

THE BODY OF LETTERS  
in  
PROUST'S *ALBERTINE DISPARUE*

by

FRANCES EVELYN SPRINGER

B.H.E., The University of British Columbia, 1955  
B.A., The University of Toronto, Trinity College, 1958

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

Department of French

We accept this thesis as conforming  
to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

OCTOBER 1993

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### ABSTRACT

In this second to last volume of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Proust's hero turns from a busy world of receptions and *grandes soirées* to a more introspective, contemplative world of writing letters, which, in its way, is just as instructive to the aspiring writer as are the lessons he learned from stepping out into high society.

The large body of letters in *Albertine disparue* offers Marcel the opportunity to experience at first hand how written language functions. In effect, language and how it generates meaning in Proustian terms is one of the central issues in the *Albertine* sequence. I study how this unique experience with a varied and substantial correspondence allows the hero to penetrate the mysteries of the written word. I proceed with a detailed examination of the various letters and telegrams, dividing them into different categories and determining how these letters fit into the storyline, i.e., how they relate to the structure of the narrative text. Subsequently, I examine how the interpretation of these letters informs the hero's understanding of language.

*Albertine disparue* raises questions about the relationship of words and their meaning, and about writing and its ability to represent reality. Ultimately, Marcel responds to these questions as he learns how language signifies for him through his extensive personal experience with the written word in the large corpus of letters in *Albertine disparue*.



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# **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

The work for my Master's thesis was prepared under the supervision of Dr. Ralph Sarkonak. My debt of gratitude for his unfailing encouragement, inspiration, and guidance is incalculable. I wish to thank the members of the Supervisory Committee, Dr. Sima Godfrey and Dr. Richard Hodgson, for their invaluable advice. I am indebted to my typist, Jacqueline Langlois, for her tireless support. Finally, I wish to express my appreciation to my son, Marcus Springer, for his professional assistance with the graphics.

## INTRODUCTION

"J'entrepris mon ouvrage à la  
veille de mourir sans rien savoir  
de mon métier."

*Le Temps retrouvé*, 346

*Albertine disparue* is about reading and writing letters—about written communication as a prelude to a career of writing for the hero of the novel. This volume of *la Recherche* could almost be called a *roman par lettres*, considering the fact that it contains sixty-eight letters and telegrams varying in length from a few words to a three-page letter and, in addition, approximately ninety references to these letters in the form of quotations and rereadings, forming a loose network of correspondence throughout the text. This body of letters is an unusual feature in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*; however, it is an essential part of *Albertine disparue*. With Albertine's departure and Marcel's trip to Venice, separation is a principal theme of this last section of the Albertine sequence, and correspondence the necessary means of communication. With her disappearance from the first page to her subsequent death in the first chapter, Albertine becomes a kind of absent referent. The narrator's relationship with

Albertine, even in death, could be called a literary connection: Marcel finds himself "en présence d'une pensée," communicating through a web of thoughts, "hypothèses," images, poems, words, and letters.

Before beginning his literary career, the young, aspiring writer undertakes the arduous task of looking for a subject about which to write. Marcel's quest in *A la recherche du temps perdu* sends him on a long apprenticeship before he makes the great discovery at the end of the novel about what the subject of his book will be: "la matière de mon expérience laquelle serait la matière de mon livre" (TR, 221). However, the hero's quest takes a detour in *Albertine disparue* through a substantial body of correspondence that will allow Marcel the opportunity to learn some important lessons concerning the process of writing itself. With the letters and telegrams in this penultimate volume of *la Recherche*, Marcel faces the reality of writing and interpreting words, and gains valuable experience with the more practical aspects of his chosen "métier": how language functions, i.e., how meaning is encoded through inscription and decoded through interpretation.

In his philosophical analysis of Proust's novel, Vincent Descombes comments: "En un sens, toute la *Recherche* est consacrée à ce problème...du langage."<sup>1</sup> Clearly, the way in which language signifies affords the basis of a personal and

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<sup>1</sup>Vincent Descombes, *Proust, Philosophie du roman*. Minuit: Paris, 1987, 280.

often painful experience for the hero in the Albertine sequence. To "know" Albertine is Marcel's burning passion and to embrace Albertine is like holding a closed letter whose meaning lies sealed within:

Je pouvais bien prendre Albertine sur mes genoux, tenir sa tête dans mes mains, je pouvais la caresser, passer longuement mes mains sur elle, mais, comme si j'eusse manié une pierre qui enferme la salure des océans immémoriaux ou le rayon d'une étoile, je sentais que je touchais seulement l'enveloppe close d'un être qui par l'intérieur accédait à l'infini. Combien je souffrais de cette position où nous a réduits l'oubli de la nature qui, en instituant la division des corps, n'a pas songé à rendre possible l'interpénétration des âmes! (*La Prisonnière*, 372) [My italics]

Opening this envelope is Marcel's ultimate dream. The real body of Albertine, like a tangible sign, is "aussi difficile à déchiffrer, aussi mystérieux" (72) as is the body of letters in the Albertine sequence. I propose to study how the unique experience with this large body of correspondence in *Albertine disparue* will allow Marcel to penetrate the mysteries of one of the essential elements of language: the sign.

