconstructions of Albertine's past, and in the light of his knowledge of Saint-Loup's homosexuality, Marcel learns that the 'lift' was involved in bisexual intrigue at Balbec both with Saint-Loup and with other guests at the hotel. Marcel reflects that if this is true, then Saint-Loup had another reason for blushing when Bloch mentioned the 'laïft' (IV, 260–1; V, 786). But his 'knowledge' itself is questionable, and every affirmation made by or about people in these later portions of the novel is radically uncertain.

*Le sport*

It is high season in Balbec. No one is braving the storms raging on the edge of the known world, or peering moodily into the realms of eternal fog; they are sunning themselves on the boardwalk, where a band plays every morning outside the hotel. And Balbec is sports-mad. Marcel, like his author, takes a book onto the beach; at most he goes for an occasional bathe; everyone else is playing tennis, golf, or polo, riding horses or bicycles, sailing on yachts, going to the races. When she first gets to know him, Albertine condescends to Marcel: ‘Vous ne faites rien ici? On ne vous voit jamais au golf, aux bals du Casino; vous ne montez pas à cheval non plus. Comme vous devez vous raser! Vous ne trouvez pas qu’on se bêtifie à rester tout le temps sur la plage?’ [Don’t you do anything here? We never see you playing golf, or dancing at the Casino. You don’t ride either. You must be bored stiff. You don’t find it too deadly, idling about on the beach all day?] (II, 231; II, 527–8).<sup>25</sup> Marcel has already noticed that the *jeunes filles en fleurs*, whom he desires and envies, are keen on sport. His first sight of them is marked by (with apologies to the Scots) the most English of French sporting imports:

Une de ces inconnues poussait devant elle, de la main, sa bicyclette; deux autres tenaient des “clubs” de golf; et leur accoutrement tranchait sur celui des autres jeunes filles de Balbec, parmi lesquelles quelques-unes, il est vrai, se livraient aux sports, mais sans adopter pour cela une tenue spéciale.

[One of these unknown girls was pushing a bicycle in front of her; two others carried golf-clubs; and their attire generally was in striking contrast to that of the other girls at Balbec, some of whom, it is true, went in for sports, but without adopting a special outfit.]

(II, 146; II, 426)

The *Pléiade* editors have a note on the debate which raged in France at the turn of the century about what dress was proper for female cyclists, but they say nothing about what ‘tenue spéciale’ might have been envisaged for female golfers. Fortunately Proust himself supplies a clue, in the form of a snide remark by none other than the anglophile Odette. When Marcel praises the artistry of her dresses, she of all people responds with scorn of an English fad which, for once, she cannot embrace, since it

<sup>25</sup> It is in this conversation that Marcel observes the ‘affectation juvénile de flegme britannique’ in Albertine’s voice (II, 232; II, 528).

conflicts with an even higher priority: “Je ne joue pas au golf comme plusieurs de mes amies, disait-elle. Je n’aurais aucune excuse à être, comme elles, vêtue de sweaters.” [“I don’t play golf,” she would answer, “like so many of my friends. So I should have no excuse for going about in sweaters as they do”] (I, 610; II, 228).<sup>26</sup>

Marcel may not recall Odette’s backhanded concession that golf is an acceptable pastime in her milieu; at any rate he does not yet know where to place the girls of the ‘petite bande’ on the social scale. One of his hypotheses is that they are ‘les très jeunes maîtresses de coureurs cyclistes’ [the very juvenile mistresses of racing cyclists] (II, 151; II, 431).<sup>27</sup> When he eventually meets Albertine and hears her use a locution which indicates that she comes from a bourgeois background, he has to revise his first impression of her as ‘la bacchante à bicyclette, la muse orgiaque du golf’ [the bacchante with the bicycle, the orgiastic muse of the golf-course] (II, 228; II, 524). But even at their first appearance he judges that the members of the group have been brought together by their love of physical activity, and that their energy and confidence may belong to a wider social phenomenon, ‘[les] habitudes nouvelles de sport, répandues même dans certains milieux populaires’ [new sporting habits, now prevalent even among certain elements of the working class] (II, 149; II, 428)—a cult of sporting prowess with which Balbec is imbued and which has its origin in a particular aspect of *anglomanie*. I use the word ‘cult’ advisedly; when Marcel dreams of making an assignation with one of the *jeunes filles en fleurs*, he imagines it taking place ‘avant la messe ou après le golf’ [before church or after golf] (II, 242; II, 541).

The modern concept of ‘le sport’ in France came from England. ‘Par le mot de *sports*, dont l’équivalent n’existe pas en notre langue . . . on désigne la chasse, les courses, le combat de boxeurs’ [The word *sport*, whose equivalent does not exist in our language . . . denotes hunting, horse-racing, boxing-fights], stated the *Journal des haras* in 1828; ‘haras’ means ‘stud-farm’ and the predominant application of the term *sport* in

<sup>26</sup> Bonnaffé has ‘sweater’ from 1910, specifically as an outfit for sports; Le Robert dates this sense to 1902 and says that by 1910 the sense extended to what we would now call a cardigan. Albertine later expresses the same view from the opposite perspective: she ridicules the aristocratic ‘demoiselles d’Ambresac’ for their lack of sporting dress-sense: “Et puis elles s’habillent d’une manière ridicule. Elles vont jouer au golf en robes de soie!” [“And then they dress in the most absurd way. Fancy going to play golf in silk frocks!”] (II, 239; II, 537).

<sup>27</sup> He later adds, for good measure, ‘de champions de boxe’ (II, 200; II, 490).

France was initially to horse-racing. *Le Sport*, founded in 1854, was essentially a racing paper aimed at aristocratic patrons of *le turf*—some of whom would be members of *le Jockey-Club*.<sup>28</sup> The new vocabulary attracted hostile attention: young men spoke ‘un argot incompréhensible [an incomprehensible slang], *sport*, *turf*, *handicap*’, wrote Théophile Gautier in 1848; the poet Jean-Pons-Guillaume Viennet, in *Épître à Boileau sur les mots nouveaux*, argued that the Anglo-French alliance in the Crimean War didn’t mean that France had to surrender its linguistic autonomy: ‘Faut-il, pour cimenter un merveilleux accord, | Changer l’arène en *turf* et le plaisir en *sport*’ [Must we, to cement an admirable accord, change *l’arène* to *turf*, and *le plaisir* to *sport*?].<sup>29</sup> This last, more general definition of *sport* as *plaisir* may be a poeticism, but it suggests that the term was widening its application; a note to the French translation of Thackeray’s *Pendennis*, published in 1875, defines it as ‘Les courses de chevaux, la chasse, le pêche, le tir, en un mot tous les plaisirs du gentleman’ [Horse races, hunting, fishing, shooting, in a word all the amusements of a gentleman].<sup>30</sup> Gradually, the concept of sport as practised by *les gentlemen* in England, and the ideals associated with it, made their way into French culture, giving ‘English’ sports an aristocratic tinge; at the same time, counter-impulses were at work, both in defence of native forms of exercise and in opposition to sporting prowess as such, as an enemy of intellectual and artistic values. Albert Dauzat, writing in 1912, claimed not to approve of the split between intellectuals and *les sportifs*, but he could not resist a dig at the English; speaking of ‘la renaissance sportive’ in France, which he dates to the period 1890–5, he says that its theoreticians ‘réhabilitent le culte de l’énergie et nous donnent pour modèles nos voisins d’outre-Manche, peu férus d’humanités antiques, mais en revanche admirablement dressés à la vie pratique et à la conquête du monde’ [rehabilitate the cult of physical energy and give us as models our neighbours across the Channel, not very keen on classical learning, but on the other hand admirably set up for the practical business of life and the conquest of the world] (p. 8). Unfair to Victorian classical

<sup>28</sup> Zeldin, II, 560. As a *Guide du sportsman* put it in 1839, ‘Le genre de *sport* qui donne, en quelque sorte, la vie à tous le autres . . . c’est le *turf*.’ This latter term arrived at the same time as *sport* itself, in 1828, also in the *Journal des Haras*; Balzac has it in *Béatrix*, 1845 (Bonnaffé).