Proust began writing *Albertine disparue* in 1914 and it was one of the last volumes he worked on: "le personnage d'Albertine" was not introduced until after the death of Alfred Agostinelli in May, 1914.<sup>2</sup> *Albertine disparue* or *La Fugitive* as Proust wished to call it was complete enough in 1921 for him to consider offering it for publication in a literary review as

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<sup>2</sup>Jean-Yves Tadié, *Proust*, Pierre Belfond: Paris, 1983, 21.

he often did with other selections from *la Recherche*. In October of 1921, one year before he died, Proust wrote to his publisher, Gaston Gallimard, about sending the last part of what he called *Sodome III*, i.e., *La Fugitive*, as a prepublication release to the journal *Oeuvres Libres*:

Avant de commencer à mettre au point *Sodome III* [*La Prisonnière*] je lui donnerai la fin de *Sodome III* [*La Fugitive*] où il n'y a rien à changer et qui est ce que j'ai écrit de mieux (*La mort d'Albertine*, l'oubli).<sup>3</sup>

Eventually, Proust chose a section of *Sodome II* to be published by *Oeuvres Libres* as he explained to Gallimard, "car faire paraître en revue la fin de *Sodome III* avant qu'ait paru en volume *Sodome II*, c'est bien embrouiller le lecteur."<sup>4</sup>

Even though he was satisfied with *La Fugitive* at that time, Proust wrote to Gallimard nine months later, in July of 1922, that there was still some work to be done to both *La Prisonnière* and *La Fugitive*—then referred to as *Sodome et Gomorrhe* part I and part II respectively:

Aucune des deux parties n'est "prête", ce qui s'appelle "prête"... Je ne veux pas vous livrer du travail baclé, mais le meilleur possible dans la

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<sup>3</sup>Marcel Proust à Gaston Gallimard, 19th or 20th October, 1921. In *Marcel Proust, Gaston Gallimard, Correspondance 1912-1922*, ed. P. Fouché. Gallimard: Paris, 1989, 416.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, 146. In November, 1921 *Oeuvres Libres* published an extensive article based on sections of *Sodome II* under the title *Jalousie*, "roman inédit complet," in their issue No. 5 (November) 1921, pp 7-156 [SG: II 633-738, 789-803]. Cf. *Marcel Proust, Textes Retrouvés*, Ed. Philip Kolb et Larkin B. Price, University of Illinois Press: Chicago, 1968, 264.



mesure de mes faibles facultés. Hé bien sur les deux parties il y a encore à faire.<sup>5</sup>

Proust was never able to finalize the manuscript of *La Fugitive* because he was working on the last corrections to *La Prisonnière* right up until a week or so before he died. In fact, *Albertine disparue* remained unedited at the time of Proust's death and has the most complicated history of publication. *La Fugitive* or *Albertine disparue*, as it came to be called, was not published until 1925, three years after Proust's death. Various publications of this volume have proved problematic because of adjustments and corrections to the original manuscript. The first NRF edition in 1925 was published by Gallimard based on the original manuscript that had been corrected and edited posthumously by Dr Robert Proust and Jacques Rivière. The title *Albertine disparue* was used because another work was published by the NRF at that time with the title *La Fugitive*. Subsequently, the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade produced two editions of *A la recherche du temps perdu*: the first one now referred to as the "Old Pléiade" edition was published in 1954, edited by Pierre Clarac and André Ferré, who did not have access to the original manuscript. The second edition referred to as the "New Pléiade" edition, was published from 1987 to 1989, under the direction of Jean-Yves Tadié, who did have access to the original manuscript which was acquired by

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid, 551.

the Bibliothèque Nationale in 1962. The volume of *Albertine disparue* in this edition was annotated and established with the addition of critical text by Anne Chevalier; it was reprinted as a single volume in the new paperback edition of the Folio Collection in 1990.

To confuse the issue even further, a copy of the original manuscript of *Albertine disparue* was discovered in the papers of the Mauriac family in 1986. It formed the basis of another and much shorter edition of this volume called the "Mauriac edition," which was published by Nathalie Mauriac and Etienne Wolff in 1987.

According to Anne Chevalier, "aucune des éditions n'est entièrement fidèle à un seul document" (*Préface*, xiv). However, for the purposes of my study, the significant factor in the discrepancies between these different editions of *Albertine disparue* is the omissions that affect the length of the various texts: the Mauriac edition is only one hundred pages long—eliminating the last half of Chapter I, all of Chapter II, and Chapter IV as they appear in the Gallimard editions; the "Old Pléiade" 1954 edition is two hundred and sixty-six pages, cutting off the text six pages short of the 1989 "New Pléiade" and the 1990 Folio editions, which both have two hundred and seventy-two pages. Clearly, variation in the length of these different editions could seriously affect the count of the letters in *Albertine disparue*. With the Mauriac edition, for example, the number of letters would be cut in half and the

riddle of the telegram from the dead Albertine—one of the most important documents in the volume—would not be resolved. The three Gallimard editions—1954, 1989 and 1990—all have the same number of letters with the single exception of one less letter in the shorter 1954 "Old Pléiade" edition. Therefore, I have chosen to base my study on the version of *Albertine disparue* published in the new Folio Collection edition of 1990.<sup>6</sup>

To date no one appears to have done a detailed study of the large body of letters in *Albertine disparue*. A short analysis of the Proustian letters has been written by Alain Buisine. His book, *Proust et ses lettres*, is a brief monograph comparing Proust's real life and fictional correspondence. Proust himself criticized this kind of approach in his essay *Contre Sainte-Beuve* where he decries Sainte-Beuve's notion that a critic should not separate *l'homme et l'oeuvre*, i.e., a writer from his opus. Proust was against the idea of interpreting a novel by reading biographical details of the author into his work. In fact, Buisine recognizes that his approach is *contre courant*:

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<sup>6</sup>The passages quoted from this volume and from all the other volumes of *A la recherche du temps perdu* will be taken from this Folio edition. The novel itself is referred to throughout the text as *la Recherche*. The following abbreviations are used to identify different volumes in various tables and references throughout the text: *Swann* for *Du côté de chez Swann*; *JFF* for *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*; *SG* for *Sodome et Gomorrhe*; *LaP* for *La Prisonnière*; and *TR* for *le Temps retrouvé*.

Il n'y aurait donc rien de moins proustien que mon projet d'interroger l'oeuvre à partir du courrier de son auteur.<sup>7</sup>

Buisine's analysis does not, however, concentrate on the correspondence in *Albertine disparue*. Of the many examples he quotes from Proust's personal letters, as well as from all of the volumes of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Buisine only refers to eight letters from *Albertine disparue* in particular. He does establish, however, the general character of the Proustian correspondence:

...le propre de la lettre proustienne n'est-il pas justement l'erreur: de la fausseté comme fondement de la vérité épistolaire.<sup>8</sup>

But Buisine does not focus on the implications that these letters have for language and the interpretation of the sign for the literary apprenticeship of the hero of the novel.

My study proposes a detailed examination of these letters in order to establish their classification, order, context, the intervals between them, the frequency of references to them throughout the text, and, finally, a brief analysis of their content. The results of my research will be grouped together in the following chapters: Categories, Narrative Presence, and The Narrative of Absence.

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<sup>7</sup>Alain Buisine, *Proust et ses lettres*, Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1983, 94.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, 94.

In Chapter I, a classification of all the correspondence in *Albertine disparue* will be presented on a table graph under the headings: sender/receiver; letters/telegrams; real/imagined letters; new/old letters. The categories of this table graph will be reorganized onto a second table graph illustrating a further classification of the correspondence as: Personal Correspondence (direct, i.e., to/from Albertine and indirect, i.e., about Albertine) and General Correspondence (unconnected to Albertine).

In Chapter II, the main body of research will concentrate on the presence of the letters and telegrams in the narrative text or "récit"<sup>9</sup> as the term is used in Genette's *Figures III*. Using this model, three major graphs will be drawn: first, a linear graph of *l'histoire*—a reconstruction of the occurrences of the letters according to their dates in chronological sequence compared to their appearance in *le récit*, plotting the occurrence of each letter in the sequence in which it appears according to the pagination. Second, a graph of *la durée* will represent the *vitesse* of the narrative movement measured by the distortions created by the relationship of the temporal span of the *histoire* or story plotted on one line as compared to the length of the *récit* or narrative text devoted to the various episodes of the story. Subsequently, a graph of *la fréquence* will be drawn where the narrative sequence of the

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<sup>9</sup>Gérard Genette, *Figures III*, Seuil: Paris, 1972, 74.

*récit* will be exploded into three separate lines representing: actual and imagined letters, real and imagined telegrams, with one final line for all the repeated references, citations or rereadings of the above correspondence.

In Chapter III, after an analysis of the contents of a selected number of individual letters, conclusions and implications will be drawn from a comparison of the graphs in order to demonstrate how the different categories of the letters (Chapter I), their appearance, distribution and context (Chapter II), form a structure that embodies one of the central themes of *la Recherche*, "le travail de l'oubli," a process of transformation, like a rite of passage that the narrator must pass through in order to become a writer. An analysis of this sequential structure of the letters will reveal a transformation from a preoccupation with the actual departure (Albertine letters), through obsession (Aimé letters), to indifference and final *oubli* (the last telegram from "Albertine"). Albertine literally disappears from the body of letters and, consequently, from Marcel's thoughts. She moves from absent referent to neutral signifier—"le cygne inerte", as Marcel calls her, or *le signe inerte*—nothing more than a noun, a word, absent of meaning, an element of fiction, a potential literary presence in the narrator's *livre à venir*.

## CHAPTER I

### Mapping the Letters

Although *Albertine disparue* seems to renew the tradition of the *roman par lettres* because of the sixty-eight letters and telegrams that create a network of correspondence throughout this volume of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, relatively few of these letters occur in actual letter form. Before opening the envelope, so to speak, to find out what is being communicated by this profusion of correspondence, we need to establish some parameters: what form the letters take and how they are presented in the narrative; who is the focus of the correspondence and if it can be considered the correspondence of one person or if the focus shifts to other correspondents during the course of the narrative. We need to ask why so many letters are written in this particular volume of *la Recherche* and what specifically distinguishes the correspondence of *Albertine disparue* from other correspondence contained in the novel.

In order to better comprehend the outline of this large body of letters, I will arrange the correspondence into

different categories to see what patterns or groupings of letters evolve, which will shed some light on the unique character of the Proustian correspondence in *Albertine disparue*. I will divide the letters into two different categories, grouping them first according to author—identifying the sender and the receiver—and second according to whether the letters are of a personal or general nature. Distinctions will be made between real or imagined letters; between new and old letters; and between letters for which full, partial, or no text is "quoted."

#### The Correspondents: senders and receivers

First, a list will be established of all the letters and telegrams as they appear in the text in order to determine who writes the letters and to whom, thereby identifying the first category: sender and receiver. Some additional information has been included in this list in order to facilitate future references: the page number on which a letter appears, whether the correspondence is a letter or telegram, and whether either of these is real or imagined. The correspondence is tabled in the order that it appears in the narrative or *récit*, each letter and telegram numbered under that heading on Table 1.



Table 1  
Letters and Telegrams

RÉCIT	LETTER TELE.	PAGE	SENDER	RECEIVER	REAL	IMAGINED	OLD
1	L	5	Albertine	Marcel	x		
2	L	10	une Américaine	<i>ma maîtresse</i>	x		
3	L	10	unknown	<i>ma maîtresse</i>	x		
4	L	19	Marcel	Gilberte	x		x
5	T	30	Marcel	Albertine		x	
6	T	32	Saint-Loup	Marcel	x		
7	L	33	nièce de Mme de Guermantes	Marcel	x		
8	L	33	Albertine	Marcel		x	
9	T	33	Marcel	Albertine		x	
10	T	34	Saint-Loup	Marcel	x		
11	T	36	Marcel	Saint-Loup	x		
12	T	36	Albertine	Marcel	x		
13	L	37	Marcel	Albertine	x		
14	L	37	Marcel's mother	Marcel		x	
15	L	38	Marcel	Elstir		x	
16	T	40	Marcel	Albertine		x	
17	L	50	Albertine	Marcel	x		
18	L	51	Albertine	<i>l'intermédiaire</i>		x	
19	L	51	Marcel	Andrée	x		
20	L	51	Marcel	Albertine	x		
21	L	57	Marcel	Albertine		x	
22	T	58	Marcel	Albertine	x		
23	T	58	Mme de Bon Temps	Marcel	x		
24	L	59	Albertine	Marcel	x		
25	L	60	Albertine	Marcel	x		
26	L	69	Albertine	Marcel	x		x
27	L	76	Mme Verdurin	Marcel	x		
28	L	93	Gilberte	Marcel		x	x
29	L	94	Albertine	Marcel		x	
30	L	96	Aimé	Marcel	x		
31	L	105	Aimé	Marcel	x		
32	L	105	Aimé	Marcel	x		
33	L	105	Marcel	Aimé	x		
34	T	105	Aimé	Marcel	x		
35	L	105	Aimé	Marcel	x		
36	L	130	Gisèle	Andrée	x		
37	L	138	Albertine	Marcel	x		x
38	T	145	Marcel	Saint-Loup	x		