<sup>29</sup> Both citations from Bonnaffé; for more on Viennet’s poem, see Ch. 1, pp. 12–13.

<sup>30</sup> Cited in Mackenzie, 132.

scholarship, certainly, but a routine jibe; and Dauzat goes on to differentiate French from English sports according to national temperament: ‘tandis que le snobisme soutenait seul chez nous les sports anglais de jeu et de lutte, l’esprit d’initiative de notre race choisissait ou créait ses sports, propres à développer nos qualités individualistes . . . alpinisme, cyclisme, automobilisme, aviation’ [while snobbery alone sustained in our country the English sports of gambling and fighting, the spirit of initiative of our race chose or invented its own sports, fit to develop our individualist qualities . . . mountaineering, cycling, motoring, aviation] (pp. 10–11).

Proust is not above making literary fun of Philistine young gentlemen who haven’t a brain in their virile heads. In *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, at the princesse de Guermantes’s soirée, Marcel witnesses M. de Charlus, smitten by Mme de Surgis’s two handsome sons, doing his best to discern in them a smidgin of intellectual culture. One of them, Victurnien, does indeed know his name to be that of a character in Balzac, though that is all of Balzac he knows; M. de Charlus lauds him for his literary gifts, and turns to his brother Arnulphe:

“Et vous lisez vous aussi? Qu’est-ce que vous faites?” demanda-t-il au comte Arnulphe qui ne connaissait même pas le nom de Balzac. Mais sa myopie, comme il voyait tout très petit, lui donnait l’air de voir de très loin, de sorte que, rare poésie en un sculptural dieu grec, dans ses prunelles s’inscrivaient comme de distantes et mystérieuses étoiles.

“Si nous allions faire quelques pas dans le jardin, Monsieur”, dis-je à Swann, tandis que le comte Arnulphe, avec une voix zézayante qui semblait indiquer que son développement au moins mental n’était pas complet, répondait à M. de Charlus avec une précision complaisante et naïve: “Oh! moi, c’est plutôt le golf, le tennis, le ballon, la course à pied, surtout le polo.” Telle Minerve, s’étant subdivisée, avait cessé, dans certaine cité, d’être la déesse de la Sagesse et avait incarné une part d’elle-même en une divinité purement sportive, hippique, “Athéné Hippiia”. Et il allait aussi à Saint-Moritz faire du ski, car Pallas Tritogeneia fréquente les hauts sommets et rattrape les cavaliers.

[“And are you a reader too? What do you do?” he asked Comte Arnulphe, who had never even heard the name of Balzac. But his short-sightedness, since it caused him to see everything very small, gave him the appearance of seeing great distances, so that—rare poetry in a statuesque Greek god—remote, mysterious stars seemed to be engraved upon his pupils.

“Suppose we took a turn in the garden,” I said to Swann, while Comte Arnulphe, in a lisping voice which seemed to indicate that mentally at least his development was incomplete, replied to M. de Charlus with an artlessly obliging

precision: "Oh, you know, mainly golf, tennis, football, running, and especially polo." Thus had Minerva, having subdivided herself, ceased in certain cities to be the goddess of wisdom, and had become partly incarnated in a purely sporting, horse-loving deity, Athene Hippia. And he went to St Moritz also to ski, for Pallas Tritogeneia frequents the high peaks and outruns swift horsemen.]

(III, 102; IV, 120)

The comic contrast between Arnulphe's physical beauty and his brainless addiction to English sports (not a single individualistic French activity among them) is only part of the effect of this passage. It tells us about Marcel's, and Proust's, impulse to aestheticize stupidity, and to make it the subject of intellectual contemplation: Arnulphe's myopic gaze (a liability on the polo field, you would think) is filled with a poetry he knows nothing about; a characteristic Proustian simile links his 'nobility' (of social station) with classical divinity, a divinity divorced from its intellectual pretensions but, despite the satire, still divine. Just as Albertine is truly, in at least one of her 'incarnations', 'la muse orgiaque du golf', so Arnulphe here incarnates a 'divinité purement sportive', at which we are free to laugh but which we should recognize as a part of that reality outside himself to which Marcel is so strongly drawn. And we should acknowledge that the goddess who appears divided here may reunite her elements in a different figure. When Marcel first sees Robert de Saint-Loup, he describes him in terms of his physical beauty and energy, and also in terms of an aesthetic 'framing' which resembles, except for its tone, the treatment of Arnulphe de Surgis:

Il venait de la plage, et la mer qui remplissait jusqu'à mi-hauteur le vitrage du hall lui faisait un fond sur lequel il se détachait en pied, comme dans certains portraits où des peintres prétendent, sans tricher en rien sur l'observation la plus exacte de la vie actuelle, mais en choisissant pour leur modèle un cadre approprié, pelouse de polo, de golf, champ de courses, pont de yacht, donner un équivalent moderne de ces toiles où les primitifs faisaient apparaître la figure humaine au premier plan d'un paysage.

[He was coming from the beach, and the sea which filled the lower half of the glass front of the hall made a background against which he stood out full-length, as in certain portraits whose painters attempt, without in any way falsifying the most accurate observation of contemporary life, but by choosing for their sitter an appropriate setting—a polo ground, golf links, a race-course, the bridge of a yacht—to furnish a modern equivalent of those canvases on which the old masters used to present the human figure in the foreground of a landscape.]

(II, 89; II, 357)

Although the background to Saint-Loup here is the sea,<sup>31</sup> the analogy which Marcel draws with modern painters who place their figures against the background of sporting landscapes suggests that such landscapes, too, would be a 'cadre approprié' for Saint-Loup. Yet this golden young nobleman is (at least in this phase of his life) the very reverse of Arnulphe de Surgis; in him, as Marcel soon discovers, the two aspects of Minerva are not separated but united: 'Ce jeune homme qui avait l'air d'un aristocrate et d'un sportsman dédaigneux n'avait d'estime et de curiosité que pour les choses de l'esprit' [This young man who had the air of a disdainful aristocrat and sportsman had in fact no respect or curiosity except for the things of the mind] (II, 92; II, 360).<sup>32</sup>

The ease with which both Arnulphe and Marcel mingle English and French terms—'le golf, le tennis, le ballon, la course à pied, surtout le polo' from Arnulphe; 'pelouse de polo, de golf, champ de courses, pont de yacht' from Marcel—suggests a linguistic fluidity which is characteristic of the vocabulary of sport in the period. But the history of French sport in the nineteenth century is also one of the supplanting of native species by foreign imports, often accompanied by linguistic 'forgetting'. Rugby was introduced in 1872 by English residents in Normandy, who formed the Havre Athletic Club; it displaced *la soule*, or *mellé*, the 'game' between neighbouring parishes which, as one writer put it, 'allows one to kill an enemy without losing one's right to Easter communion'.<sup>33</sup> The word used by the server to his opponent in the *jeu de paume*, which goes back to the fourteenth century, 'tenez' ('take this', 'here it comes') is accepted by the *OED*, with some caution, as the origin of the English word 'tennis'; this suggestion was first made by nineteenth-century etymologists and is found in Bonnaffé; the usual exasperation was expressed that the French were reimporting their own word in an English guise, especially since the English *tennis* conforms to the stress pattern of *tenez*, with the accent on the first syllable, whereas the French pronunciation of *tennis* lengthens the second syllable and places the stress there: *tennice* (as in Odette's home

<sup>31</sup> For this image of the sea as a backdrop, see the *Figaro* article on the Grand Hotel cited above, n. 11.

<sup>32</sup> Le Robert dates 'sportsman' to 1823, with the same link to racing as 'sport' (see above); the more general sense of 'amateur de sports' dates from 1872, 'évoquant la période 1870–1930'; it was eventually replaced by *sportif* 'qui n'a pas la même connotation sociale distinguée, liée à l'anglomanie'.