RÉCIT	LETTER TELE.	PAGE	SENDER	RECEIVER	REAL	IMAGINED	OLD
39	T	146	Saint-Loup	Marcel	x		
40	L	159	Gilberte	Mme de Guermantes		x	
41	L	166	Gilberte	general letters	x		
42	L	169	Marcel	general letters	x		
43	L	169	Mme Goupil	Marcel	x		
44	L	169	Sautton	Marcel	x		
45	L	170	Bloch	Marcel		x	
46	L	171	Bergotte	Marcel		x	
47	L	193	Marcel	Andrée	x		
48	L	198	Mme Verdurin	Albertine	x		x
49	T	199	Albertine	Albertine	x		x
50	T	216	M. Barrère	<i>son bureau</i>	x		
51	T	216	M. Barrère	<i>son bureau</i>	x		
52	L	218	<i>mon coulissier</i>	Marcel	x		
53	T	220	"Albertine"	Marcel	x		
54	L	222	Marcel	Gilberte	x		x
55	L	230	Gilberte	Marcel	x		
56	L	230	<i>une amie de la mère</i>	<i>la mère de Marcel</i>	x		
57	L	230	Gilberte	<i>la mère de Marcel</i>	x		
58	L	240	M. de Charlus	Marcel	x		
59	L	240	Saint-Loup	Marcel	x		
60	L	241	<i>certaines personnes</i>	Marcel	x		
61	L	250	<i>le baron de Charlus, etc.</i>	Marcel	x		
62	L	252	Léonor	Marcel	x		
63	L	253	<i>grand-mère de Marcel</i>	general letters		x	
64	L	255	<i>le papetier</i>	wedding guests Gilberte/Saint-Loup	x		
65	L	255	<i>amie de la mère</i>	M. Sazerat		x	
66	L	257	<i>Bobette</i>	Saint-Loup	x		
67	L	260	Saint-Loup	general letters	x		x
68	L	264	general letters	<i>Charlie</i>	x		

This long list identifies the sender and receiver of each of the sixty-eight letters that occur in *Albertine disparue*: specifically fifty-two letters of which forty are real and twelve imagined, and sixteen telegrams of which thirteen are real and three imagined. Of these, only eight

letters and nine telegrams appear in actual letter form, with full text, or as actual telegrams, varying in length from an imagined one word cable, "Revenez" (16 T 40), to the longest letter in *Albertine disparue*, Marcel's *lettre d'adieu* (13 L 37), which is ninety lines long. The following is a list of these letters and telegrams:

Table 2

Chapter I

1 L 5	Albertine → Marcel	(lettre de rupture)	17 lines
6 T 32	Saint-Loup → Marcel	(ces dames sont parties)	1 line
9 T 33	Marcel → Albertine	(Venez vite)	2 words
12 T 36	Albertine → Marcel	(heureuse de revenir)	5 lines
13 L 37	Marcel → Albertine	(lettre d'adieu)	90 lines
16 T 40	Marcel → Albertine	(Revenez)	1 word
17 L 50	Albertine → Marcel	(deux fois crépusculaire)	11 lines
20 L 51	Marcel → Albertine	(Andrée/femme)	20 lines
23 T 58	Mme Bontemps → Marcel	(Albertine morte)	6 lines
24 L 59	Albertine → Marcel	(posthumous)	9 lines
25 L 60	Albertine → Marcel	(posthumous)	6 lines
30 L 96	Aimé → Marcel	(la doucheuse)	57 lines
34 T 105	Aimé → Marcel	(lettre suit)	2 lines
35 L 105	Aimé → Marcel	(la blanchisseuse)	29 lines

Ch. II, III & IV

39 T 146	Saint-Loup → Marcel	(Mlle de L'Orgeville)	4 lines
51 T 216	M. Barrère → bureau	(Visconti/Venosta)	2 lines
53 T 220	"Albertine" → Marcel	(très vivante)	4 lines

These seventeen letters and telegrams represent approximately two hundred and sixty-five lines of text which would, theoretically, cover a total of about six pages of *Albertine disparue* if they were all massed together. It is important to note that all of the major, full-text letters appear in Chapter I—specifically fourteen letters and telegrams. Of the thirty-six letters in Chapter I (3-138) just under half are written in letter format for a total of two hundred and

fifty-five lines, while in the rest of *Albertine disparue* (Chapters II, III, and IV, [138-272]), only three short telegrams are written with full text for a total of ten lines.

An additional four letters are referred to in the narrative by partial text that quotes only a single line or phrase from the following letters:

Table 3

2 L 10	Une Américaine → <i>ma maîtresse</i>
32 L 105	Aimé → Marcel
48 L 198	Mme Verdurin → Albertine
52 L 218	<i>Mon coulissier</i> → Marcel

No text is given for the remaining forty-seven letters and telegrams; however, these are represented in a variety of ways. Some are simply recognized by a short reference to their purpose: "J'écrivis à Andrée de revenir" (47 L 193); "J'envoyais à Aimé l'argent qui payait son voyage" (33 L 105). Although the singular reference to the purpose of these letters is precise, the actual content of the letter remains undisclosed.

Other correspondence is mentioned in a slightly more informative way when the narrator offers cursory references to the content of various letters: "Gilberte m'annonçait son mariage avec Robert de Saint-Loup. Elle me disait qu'elle n'avait pas eu de réponse" (55 L 230); "Je me demandais de mon côté pourquoi M. de Charlus d'une part, Saint-Loup de l'autre, lesquels avaient eu l'occasion de m'écrire peu auparavant, m'avaient parlé de projets si amicaux de voyages et dont la réalisation eût dû exclure la possibilité de ces cérémonies [de mariage]" (58, 59 L 240).