<sup>33</sup> Zeldin, II, 685–6. Subsequent information also comes from this section of Zeldin's work.



town).<sup>34</sup> ‘Des vocabulaires entiers sont gâtés par l’anglais’ [Entire vocabularies are spoiled by English], Remy de Gourmont claimed:

Tous les jeux, tous les *sports* sont devenus d’une inélégance verbale qui doit les faire entièrement mépriser de quiconque aime la langue française. *Coaching*, *yachting*, quel parler! Des journalistes français ont fondé il y a quelques années un cercle qu’ils baptisèrent *Artistic-cycle-club*: ont-ils honte de leur langue ou redoutent-ils de ne pas la connaître assez pour lui demander de nommer un fait nouveau? (pp. 53–54)

[All games, all *sports* have become linguistically inelegant to the point where they must be held in complete contempt by anyone who loves the French language. *Coaching*, *yachting*, what parlance! A few years ago some French journalists founded a club which they named *Artistic-cycle-club*: are they ashamed of their own language or are they afraid of not knowing it well enough to ask it to supply a name for something new?]

The extremity of Gourmont’s own language, here as elsewhere in his book, betrays him into pomposity (‘quiconque aime la langue française’, as though there were only one way of loving it) and reveals a blind spot; Proust, by contrast, recognized what a fertile literary resource the *parler* of sport offered him. The social world which Marcel enters at Balbec is in any case defined by an ‘inélégance verbale’ which takes many forms, from the hotel manager’s macaronic malapropisms to the self-satisfied conversations of the ‘regulars’, not to mention the reappearance of Marcel’s school-friend Bloch, with his defective pronunciation of English names and words. The distinctiveness of the vocabulary of sport signifies to Marcel the inaccessibility (to him) of a particular mentality, which by that very token becomes an object of intense desire; like all the other ‘worlds’ from which Marcel (as subject) is excluded, but over which Proust (as writer) presides, it is guarded by linguistic demons which must be propitiated, tamed, and subsumed into the novel’s own vast, encompassing *parler*.

Proust himself never played an ‘English’ sport, though many of his friends did. Jeanne Pouquet, who became the wife of Gaston Arman de

<sup>34</sup> Bonnaffé dates *tennis* (as an abbreviation of *lawn-tennis*) to 1836 when it was described as a little-known ball-game; even thirty years later, the supplement to the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie* was still fairly vague: ‘sorte de jeu de balle, dans lequel on se sert de raquettes’ [a sort of ball-game, in which one makes use of rackets]. Paul Bourget reminds us, again, of the social aspect: ‘Ils [les gens de cercle] savent s’habiller, jouer au tennis, parler sport’ [They (society people) know how to dress, play tennis, talk about sport] (*Mensonges*, 1888); his Proustian *cocotte* Gladys Harvey (see Ch. 1, p. 23) is a renowned *joueuse de tennis*.

Caillavet and was one of the models of Gilberte, told her daughter: ‘If one was to substitute “The tennis club on the Boulevard Bineau” for the “Champs-Élysées” in the account of Marcel’s love for Gilberte, I can trace almost word for word the evocations of his love for me . . .’<sup>35</sup> Proust used to frequent this club, but not to play tennis; he would bring sandwiches and cakes, and loiter with his particular brand of charged flirtatiousness; there is a fine photograph of him at the club, kneeling in troubadour pose at the feet of Jeanne Pouquet (who stands on a chair to give her divinity greater mock-dignity) and strumming on a racket as though it were a lute. The duc de Guiche took him to a polo match at Cabourg in 1907, and the following year secured his election to a club called the Polo de Bagatelle; in the last year of his life an English newspaper asked him for a photograph ‘à cheval en train de jouer au polo’ [on horseback and playing polo]. None was to hand.<sup>36</sup> He also accompanied friends around the golf course at Cabourg, but without understanding the rules, as we shall see; and one of the oddest reflections in the novel is that ‘Le golf donne l’habitude des plaisirs solitaires’ [Golf gives one a taste for solitary pleasures] (II, 282; II, 589).<sup>37</sup> In *A la recherche* the young Marcel is not physically inactive, but the games he plays are old-fashioned children’s games, the kind whose French names Remy de Gourmont would have savoured: *le jeu de barres* (‘Prisoner’s Base’) with Gilberte and her friends in the Champs-Élysées, *La Tour prends garde* (‘King of the Castle’) and *le furet* (‘Hunt-the-Slipper’) with the *jeunes filles en fleur* on their outings at Balbec. But he never plays tennis or golf with Albertine; the ‘muse orgiaque du golf’ remains, as a Muse should, untouched by her worshipper.

The golf course featured prominently in publicity for Cabourg and the Grand Hotel. An item in the journal *Comœdia* in 1913 lays it on thick:

On nous écrit de Cabourg: Le Golf de Cabourg qui comptait parmi les plus beaux de la Côte peut prétendre maintenant être un des plus beaux Golfs de France. M. H.

<sup>35</sup> Tadié, 101.

<sup>36</sup> Letter to Bernard Fay, 12 Aug. 1922, *Corr.* XXI, 412–13. See also Tadié, 449 and note.

<sup>37</sup> For a sighting of Proust on the golf course, wrapped in his violet velvet cloak, see Painter, II, 172–3. *Diabolo* is an example of Gourmont’s Revenge, or the reimportation of a word from French into English: despite its Italian name, the modern version of the game was invented by a Frenchman and replaced the old English ‘devil upon two sticks’; the first *OED* citations come by a pleasing coincidence from 1907, the year of Proust’s return to Cabourg. It is perhaps easier to see the relation of the diabolo than of golf to the other occupations which Marcel mentions as requiring ‘une inviolable solitude: la lecture, la rêverie, les larmes et la volupté’ [an inviolable solitude: reading or day-dreaming, tears or sensual pleasure] (I, 12; I, 12).



11. Proust serenades Jeanne Pouquet at the tennis club on boulevard Bineau.

Ruhl qui préside aux destinées de Cabourg n'a reculé devant aucun sacrifice pour le réorganiser totalement. A grands frais, il fit venir cet hiver une équipe d'ouvriers anglais qui a travaillé d'arrache-pied sous la haute direction de M. Colt, l'architecte paysagiste anglais bien connu. Le Grand Hôtel, le Casino et le Golf sont autant d'attraits uniques qui font comprendre la vogue croissante de Cabourg.

[News reaches us from Cabourg: the golf course of Cabourg which ranked among the finest on the Côte [Fleurie] can now claim to be one of the finest golf courses

in France. M. H. Ruhl who presides over the destinies of Cabourg has spared no expense to reorganize it completely. At great expense, he brought over during the winter a team of English workmen which worked flat-out under the high command of M. Colt, the well-known English landscape architect. The Grand Hotel, the Casino, and the Golf Club form an ensemble of unique attractions which help to explain the growing vogue of Cabourg.]<sup>38</sup>

Golf had arrived relatively recently in France, in the 1870s; the fact that the Cabourg course had been redesigned by an Englishman gave it the double prestige of authenticity and fashion. Proust knew that this fashionableness was localized both in social and topographical terms. It might be *chic* at the seaside, where its English provenance was a strong part of its appeal;<sup>39</sup> but in Paris, as we have seen from Odette's disparaging comment on *sweaters*, it would be trumped by a stronger suit. Nevertheless Marcel does at least clarify the issue of respectability when he sees one of the girls being marched home by her governess. Not only the sport, but the markers of social status are 'done' in English here:

au coin d'une des petites rues qui débouchent, perpendiculairement, sur la plage, nous croisâmes une jeune fille qui, tête basse comme un animal qu'on fait rentrer malgré lui dans l'étable, et tenant des clubs de golf, marchait devant une personne autoritaire, vraisemblablement son "anglaise", ou celle d'une de ses amies, laquelle ressemblait au portrait de *Jeffries* par Hogarth, le teint rouge comme si sa boisson favorite avait été plutôt le gin que le thé . . .

[at the corner of one of the little streets which ran down at right angles to the beach, we passed a girl who, hanging her head like an animal that is being driven reluctant to its stall, and carrying golf-clubs, was walking in front of an authoritarian-looking person, in all probability her or one of her friends' "Miss," who resembled the portrait of Jeffreys by Hogarth, with a face as red as if her favourite beverage were gin rather than tea . . .]

(II, 185; II, 472)<sup>40</sup>

The girls are old enough to be sexually enticing, young enough still to be provided with the English governess (here, 'anglaise'; elsewhere referred

<sup>38</sup> *Comœdia*, 8 June 1913, from a column called 'Échos'; cited in *Corr.* XII, 244 n. 5. Henri Ruhl had succeeded Jules Cesari as manager of the Grand Hotel.

<sup>39</sup> In this, as in other aspects of the Grand Hotel's operations, the influence of the Riviera is strong: see Howarth, 62–4.

<sup>40</sup> The reference is to Hogarth's portrait of the lawyer John Jeffreys and his family; this is another small example of the transpositions of gender which run through *A la recherche*, many of which have, as here, an English flavour. *Vintage* has 'suggested a portrait of Jeffreys'.

to as ‘Miss’<sup>41</sup> who was *à la mode* (or even *de rigueur*). Marcel thinks that this particular young girl, who is wearing ‘un polo noir’, may be Mlle Simonet (i.e. Albertine); at any rate he decides to fix his desire, which floats among the whole of the ‘petite bande’, on ‘celle aux clubs de golf . . . les yeux brillants sous son “polo”’ [the one with the golf-clubs . . . her eyes sparkling beneath her polo-cap] (II, 186; II, 472–3).<sup>42</sup>

The use of *polo* here to mean a kind of hat is French, not English; the *OED* cites the *Daily Chronicle* in 1905: ‘The small round hat that the French milliners call the “polo” and we in this country term the pork-pie’—for the French are more elegant even in their vulgarity.<sup>43</sup> *Golf* is similarly adapted in French to the game, the course, and the Golf Club or club-house: ‘“Celui-ci joue très bien au golf”’ [“This one plays golf quite well”] (II, 234; II, 531); ‘“Elle est sur sa chaise longue, mais par ubiquité ne cesse pas de fréquenter simultanément de vagues golfs et de quelconques tennis”’ [“She is outstretched on her couch, but in her ubiquity has not ceased to frequent simultaneously vague golf-courses and dubious tennis-courts”] (II, 235; II, 533); ‘un goûter donné au golf’, [a tea-party at the golf-club] (II, 248; II, 547).<sup>44</sup> This linguistic economy allows

<sup>41</sup> Albertine says of Gisèle: ‘elle repart tantôt pour Paris . . . elle et Miss, parce qu’elle a à repasser ses examens’ [She’s going back to Paris later today . . . she and ‘Miss,’ because she’s got to take her exams again]; Marcel immediately conceives the fantasy of meeting Gisèle on the train and making a pass at her ‘tandis que Miss sommeillerait’ [while ‘Miss’ dozed] (II, 243; II, 542–3; *Vintage* has ‘while the governess dozed’).

<sup>42</sup> Proust’s use of quotation marks around English words is inconsistent. The clubs carried by the young girls when Marcel first sees them are “clubs” de golf’, later simply ‘clubs de golf’; again at first sight, one of them wears ‘un “polo” noir’, which in the later passage from which I have just quoted is successively ‘un polo noir’ and ‘son “polo”’. This inconsistency forms part of a larger uncertainty which Proust, and his printers, would have shared as to what exactly constituted a naturalized foreign word.

<sup>43</sup> Bonnaffé: ‘Petite coiffure ronde portée par les joueurs de polo ou d’autres sports’, with a citation from 1897, ‘Coiffés de “polos” à la dernière mode’.

<sup>44</sup> Le Robert dates the first appearance of *golf* meaning the game to 1872, and as ‘golf-course’ to 1901, but does not give the third sense of ‘club-house’. Much later in the novel, in *La Prisonnière*, Marcel will register that *golf*, too, has become an item of clothing; when he is attracted to a young dairymaid and summons her to his apartment on the pretext of sending her on an errand, he glimpses ‘la manche rouge de sa jaquette’ [the red sleeve of her jersey] and asks her what she calls it: ‘Elle me répondit: “C’est mon golf.” Car par une déchéance habituelle à toutes les modes, les vêtements et les mots qui, il y a quelques années, semblaient appartenir au monde relativement élégant des amies d’Albertine, étaient maintenant le lot des ouvrières’ [She replied: “It’s my *golf*. For, by a slight downward tendency common to all fashions, the garments and words which a few years earlier seemed to belong to the relatively smart world of Albertine’s friends, were now the currency of working-girls] (III, 650; IV, 156–7; *Vintage* has ‘It’s my sweater’). This sense of *golf* is dated by Le Robert to 1909.

Marcel to take part in the sport without actually playing it: ‘maintenant je m’intéressais extrêmement au golf et au tennis’ [I now showed a keen interest in golf and tennis], he says in the first phase of his infatuation with the *jeunes filles en fleurs* (II, 189; II, 477), but he doesn’t mean he takes up these sports, only that their location (and language) become part of his imaginative life. In turn, this prepares the ground for Elstir’s revelation that the vulgar elements of modernity are as capable of artistic transfiguration as the most perfect works of art—that the painting of a sporting occasion may not be less valuable in aesthetic terms than that of a cathedral. Already Bloch’s deliciously overdone phrase, ‘de vagues golfs et de quelconques tennis’, is a step in this direction. Marcel is severe on him: ‘Comme beaucoup d’intellectuels il ne pouvait pas dire simplement les choses simples. Il trouvait pour chacune d’elles un qualificatif précieux, puis généralisait’. [Like many intellectuals, he was incapable of saying a simple thing in a simple way. He would find some precious qualifier for every statement, and would then generalise] (II, 235; I, 941).<sup>45</sup> But isn’t this what the greater artist does, in his greater way? For Albertine to become, for Marcel, ‘la muse orgiaque du golf’ required a transformation just as fanciful, but more powerful; the artist of *A la recherche* escapes from the preciousness in which Bloch is mired only because he is stronger and fleetlier of foot.

Elstir’s lesson and example take pride of place in the development of Marcel’s artistic sensibility at Balbec, but another character, as sports-mad as the dim-witted Arnulphe, proves capable of a surprising development of his own. This is Octave, popularly known as ‘Dans les choux’ (‘I’m a wash-out’), a friend of Albertine and the other *jeunes filles*, and a nephew of M. Verdurin. Octave rarely appears without a jingling of English words:

Un jeune homme aux traits réguliers, qui tenait à la main des raquettes, s’approcha de nous. C’était le joueur de baccara dont les folies indignaient tant la femme du premier président. D’un air froid, impassible, en lequel il se figurait évidemment que consistait la distinction suprême, il dit bonjour à Albertine. “Vous venez du golf, Octave? lui demanda-t-elle. Ça a-t-il bien marché? Étiez-vous en forme? — Oh! ça me dégoûte, je suis dans les choux, répondit-il. — Est-ce qu’Andrée y était? — Oui, elle a fait soixante-dix-sept. — Oh! mais c’est un record. — J’avais fait quatre-vingt-deux hier.”

<sup>45</sup> *Vintage* has ‘and would sweep from the particular to the general’.

[A young man with regular features, carrying a bag of golf-clubs, sauntered up to us. It was the baccarat-player whose fast ways so enraged the senior judge's wife. In a frigid, impassive tone, which he evidently regarded as an indication of the highest distinction, he bade Albertine good day. "Been playing golf, Octave?" she asked. "How did it go? Were you in form?" "Oh, it's too sickening; I'm a wash-out," he replied. "Was Andrée playing?" "Yes, she went round in seventy-seven." "Why, that's a record!" "I went round in eighty-two yesterday."]

(II, 233; II, 529)<sup>46</sup>

Bloch's *vagues golfs* indeed! Perhaps Proust deduced that the aim of golf was to score as highly as possible from the standard of play he witnessed. At any rate Octave continues to be associated with this sport and with a whole way of thinking and behaving whose consummate frivolity fascinates Marcel:

Je fus frappé à quel point chez ce jeune homme . . . la connaissance de tout ce qui était vêtements, manière de les porter, cigares, boissons anglaises, chevaux . . . s' était développée isolément sans être accompagnée de la moindre culture intellectuelle. Il n' avait aucune hésitation sur l' opportunité du smoking ou du pyjama, mais ne se doutait pas du cas où on peut ou non employer tel mot, même des règles les plus simples du français.