For a small group of letters, although no text is given as such, the letters are described in some detail by a résumé of their contents by the narrator like the following letter from Marcel to Andrée:

Je fis immédiatement porter à Andrée une lettre où je lui disais qu'Albertine était chez sa tante, que je me sentais bien seul, qu'elle me ferait un immense plaisir en venant s'installer chez moi pour quelques jours et que comme je ne voulais faire aucune cachotterie, je la priais d'en avertir Albertine. (19 L 51)

A final group of letters presented without text is simply referred to by the narrator as the correspondence of some individuals without giving any indication of what it is about. For example, Marcel mentions the general correspondence of Gilberte Swann, now Mlle de Forcheville, describing only her signature, G.S. Forcheville, used in "ses lettres" (41 L 166). Enigmatic allusions are made to the correspondence that Marcel received from Albertine during a sojourn in Balbec: "la fréquence et le style de ses lettres qu'elle avait adressées pendant une absence" (26 L 69). The letter to Marcel from the young marquis de Cambremer (62 L 252) is a similar case where the signature of the letter ("signée Léonor") and its formal salutation: "Croyez à ma sympathie vraie" (reminding Marcel of the style of the "formule finale" used by Mme de Cambremer) reveal the author of the letter but nothing of its contents.

In this first category of the correspondence, which identifies the senders and the receivers, the majority of letters are simply described by the narrator in various ways within the narrative text itself. Actually, seventy-five percent of the letters are presented in a fragmented way: by a single line or phrase quoted from the text of the letter; by a simple reference to the author; by a few words referring to the purpose, content, or style of the letter; or by a résumé of the contents which are edited by the narrator, thus producing a body of correspondence that is often partial, enigmatic, elliptical, or incomplete. At times the writing is even discontinued; apart from the obvious reasons of Albertine's death, there are cases where the correspondence is broken off. For example, Marcel is finally unable to respond to letters: "certaines personnes que je ne vis pas m'écrivirent et me demandèrent « ce que je pensais » de ces deux mariages... Je n'eus pas le courage de répondre à ces lettres" (60 L 241).

#### Personal and General Correspondence

The second category, which is simply a rearrangement of the letters and telegrams on Table 1, groups these letters according to the way in which they relate to the events surrounding the life of the absent heroine. The classification of letters that appears in Table 4 distinguishes between

## Classification of Correspondence

### Personal correspondence:

### General correspondence:

Direct-to/from Albertine

Indirect-about Albertine

Unconnected to Albertine

## PERSONAL

## GENERAL

### DIRECT

1 L 5 Albertine - Marcel  
5 T 30 Marcel- Albertine  
8 L 33 Albertine - Marcel  
9 T 33 Marcel- Albertine  
12 T 36 Albertine - Marcel  
13 L 37 Marcel- Albertine  
16 T 40 Marcel- Albertine  
17 L 50 Albertine - Marcel  
20 L 51 Marcel - Albertine  
21 L 57 Marcel- Albertine  
22 T 58 Marcel- Albertine  
24 L 59 Albertine - Marcel  
25 L 60 Albertine - Marcel  
26 L 69 Albertine - Marcel  
29 L 94 Albertine - Marcel  
37 L 138 Albertine - Marcel  
53 T 220 "Albertine" - Marcel

### INDIRECT

6 T 32 Saint-Loup - Marcel  
10 T 34 Saint-Loup - Marcel  
11 T 36 Marcel - Saint-Loup  
14 L 37 *mère* - Marcel  
15 L 38 Marcel - Elstir  
18 L 51 Albertine - *l'intermédiaire*  
19 L 51 Marcel - Andrée  
23 T 58 Mme B. - Marcel  
30 L 96 Aimé - Marcel  
31 L 105 Aimé - Marcel  
32 L 105 Aimé - Marcel  
33 L 105 Marcel - Aimé  
34 T 105 Aimé - Marcel  
35 L 105 Aimé - Marcel  
42 L 169 Marcel - general  
47 L 193 Marcel - Andrée  
48 L 198 Mme Verdurin - Albertine  
49 T 199 Albertine - Albertine

2 L 10 L'Américaine - *ma maîtresse*  
3 L 10 unknown - *ma maîtresse*  
4 L 19 Marcel - Gilberte  
7 L 33 *nièce* - Marcel  
27 L 76 Mme Verdurin - Marcel  
28 L 93 Gilberte - Marcel  
36 L 130 Gisèle - Andrée  
38 T 145 Marcel - Saint-Loup  
39 T 146 Saint-Loup - Marcel  
40 L 159 Gilberte - Mme de Guermantes  
41 L 166 Gilberte - general  
43 L 169 Mme Goupil - Marcel  
44 L 169 Sautton - Marcel  
45 L 170 Bloch - Marcel  
46 L 171 Bergotte - Marcel  
50 T 216 M. Barrère - *bureau*  
51 T 216 M. Barrère - *bureau*  
52 L 218 *Coulistier* - Marcel  
54 L 222 Marcel - Gilberte  
55 L 230 Gilberte - Marcel  
56 L 230 *amie* - *mère*  
57 L 230 Gilberte - *mère*  
58 L 240 Charlus - Marcel  
59 L 240 Saint-Loup - Marcel  
60 L 241 *certaines personnes* - Marcel  
61 L 250 *faire-part* - Marcel  
62 L 252 Léonor Cambremer - Marcel  
63 L 253 *Grand mère* - general  
64 L 255 *papetier* - wedding guests  
65 L 255 *amie* - M. Sazerin  
66 L 257 Bobette - Saint-Loup  
67 L 260 Saint-Loup - general  
68 L 264 general letters - Charlie

Marcel's personal correspondence that concerns Albertine and the general correspondence, written by Marcel and others, on matters that do not concern Albertine.

The two major divisions in this category correspond to the storyline: the "Personal Correspondence" focuses on Albertine's departure and death, and the "General Correspondence" deals with Marcel's gradual return to "normal life" and its varied concerns. Classifying the correspondence along these lines not only conforms to the plot and forms major groups of letters around specific individuals, it also reveals the unique character of the letters in *Albertine disparue*.

The first collection of personal letters that appears in Table 4 is grouped under the headings: direct (all letters between Marcel and Albertine); and indirect (all letters concerning Albertine, written to/from Marcel and others such as Saint-Loup, Aimé, Mme Bontemps, etc.). The direct letters include all the letters and telegrams, real and imagined, written between Marcel and Albertine from the moment of her departure: her first farewell letter to Marcel (1 L 5); her telegram offering to return (12 T 36); Marcel's long *lettre d'adieu* (13 L 37); his desperate telegram begging her return (22 T 58); her last two letters received posthumously by Marcel, the first accepting Andrée as Marcel's next mistress (24 L 59) and the second and final letter from Albertine asking him ironically: "Serait-il trop tard pour que je revienne chez vous? Si vous n'avez pas encore écrit à Andrée consentiriez-



vous à me reprendre?" (25 L 60). The last four letters from Albertine, which appear on the list after the time of her death are, in fact, not posthumous letters. Two of these (26 L 69, 37 L 138) refer to old letters from Albertine received by Marcel during their holidays in Balbec, which the narrator rereads in his period of mourning. The last two are the imagined letter in which Marcel, longing for her return, fantasizes a new and less painful ending to the tragic story of Albertine's accidental death (29 L 94), and the final telegram from the dead Albertine (53 T 220). Although technically this last telegram is not from Albertine, Marcel's error in thinking it was from her completes the cycle of *l'oubli*, i.e., the hero's final indifference to his absent mistress, and so it is included as the last of the seventeen letters and telegrams written between Marcel and Albertine, forming the major group which will be referred to as the Albertine letters.

The second column of personal letters in Table 4, grouped under the heading "indirect," consists of all the correspondence concerning Albertine exchanged between Marcel and others about the events surrounding the life and death of the absent heroine. Responding to the departure of Albertine from Paris, Marcel immediately begins a kind of rescue operation by dispatching Saint-Loup to La Touraine in order to secure her return. The three telegrams (6 T 32, 10 T 34, 11 T 36) sent between Marcel and Saint-Loup fail: "leur attente...inutile, leur résultat nul" (86). The telegram from Mme Bontemps

announcing Albertine's death (23 T 58) starts Marcel out on an obsessive investigation into Albertine's past and, particularly, into her lesbian affiliations, which might shed some light on why she left him.

Aimé is sent to Balbec and La Touraine on two separate missions to provide Marcel with "l'éclaircissement de certains soupçons" (95). The six letters written between Marcel and Aimé, which will be referred to as the Aimé letters, include the two major letters from Aimé concerning *la doucheuse* from Balbec (30 L 96) and *la blanchisseuse* from La Touraine (35 L 105), which confirm that Albertine had lesbian contacts during the time she lived with Marcel. This information convinces Marcel that she probably left him in order to live this kind of life on her own and contributes to the development of an attitude of indifference toward Albertine which, along with a renewed acquaintance with Gilberte Swan, allows him to write:

C'est à partir de ce moment-là que je commencai à écrire à tout le monde que je venais d'avoir un grand chagrin et à cesser de le ressentir.  
(42 L 169)

This is not, of course, entirely true. Determined to find out the truth about her relationships, Marcel still suffers nagging doubts about Albertine's past and has three sessions with Andrée going over and over the subject of *la gomorrhéenne* for a period of about six months. He writes to Andrée (47 L 193) asking her to return for the third and final visit, still driven by the

desire to know, for certain, why Albertine left him. Andrée's explanation of the last two letters in this classification—the mysterious telegram Albertine had sent to herself (49 T 199) in Balbec giving herself an excuse to leave Marcel and return to Paris, and a more recent invitation from Mme Verdurin inviting Albertine to her *matinée* (48 L 198)—confirm Marcel's misunderstanding of the situation and of Albertine herself. According to Andrée, Albertine left Marcel to marry Mme Verdurin's nephew, whom she planned to meet at the *matinée* and not, as Marcel deduced from Aimé's letters or from his misinterpretation of Mme Verdurin's invitation, to pursue a lesbian lifestyle: in other words, she simply left him for another man. If Andrée is to be believed, Marcel deserves her admonition concerning Mme Verdurin's invitation: "Mais vous avez mal compris ce billet" (198).

The final classification, "General Correspondence," in Table 4, refers to all the letters and telegrams unrelated to Albertine as Marcel attempts to resume his life after the death of his mistress. The majority of these letters, which appear in Chapters II, III, and IV of the novel, concern his renewed acquaintance with Gilberte Swann, the publication of his first article in *Le Figaro*, his trip to Venice, and the impending marriages of friends and acquaintances, as well as other matters. The majority of the correspondence in this category is grouped around the marriage and potential breakup of two individuals: Gilberte Swann and Robert de Saint-Loup.

This final category marks the beginning of the three stages of *l'oubli*. Marcel explores the possibilities of change and forgetting the dead Albertine; his meeting with Gilberte starts this process. A series of eight letters which will be referred to as the Gilberte letters (all letters to or from Gilberte) describe a metamorphosis in Gilberte as she herself goes through a series of changes, emerging ultimately as a masked figure. Her name changes six different times in this series of letters (some deliberately, some in error): she is referred to as Gilberte Swann, Mlle d'Eporcheville, Mlle de L'Orgeville, Mlle de Forcheville, Albertine, and finally, la marquise de Saint-Loup. Three old, childhood letters (an imagined love letter from Gilberte [28 L 93], and two letters from Marcel feigning indifference at the end of their affair [4 L 19, 54 L 222]) refer to the youthful Gilberte Swann. Marcel does not recognize Gilberte when he sees her again for the first time in ten years, and thinks she is someone he met with Saint-Loup in a *maison de passe*. He misunderstands her name as Mlle d'Eporcheville, not realizing his error until he receives a telegram from Saint-Loup (39 T 146) telling him that the person he thought she was, Mlle de L'Orgeville, is not in Paris. The imagined letter to Mme de Guermantes from Gilberte, now Mlle de Forcheville—Gilberte was adopted by de Forcheville when he married Odette after Swann's death—is a reaction to the insolent attitude of la duchesse de Guermantes toward the *arriviste*: "Elle avait voulu écrire à la duchesse pour lui