[I was struck by the extreme degree to which, in this young man . . . the knowledge of everything that pertained to clothes and how to wear them, cigars, English drinks, horses . . . had been developed in complete isolation, unaccompanied by the least trace of any intellectual culture. He had no hesitation as to the right time and place for dinner-jacket or pyjamas, but had no notion of the circumstances in which one might or might not employ this or that word, or even of the simplest rules of grammar.]

(II, 233; II, 530)<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> The opening sentences refer to Octave's first appearance in the novel, where, not yet named, he figures as a consumptive *fin-de-siècle* decadent who goes each day to the Casino 'dans un veston nouveau, une orchidée à la boutonnière' [in a new jacket, with an orchid in his buttonhole], losing enormous sums at baccarat, 'pâle, impassible, un sourire d'indifférence aux lèvres' [pale, impassive, a smile of indifference on his lips] (II, 38; II, 295; *Vintage* has 'in a new suit of clothes' and 'a smile of complete indifference'). Both the orchid and the affectation of indifference are 'English' signs; the latter in particular derives from the *dandy* of the earlier 19th cent. The phrase 'en forme', as used here, was a borrowing from English, first to describe the good condition of a horse (1858), then of a sportsman (1884). Le Robert dates *record* as used here to 1893.

<sup>47</sup> 'Pyjama(s)', from an Urdu and Persian word, entered English around 1800 with wildly varying spellings (peijammahs, pie-jamahs, pyjamahs, etc.); 'pajamas', the American form, influenced the first appearances of the word in French, dated by Le Robert

It is entirely germane to Proust's design that Octave's faulty French should accompany his expertise in words borrowed from another language; not surprisingly he wins first prize at the Casino in all the dance competitions, 'de boston, de tango, etc.';<sup>48</sup> on the other hand he dislikes being greeted by his cousin M. Verdurin in authentically vulgar French:

il parla avec dédain des fameux mercredis, et ajouta que M. Verdurin ignorait l'usage du smoking ce qui rendait assez gênant de le rencontrer dans certains "music-halls" où on aurait autant aimé ne pas s'entendre crier: "Bonjour, galopin" par un monsieur en veston et en cravate noire de notaire de village. (II, 238)

[he spoke disdainfully of the famous Wednesdays, adding that M. Verdurin had no idea of when to wear a dinner-jacket, which made it a bit embarrassing to come across him in certain music-halls, where one would just as soon not be greeted with a 'Hello, young whipper-snapper!' by a gentleman in a lounge suit and a black tie like a village notary's.]<sup>49</sup>

Given this concentration of English affectations, which Marcel initially takes as a firm indication of Octave's intellectual nullity, his subsequent history in the novel takes a surprising turn. When we next hear of him directly, in *La Prisonnière*, Marcel is still referring to him as 'ce jeune homme si savant en choses de courses, de jeux, de golf, si inculte dans tout le reste' [the young man so learned in matters of racing, gambling and golf, so uneducated in everything else] (III, 568; V, 60). Later on he becomes the lover of the actress Rachel, formerly Saint-Loup's mistress,

to 1882; *le pyjama* became the dominant form in the 1890s. The original sense is that of loose drawers or trousers, usually of silk or cotton, then (with the addition of a jacket) applied to night wear; but Octave may mean a daytime or evening garment worn by women (which would fit with *le smoking*), or even a form of beachwear. A striking example of linguistic cross-over is found in one of the *OED* citations for 'pyjamas', from E. S. Bridges' *Round the World in Six Months* (1879): 'I relinquished my English *chemise de nuit* and took to pyjamas'; Bridges is in Japan at the time.

<sup>48</sup> The *boston* was a slow waltz; Bloch and Wartburg date it to 1882. Gilberte's fierce determination to go to a dance class rather than stay home with Marcel is the occasion of their final quarrel, and is sarcastically attributed to 'une inclination sentimentale pour le boston' [a sentimental attachment to the boston] (I, 573; II, 182).

<sup>49</sup> My trans., borrowing the excellent 'whipper-snapper' from James Grieve (*In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, Penguin 2002, 461); *Vintage* (II, 535–6) incorrectly renders 'ignorait l'usage du smoking' as 'had never even heard of dress-clothes'. In the 12th cent. a 'galopin' was a messenger on horseback; in the 14th cent., an errand-boy; in the 17th cent., a street urchin; in the 19th cent., a familiar endearment ('young rascal'). 'Galopin' has a secondary degree of authentic 'Frenchness' in *A la recherche*: it is the name of the *pâtissier* in Combray (I, 56; I, 66, and *Pléiade* note, I, 1128).



then leaves her for Albertine's closest friend (and, probably, lover), Andrée; later still Marcel will learn (as far as he learns anything for certain) that Octave had hoped at one time to marry Albertine, and that her flight from Marcel's house had been made with him in mind. All these complications bring Octave into the maze of the novel's sexual intimacies, and, as though to match this development, we are told of his creative flowering: 'Ce jeune homme fit représenter de petits sketches, dans des décors et avec des costumes de lui, et qui ont amené dans l'art contemporain une révolution au moins égale à celle accomplie par les Ballets russes' [This young man produced certain sketches for the theatre, with settings and costumes designed by himself, which effected in contemporary art a revolution at least equal to that brought about by the Russian ballet] (IV, 184; V, 693). By a witty reversal, Octave's English affectations are superseded by another English word, *sketches*;<sup>50</sup> it seems so unlikely to many of those who knew him at Balbec, where he passed all his time 'au baccara, aux courses, au golf ou au polo', that they think these *sketches* must have been ghost-written, either by Andrée or a professional hack; 'Mais tout cela était faux; et ce jeune homme était bien l'auteur de ces œuvres admirables' [But all this was untrue, and this young man was indeed the author of those admirable works] (IV, 185; V, 694). Marcel himself recognizes that Octave's authentic talent may not be psychologically incompatible with his former (apparent) shallowness, and that genius may already have been present in the young man whose interests at Balbec had seemed confined to such matters as 'la correction des attelages et . . . la préparation des cocktails' [turning out a smart carriage and pair and mixing cocktails]. He ought perhaps to have realized this earlier; for he had before him the example of a greater artist than Octave, that of Elstir.

### *The painter of modern life*

I am not concerned here with Elstir's revelation to Marcel of a new way of seeing, the young man's discovery, in Elstir's Balbec studio, of the painterly 'metaphors' by which the stale world of habitual perception is abolished and recreated afresh. Elstir is not simply a model and precursor for the aesthetic of *A la recherche*; indeed, if he were simply that he could

<sup>50</sup> Le Robert dates *sketch* in the theatrical sense to 1879; it elbowed out the old French 'saynète'. Bloch and Wartburg's date is considerably later, 1903.

not even be that. He figures so largely in Marcel's life, and in the development of his art, because he offers him more than one revelation, or, to put it another way, because the revelation he offers turns out to be multifaceted, to be capable itself of metaphorical transformation. Elstir teaches Marcel not only how to look, but what to look at; he shows him a modern world stripped of social prejudice and *a priori* aesthetic judgements; he enlarges Marcel's imaginative scope to include the shapes of the material world in every one of their aspects, indifferent to aesthetic categorization as 'beautiful' or 'ugly'. Nor is it solely a question of shape or surface, but of spirit, of that which, in any 'picture' of life, whether in paint or words, gives us its inner meaning.