demander ce qu'elle avait contre une jeune fille qui ne lui avait rien fait" (40 L 159). Marcel's Venetian telegram from "Albertine" (53 T 220) temporarily confuses Gilberte with the dead Albertine. With the two announcements of Gilberte's marriage to Saint-Loup (55 L 230, 57 L 230), Gilberte finally becomes la marquise de Saint-Loup.

Gilberte, as revealed through her correspondence, embodies change in *Albertine disparue*. In changing her name, she changes her social status—marrying into the aristocratic family of the Guermantes. Furthermore, she changes her style of writing and her signature in order to hide her origins—especially the Jewish background of her father that would be frowned upon in the aristocratic circles of the day:

...elle dissimulait le plus souvent ses origines...Il est vrai que pour les écrits dont elle avait lui-même la responsabilité, ses lettres [41 L 166], elle ménagea quelque temps la transition en signant G.S. Forcheville. La véritable hypocrisie dans cette signature était manifestée par la suppression bien moins des autres lettres du nom de Swann que de celle du nom de Gilberte. En effet en réduisant le prénom innocent à un simple G, Mlle de Forcheville semblait insinuer à ses amis que la même amputation appliquée au nom Swann n'était due aussi qu'à des motifs d'abréviation. (167)

Gilberte utilizes language to facilitate her intention to become part of the Guermantes clan; she uses her signature and her handwriting to mask the change: "l'originalité assez factice de l'écriture de Gilberte" (234). For her, writing serves as a cover up and the letter as a mask.

The Gilberte letters are informative for the reader not because of what they say necessarily, but by what is implied--what they reveal about character and plot. In a similar way the ineffective and disingenuous correspondence of Saint-Loup confirms his failure as a husband: his friendship with the elevator operator, whom he used to deliver his letters to various friends (67 L 260), as a pretext for making homosexual contacts during the holidays in Balbec; the *correspondance amoureuse* with Morel (Bobette)<sup>1</sup> (66 L 257), discovered by Gilberte; and the suggestion that he is keeping Morel (Charlie)--the poor artist who never answers letters (68 L 264)--all make it obvious that "une séparation avait failli se produire entre Robert et sa femme" (257).

The rest of the correspondence in this category is of a general nature: letters discussing the pros and cons of someone of Gilberte's class marrying into the Guermantes family, including the imagined opinions of Marcel's dead grandmother about the wedding (63 L 253), and the outraged opinions of old friends of Marcel's mother (64 L 255, 65 L 255); announcements of the wedding of le jeune marquis de Cambremer and Mlle d'Oloron (56 L 230) and *lettres de faire-part* to her subsequent funeral (61 L 250); the letters of congratulations from the uninteresting or unknown admirers for Marcel's article in

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<sup>1</sup>It is explained in notes (343), that the name Bobette is a diminutive for Bobby Santois, the name Proust used for the *violoniste-chroniqueur* until around 1919-1920 when he changed the name of this character to Charlie Morel.

*Le Figaro* (Mme Goupil [43 L 169] and Sautton [44 L 169]), and the wished for letters of congratulations that never arrive from admired friends (Bloch [45 L 170] and Bergotte [46 L 171]); business telegrams of a political nature of associates of M. Norpois (50 T 216, 51 T 216); and an invitation to dinner from Mme Verdurin (27 L 76), which Marcel declines.

### Cartography of the Letters

What conclusion can be drawn from a study of these categories that identifies the personal or general correspondence of various individuals? What does the outline of the body of letters look like and where do the internal borders fall?

The overall contour of the correspondence in *Albertine disparue* is amorphous; generally, we are given only an edited version of various letters that are often partial, fragmentary, and sometimes discontinuous. Nonetheless, pools of letters form around specific individuals: Albertine (twenty letters), Aimé (six letters), and Gilberte (eight letters). Of course, Marcel is connected to the majority of the correspondence with fifty letters—he sends sixteen and receives thirty-four. This ratio underscores the fact that reading letters is as important as writing them in *Albertine disparue*.

While only twenty-five percent of the total correspondence in *Albertine disparue* is to or from Albertine, nearly three quarters, or to be more precise seventy-four percent, is written or received by Marcel. Albertine writes exclusively to Marcel (excluding the one letter she writes to herself [49 T 199]), whereas Marcel writes to various individuals, although fifty percent of the letters Marcel sends are in fact written to Albertine. So, we can say that the correspondence consistently focuses on these two people.

Continuing with percentages, we see that the body of letters divides more or less in half following along the lines of the divisions in Table 4: approximately fifty percent of the letters are the personal correspondence of Marcel (thirty-five letters concerning Albertine) and the remaining fifty percent is general correspondence (thirty-three letters concerning other matters). The "Personal Correspondence," in turn, divides in two: half of this category consists of the correspondence between Marcel and Albertine (seventeen direct letters), and the second half is the correspondence between Marcel, Aimé, Saint-Loup, and others (eighteen indirect letters) about Albertine.

Although we cannot say that the letters of *Albertine disparue* are, in general, the correspondence of one person—even if Marcel comes close with seventy-four percent of the total—we can say that Chapter I is the personal correspondence of a single individual as virtually one hundred percent of the letters are written or received by Marcel. The five letters



that do not refer to Marcel directly consist of the following: a proposed letter Albertine never wrote to the "l'intermédiaire" concerning the purchase of a Rolls Royce (18 L 51), two old letters received by Albertine and remembered by Marcel—an invitation from Mme Verdurin (48 L 198) and a telegram Albertine wrote to herself (49 T 199), and two letters intercepted by the narrator and remembered in a prolepsis concerning a mistress whom the hero lives with long after Albertine's death. As none of these letters is current, we can conclude that all of the letters converge on Marcel in Chapter I. The focus of his personal correspondence is, of course, Albertine: her future return to Paris (direct letters) or, after her death, Marcel's obsessive investigation into her past (indirect letters).