We have already seen how, on his first visit to Elstir's studio, Marcel discovered the painter's connection not only to the *jeunes filles en fleurs*, but to Odette, whom he evidently knew at the time of her affair with Swann.<sup>51</sup> The connection with Odette was made both indirectly, through the orchids which Elstir was painting, and directly, through the water-colour of 'Miss Sacripant'; Marcel makes the further leap, as he reflects on the provenance of this portrait, that Elstir must be the same as the crassly vulgar painter, 'M. Biche', who frequented the Verdurins' salon, he of 'le petit *speech*' so admired by Forcheville. Elstir's corruption extends further than his language, though; Marcel 'forgets' (though Proust does not) the painter's pleasure at the thought that Swann's liaison with Odette will happen under his eye: "Rien ne m'amuse comme de faire des mariages, confia-t-il, dans l'oreille, au docteur Cottard, j'en ai déjà réussi beaucoup, même entre femmes!" ["Nothing amuses me more than match-making," he confided to Cottard. "I've brought off quite a few, even between women!"] (I, 199; I, 242). The verb 'réussi' creates a link to the difficult 'mariages' of plants to which horticulturalists devoted their labours;<sup>52</sup> it links Elstir to Odette's sexual ambiguity in the past, and to Albertine's lesbianism in the present and the future.

Elstir's name is contained within that of Whistler—for Proust, as for many of his contemporaries, an English, not American painter, whom Proust refers to as 'le maître de Chelsea' (II, 163; II, 445)—and there is a speculative, but suggestive Englishness about the remaining letters,

<sup>51</sup> See Ch. 2, pp. 90–2.

<sup>52</sup> In the 'Note sur la fécondation des Orchidées' from the journal *L'Orchidophile* which I cited in the previous chapter (p. 89) we find phrases such as 'cet élément de réussite pour la fécondation' and 'l'opérateur tient à assurer la réussite de son expérience'.

'w h'.<sup>53</sup> I am thinking of 'Mr. W.H.', the 'onlie begetter' of Shakespeare's sonnets, and of Oscar Wilde's 'Portrait of Mr. W.H.' (1889); though Pascale McGarry, in her article on "Mr W.H." et "Miss Sacripant", is rightly cautious as to whether Proust knew the story directly, the connections between him and Wilde were extensive enough for Proust to have been aware of it from friends such as Douglas Ainslie, or the painter Jacques-Émile Blanche who knew both Wilde and Whistler, and who was himself one of the models for Elstir. Proust would have known of the Sonnets, independently of Wilde, if not from his own reading of Shakespeare then from a poem by Montesquiou with an English title, 'Sugared', in *Les Chauve-Souris* (1893); Montesquiou does not use the initials 'W.H.' but takes for granted that the dedicatee of the '*sonnets sucrés* d'origine bizarre' [*sugared sonnets* with their bizarre origin] was the Earl of Southampton, Henry Wriothesly, and names him in its first and last lines. There was also a 'Mr. W.H.' closer to Proust's heart, Willie Heath, whose fleeting friendship and early death Proust commemorated in the dedication to *Les Plaisirs et les jours*, in which Willie is himself compared to a melancholic English nobleman in a portrait by Van Dyck.<sup>54</sup>

Elstir at Balbec is marked by other English associations than his name. Marcel has read a study of him in 'une revue d'art anglaise qui traînait sur la table du salon du Grand-Hôtel' [an English art-journal which lay on the reading-room table of the Grand Hôtel] (II, 191; II, 479), and the *patron* of the restaurant at Rivebelle where Marcel and Saint-Loup spot Elstir has become gradually aware of his growing fame through 'les questions de plus d'une Anglaise de passage, avide de renseignements sur la vie que menait Elstir' [the questions asked by more than one English lady-visitor, athirst for information as to the life led by Elstir] (II, 183; II, 469). To these relatively dignified details we can add one from the garden of

<sup>53</sup> I am not quite sure whether my point is strengthened or weakened by the fact that Proust habitually misspelled 'Wisthler'.

<sup>54</sup> 'C'est au Bois que je vous retrouvais souvent le matin, m'ayant aperçu et m'attendant sous les arbres, debout, mais reposé, semblable à un de ces seigneurs qu'a peints Van Dyck, et dont vous aviez l'élégance pensive' [It is in the Bois that I would often find you in the morning, having caught sight of me and waiting for me beneath the trees, upright, but restful, like those noblemen whom Van Dyck has painted, and whose pensive elegance was yours] (JS 5–6). These portraits are again evoked in the poem on Van Dyck in 'Portraits de peintres' (pp. 81–2), specifically the portrait of James Stuart, the future Duke of Richmond, known as 'L'Homme au pourpoint', which Proust saw in the Louvre in 1891; a phrase from the dedication, 'debout, mais reposé', was borrowed from the poem. For Bourget's allusion to Van Dyck, see Ch. 1, n. 23.

Elstir's spanking new villa, which Marcel notices as he arrives: 'une petite tonnelle sous laquelle des rocking-chairs étaient allongés devant une table de fer' [a little arbour beneath which rocking-chairs were drawn up round an iron table] (II, 190; II, 478).<sup>55</sup>

The paintings which Marcel admires most on this first visit, those that initiate him into Elstir's aesthetic philosophy as opposed to his social and sexual past, are marine landscapes, and though they are intensely English in terms of technique, influenced as much by Turner as by Monet, they are less significant, for my purpose, than the ones which Marcel describes later in the novel, and about whose subjects Elstir himself discourses.<sup>56</sup> I would go further and point to a significant absence of English words from Marcel's description of these marine paintings. Remy de Gourmont had lamented the proliferation of English nautical terms in literature: 'La langue de la marine s'est fort gâtée en ces derniers temps, j'entends la langue écrite par certains romanciers' [Nautical language has become very spoiled in recent times, I mean the written language employed by certain novelists] (p. 56); but he would have nothing to reproach Proust with here. We have as words for ships *bateaux, vaisseaux, navires, barques*, but no *yachts*, though Elstir does not at all despise *le yachting*, as we shall see; words such as *mâts, bassin de calfatage, coques, grève, jetée, matelots, voiles* [masts, dry dock, hulls, shore, jetty, sailors, sails] deploy an impeccable French lexicon; I am tempted to take one last speculative step and point to the triple occurrence of the word *golfe*, its final 'e' indicating its proper French meaning of 'gulf' and segregating it from its sporting English homonym.<sup>57</sup>

Proust keeps his English vocabulary in reserve until he has established the connection between Elstir and Albertine. When Marcel glances out of the window of the studio he sees Albertine on her bicycle, wearing her *polo*; in the aftermath of his discovery that Elstir knows her and her friends he finds, as we have seen, the portrait of Odette as 'Miss Sacripant'; Elstir's

<sup>55</sup> Le Robert, usually so reliable, is wrong to state that *rocking-chair*, dated to 1851 in French, only features in an American context; it is true that rocking-chairs were an American colonial invention (Benjamin Franklin's excited great interest in Paris in 1766), but this example shows that the term had wider currency. Proust also uses the abbreviated form *le rocking* (II, 39; II, 296).

<sup>56</sup> For the English aesthetic of Elstir's paintings, see Eells, 113–42, and bibliography, 211–12.

<sup>57</sup> The description of Elstir's marine paintings is in II, 191–6 (II, 479–85); 'golfe' appears on pp. 192, 195, 196. The English word 'gulf' is French in origin.

English credentials are now established in his social life both past and present. In a conversation with Marcel some time after this first visit, he uses at least one English word, and arguably two. Marcel describes catching Andrée out in a social lie; she had told him she couldn't go out with him because her mother was ill, but Elstir (not deliberately) exposes the fib: "elle avait accepté un pique-nique à dix lieues d'ici où elle devait aller en break et elle ne pouvait plus se décommander" ["she had promised to go for a picnic somewhere miles from here. They were to drive over in a break, and it was too late for her to get out of it"] (II, 240; II, 539).<sup>58</sup> The next step is a long account of the change in Marcel's sensibility brought about by the experience of getting to know both the *jeune filles en fleurs* and Elstir. Marcel explains that he now looked forward to outings in fine weather with Albertine and her friends—complete with picnics featuring 'des sandwiches au chester' (II, 250; II, 551)<sup>59</sup>—having given up his former dream of Balbec as a primitive land shrouded in eternal mist:

Mais maintenant, tout ce que j'avais dédaigné, écarté de ma vue, non seulement les effets de soleil, mais même les régates, les courses de chevaux, je l'eusse recherché avec passion pour la même raison qu'autrefois je n'aurais voulu que des mers tempétueuses, et qui était qu'elles se rattachaient, les unes comme autrefois les autres à une idée esthétique. C'est qu'avec mes amies nous étions quelquefois allés voir Elstir, et les jours où les jeunes filles étaient là, ce qu'il avait montré de préférence,

<sup>58</sup> The *OED* has a note on 'picnic': 'The chronology of the word in French and English, with the fact that our earliest instances refer to the Continent, and are sometimes in the French form *pique-nique*, show that the word came from French (although some French scholars, in ignorance of these facts, have, in view of the obscurity of its derivation, conjectured that the French word was from English)'. But Le Robert distinguishes between original and transferred senses: *faire un repas à pique-nique* originally meant a meal where everyone brought a dish, and dates from the early 18th cent.; English borrowed this term and gave it the modern meaning of an open-air party or excursion, and French then reborrowed it. Mackenzie dates *break* to 1830; Bonnaffé cites Flaubert's *Education Sentimentale* (1869): 'Mme de Remoussot, mise à la mode par son procès, trônait sur le siège d'un break en compagnie d'Américains' [Mme de Remoussot, who had become fashionable in the wake of her trial, was queening it on the seat of a break in the company of some Americans]. In *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, the Verdurins replace their *break* with an automobile at the request of Morel's friend, the nefarious chauffeur (III, 417; IV, 495).

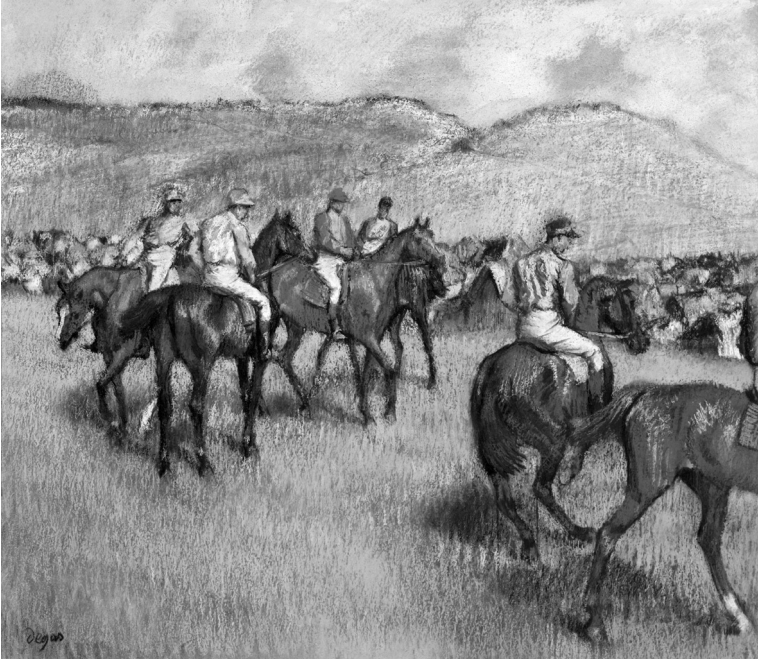
<sup>59</sup> 'Sandwich(e)' is found in French from 1802; it was feminine in form up to the 1870s (Le Robert). Purists vainly pointed out the linguistic (and gastronomic) superiority of the *tartine*. 'Chester' like 'footing' (walking for exercise) and 'plus-value' (increment), is an English word with a meaning peculiar to French: it means Cheshire cheese. 'Les sandwiches au chester' featured in older texts of *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, at a reception given for King Edward VII where Marcel distinguishes himself by his tact (III, 62; IV, 73), but have, alas, been taken off the menu by the new *Pléiade* edition (see textual note, III, 1362).

c'était quelques croquis d'après de jolies yachtswomen ou bien une esquisse prise sur un hippodrome voisin de Balbec. J'avais d'abord timidement avoué à Elstir que je n'avais pas voulu aller aux réunions qui y avaient été données. "Vous avez eu tort, me dit-il, c'est si joli et si curieux aussi. D'abord cet être particulier, le jockey, sur lequel tant de regards sont fixés, et qui devant le paddock est là morne, grisâtre dans sa casaque éclatante . . ." Puis il s'extasia plus encore sur les réunions de yachting que sur les courses de chevaux et je compris que des régates, que des meetings sportifs où des femmes bien habillées baignent dans la glauque lumière d'un hippodrome marin, pouvaient être, pour un artiste moderne, un motif aussi intéressant que les fêtes qu'ils aimaient tant à décrire pour un Véronèse ou un Carpaccio.

[But everything that I had hitherto despised and thrust from my sight, not only the effects of sunlight upon sea and shore, but even regattas and race-meetings, I now sought out with ardour, for the same reason which formerly had made me wish only for stormy seas: namely, that they were now associated in my mind, as the others had once been, with an aesthetic idea. For I had gone several times with my new friends to visit Elstir, and, on the days when the girls were there, what he had selected to show us were drawings of pretty women in yachting dress, or else a sketch made on a race-course near Balbec. I had at first shyly admitted to Elstir that I had not felt inclined to go to the meetings that had been held there. "You were wrong," he told me, "it's such a pretty sight, and so strange too. For one thing, that peculiar creature the jockey, on whom so many eyes are fastened, and who sits there in the paddock so gloomy and grey-faced in his bright jacket . . ." After which he waxed more enthusiastic still over the yacht-races, and I realised that regattas, and race-meetings where well-dressed women might be seen bathed in the greenish light of a marine race-course, might be for a modern artist as interesting a subject as the festivities they so loved to depict were for a Veronese or a Carpaccio.]  
(II, 251–2; II, 551–2)

If English words were banished from the description of paintings so influenced by English artists, here they return in full force for the description of paintings influenced by French ones—Degas and Manet, of course, but also the now less known Paul Helleu, whose studio at Deauville Proust visited, and who painted scenes very similar to those which Elstir evokes in this passage.<sup>60</sup> This is the first occurrence in the

<sup>60</sup> The link between Elstir and Helleu is made in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, at a dinner at the Verdurins' house in Normandy, La Raspelière; Saniette says of Elstir: "— Il restitue la grâce du XVIII<sup>e</sup>, mais moderne . . . Mais j'aime mieux Helleu. — Il n'y a aucun rapport avec Helleu, dit Mme Verdurin' ["He has revived the grace of the eighteenth century, but in a modern form . . . but I prefer Helleu." "There's not the slightest connexion with Helleu," said Mme Verdurin] (III, 329; IV, 390).



12. Degas, *Before the Race*, c. 1893, pastel.

novel of the word *jockey* in its literal sense, as opposed to the name of the club; it is reinforced by *paddock*, and also by *meeting*, which was last encountered as a typical affectation of Odette's: 'une réunion mondaine chez des amis des Swann (ce que celle-ci appelait "un petit meeting")' [some social gathering given by a friend of Mme Swann's (what the latter called "a little meeting")] (I, 516; II, 114).<sup>61</sup> The sporting occasions which are so repugnant to Marcel are rescued for art, and it is as though the bad

<sup>61</sup> Elstir's liking for the jockey's attire and demeanour is referred to once more, at II, 256 (II, 558); the only other occurrence of the literal sense, though still located at Balbec, is less aesthetic; it comes in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, and refers to M. de Charlus's sexual tastes (III, 377; IV, 447). Mackenzie dates *paddock* to 1709, but it was still being stigmatized as an English word in Proust's day. For Proust's dislike of the social use of *meeting*, see Ch. 1, p. 42. The slight grammatical incoherence in the French text, which leaves the referent of 'celle-ci' in the parenthesis unclear, results from an oversight; 'des amis de Swann' was originally 'une amie de Mme Swann' (*Pléiade* note, I, 1376).

taste of English vocabulary becomes more palatable, can even be savoured. Elstir's passion for *le yachting* is especially marked; in one speech he uses the words *yacht* and *yachting* almost to excess, in one of the most concentrated clusters of English words in the whole of *A la recherche*:

Le plus grand charme d'un yacht, de l'ameublement d'un yacht, des toilettes de yachting, est leur simplicité de choses de la mer, et j'aime tant la mer! Je vous avoue que je préfère les modes d'aujourd'hui aux modes du temps de Véronèse et même de Carpaccio. Ce qu'il y a de joli dans nos yachts—et dans les yachts moyens surtout, je n'aime pas les énormes, trop navires . . . c'est la chose unie, simple, claire, grise . . . Les toilettes des femmes sur un yacht, c'est la même chose; ce qui est gracieux, ce sont ces toilettes légères . . .

[The great charm of a yacht, of the furnishings of a yacht, of yachting clothes, is their simplicity, as things of the sea, and I do so love the sea. I must confess that I prefer the fashions of to-day to those of Veronese's and even of Carpaccio's time. What is so attractive about our yachts—and the medium-sized yachts especially, I don't like the huge ones, they're too much like ships . . . is the uniform surface, simple, gleaming, grey . . . And it's the same with women's clothes on board a yacht; what's really charming are those light garments . . .]

(II, 253; II, 554)

The English word so insistently deployed here is preferred to the French ('trop navire'). Marcel had hitherto tried literally not to see what Elstir shows him in this scene, 'd'expulser du champ de ma vision . . . les yachts aux voiles trop blanches comme un costume de plage' [to expel from my field of vision . . . the yachts with their too dazzling sails]; but that was before seeing Elstir's ravishing seascape with its 'jeune femme, en robe de barège ou de linon, dans un yacht arborant le drapeau américain' [young woman in a dress of white serge or linen, on the deck of a yacht flying the American flag] (II, 255; II, 557).<sup>62</sup> As for Albertine, her pleasure in Elstir's painting connects to her acuity in matters of fashion, and to her greed: "Comme j'aimerais être riche pour avoir un yacht! dit-elle au peintre. Je vous demanderais des conseils pour l'aménager. Quels beaux voyages je ferais! Et comme ce serait joli d'aller aux régates de

<sup>62</sup> In his carriage drives along the coast with his grandmother and Mme de Villeparisis—again, before his meeting with Elstir—Marcel had found his would-be aesthetic views of the sea spoiled by 'tant d'enclaves vulgaires et que mon rêve n'admettait pas, de baigneurs, de cabines, de yachts de plaisance' [so many vulgar adjuncts that had no place in my dream—bathers, cabins, pleasure-yachts] (II, 67; II, 331). There is another cluster of yachts in Marcel's letter to Albertine, IV, 38–9 (V, 520).



Cowes! . . .”’ [“How I should love to be rich and to have a yacht!” she said to the painter. “I should come to you for advice on how to do it up. What lovely trips I’d make! And what fun it would be to go to Cowes for the regatta! . . .”] (II, 254; II, 555). Much later in the novel, when Marcel, in his desperation to keep Albertine ‘imprisoned’, talks of buying her a yacht, he consults Elstir, recalling that his taste in the furnishing of yachts was exacting: ‘Il n’y admettait que des meubles anglais’ [he would allow only English furniture] (III, 870; V, 420).<sup>63</sup>

Marcel never asks, and we never in fact discover, how Elstir comes to know Albertine and the other *jeunes filles en fleurs*. They are evidently not his models (though Marcel will ‘see’ Albertine in one of Elstir’s paintings); their friendly visits to Elstir’s studio are not ‘placed’ within the social world either of Balbec or elsewhere. Unlike his former friendships with Odette and with Swann, which are rationally accounted for by their meeting at the Verdurins’, this link is enigmatic and, in some respects, unlikely. We have been told of Elstir’s solitude, of his withdrawal from ‘ordinary’ social intercourse or family life: ‘il vivait dans un isolement, avec une sauvagerie que les gens du monde appelaient de la pose et de la mauvaise éducation, les pouvoirs publics un mauvais esprit, ses voisins de la folie, sa famille de l’egoïsme et de l’orgueil’ [he lived in an unsociable isolation which fashionable people called pose and ill-breeding, the authorities a recalcitrant spirit, his neighbours madness, his family self-ishness and pride] (II, 184; II, 471). Yet the occasion on which Marcel finally meets Albertine is a party which he persuades Elstir to host;<sup>64</sup> this event, with its buffet loaded with strawberry tarts and coffee éclairs, its music, and its vague assemblage of other guests amongst whom Marcel singles out only the old gentleman to whom he offers the rose in his buttonhole, seems poised somewhere between a pastiche and a dream; it gives the impression of having been manufactured for the occasion, like a theatrical set, and is in any event never repeated.

It is possible to construct a hypothetical route by which Elstir could have met Albertine—she is the niece of Mme Bontemps, a friend of Mme Cottard, whom Elstir knew when he frequented the Verdurins’ salon; he

<sup>63</sup> He promises to buy her a car, too; needless to say it is a Rolls-Royce.

<sup>64</sup> The word Marcel uses takes us back, once more, to the ‘marriages’ of plants: ‘Quand . . . j’eus réussi à ce qu’Elstir donnât une petite matinée où je rencontrerais Albertine’ [When . . . I had succeeded in persuading Elstir to give a small party at which I should meet Albertine] (II, 224; II, 519).

also knew Odette there, of course, and when she becomes Mme Swann Odette cultivates Mme Bontemps; we hear of 'la fameuse Albertine' at school from Gilberte, she who will surely be so *fast* (I, 503; II, 98).<sup>65</sup> The trouble is that none of these possible connections are activated in the novel. Unlike the writer Bergotte, Elstir does not form part of Mme Swann's salon, and indeed there is no indication that he and Odette meet at all after her marriage to Swann, or that he maintains any links with the Cottards.

In a novel where connections between the characters are traced with minute exactness, and where such connections often matter a good deal in terms of narrative or psychological development, this gap in the circuit is unusual, and may be purposive. That is, the connection between Elstir and Albertine is left unexplained because its 'motivation' is something they have in common, not something which belongs to an external system of social or familial relations. It is an elective affinity whose elements are sexual ambiguity and the fluidity of the self. The superimposition of different perspectives, both in space and time, creates a psychological kinship between Elstir and Albertine such that the story of Marcel's love for Albertine seems the working out in time of the spatial metaphors in one of Elstir's paintings; in Elstir's artistic career, in turn, the layering of his different 'manners'—mythological, *japonisant*, Impressionist, Post-Impressionist—resembles the different, mysterious, apparently incompatible 'selves' of Albertine as Marcel successively discovers them: 'la muse orgiaque du golf', the well-brought up young lady, the sexually willing companion, the prisoner, the fugitive, the ghost.

The 'English' note in the affinity between Elstir and Albertine is only one among many, but though I don't want to exaggerate its significance I do want to 'isolate' it, as a particular element whose presence can be detected in this aspect of the novel as in others. Certain familiar characteristics of Englishness as Proust understands it are vividly apparent in the way Elstir and Albertine appear at Balbec: vulgarity, for example, and affectation; but they appear in guises susceptible of extraordinary transmutation. Just as Elstir reveals to Marcel the aesthetic pleasure to be gained in the imaginative apprehension of jockeys on a racecourse, or of young women in fashionable outfits on yachts, so Albertine reveals to him the savour, the taste of 'Balbec-Plage', the world of golf, tennis, *sandwiches*

<sup>65</sup> For this use of 'fast', see the Introduction, pp. 6–7.

*au chester*, and cocktails at the Casino. These things shed their vulgarity in the transmutation of desire; but the price which Marcel pays for this knowledge is high. The painter who enjoyed matchmaking 'even between women' will reveal to Marcel the contours of an alien sexual pleasure from which he is excluded; bound in the past to 'Miss Sacripant' and linked at Balbec to 'la muse orgiaque du golf', women whose fleeting, suggestive, shape-changing persona is like an emblem of his art, he will bequeath his imaginative legacy to his young disciple—with a necessary though unwanted coefficient of suffering.