This focus shifts in the second half of *Albertine disparue* (Chapters II, III, and IV) where only fifty-eight percent of the correspondence involves Marcel. It is important to note that although Marcel receives fifteen letters in this general category, he only sends one short message, a telegram to Saint-Loup (38 T 145). Curiously enough, Albertine makes a shadowy return in a telegram that Marcel receives while in Venice (53 T 220). It is a message to "parler mariage," purportedly from the dead Albertine. Through a series of errors the real identity of the sender—Gilberte—is not discovered until the end of Marcel's trip with the announcements of her wedding to Saint-Loup (55 L 230).

With this single exception, from Chapter II until the end of the volume *Albertine* disappears from the correspondence both as a reference and as a subject. Marcel, himself, stops writing letters in Chapter II; his last letter is a short message written to Andrée (47 L 193). In fact, Marcel only writes three letters in Chapter II: a telegram to Saint-Loup concerning Mlle de L'Orgeville (38 T 145); general correspondence announcing that he is completely over Albertine's death (42 L 169); and the final letter to Andrée (47 L 193). The letters to Gilberte are early childhood letters remembered by Marcel (4 L 9, 54 L 22). Although Marcel receives fifteen letters from Chapter II on, he does not respond to any of them. In fact, he consciously stops writing when "certaines personnes" write to him about the marriages since he Marcel remains indifferent: "Je n'eus pas le courage de répondre à ces lettres" (241).

If we wanted to consider the body of letters of *Albertine disparue* like a map it would present two distinct territories—on the one hand the intense personal correspondence of Marcel which focuses on Albertine as its object and, on the other, the general correspondence where Marcel is no longer the author of the letters and Albertine is no longer the focus of attention. The borderline for this division falls between the first half of *Albertine disparue* (Chapter I, 138 pp) which contains all of the current personal correspondence of Marcel (with three exceptions) and the second half of the volume

(Chapter II, III, and IV, 134 pp) which contains only correspondence of a general nature that does not concern Albertine (four exceptions, three of which are old letters). This creates a well defined image of a divided surface with each segment having a distinct character: half of the body of letters with a singular, focused correspondence, as opposed to the second half with its varied, multifaceted mosaic.

Roman par lettres

This division in the body of letters of *Albertine disparue* offers the clue to what makes the correspondence of this volume stand out from the rest of the novel. The letters and telegrams under the heading "General Correspondence" in Table 4 are similar to the kind of letters found throughout *A la recherche du temps perdu*—invitations to dinners, letters from friends, family, and lovers. One can find comparable letters elsewhere in the novel. As Buisine describes *la Recherche*:

...elle-même saturée de lettres, billets, télégrammes, petits bleus, se présente sous la forme d'un dispositif—ou d'une conspiration—postal où l'épistolaire joue un rôle fondamental.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Buisine, *Proust et ses lettres*, 32.

What makes *Albertine disparue* distinct is the particular kind of correspondence listed in Table 4 under the heading "Personal Correspondence." As Buisine states, although letters play a fundamental role in the novel: "Certains volumes de *la Recherche* semblent renouer avec la tradition du «roman par lettres» tant l'épistolaire y conditionne (le plus souvent négativement) les rapports humains."<sup>3</sup> Certainly, *Albertine disparue* qualifies for this distinction and, particularly, because of the part this personal correspondence concerning Albertine and Marcel plays in the development of the narrative in Chapter I, with thirty-six letters and telegrams in one narrative sequence all dealing with the same subject: the departure and death of Albertine.

There is, of course, a unique situation in this first chapter of *Albertine disparue* that provides the rationale for this extraordinary exchange of letters—the fact that Marcel sits in his bedroom, isolated from everyone relating to the outside world through letters. Marcel found himself in similar circumstances one other time in *la Recherche*: sequestered in his bedroom as a small boy, he writes his first letter to his mother while she is dining downstairs with Swann. This is the hero's first attempt to control the actions of others at a distance, by letter:

J'écrivis à ma mère en la suppliant de monter  
pour une chose grave que je ne pouvais lui dire  
dans ma lettre. (*Swann*, 28)

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid, 32.

The young child is trying to entice his mother back to his room, to restore her absent presence, in whatever way he can. He chooses what he calls "une ruse de condamné" (28), a deceptive letter, in this case one given to Françoise. The young boy also experiences his first epistolary disappointment since the letter is not delivered!

Just as the young Marcel thinks that his intriguing letter will prompt his mother's actions, "Et puis, ce n'était pas tout: maman allait sans doute venir!" (*Swann*, 30), years later the older Marcel thinks writing to the fugitive Albertine will provoke the same kind of action: "en l'écrivant pour avoir l'air de ne pas tenir à elle...le résultat de cette lettre me paraissait être au contraire de faire revenir Albertine au plus vite" (41). For Marcel, this devious kind of letter forms the basis of his strategy to secure Albertine's return—"agir sur le monde extérieur" (35). Under the circumstances, it is his only way of interacting with and controlling a world that is at a distance.

In this narrative sequence, in *Albertine disparue*, Marcel uses letters less as a means of communication than as a way of manipulating others: acting on them or reacting to them. After Albertine's departure, Marcel sends his long *lettre d'adieu* (13 L 37) to his mistress in an attempt to secure her return to Paris. However, Albertine's neutral response is a disappointment for him: "mais en somme la lettre d'Albertine

(17 L 50) n'avancait en rien les choses. Elle ne me parlait que d'écrire à l'intermédiaire" (18 L 51). Marcel's reaction to this unexpected response from Albertine is to precipitate matters by sending another letter off to Andrée asking her to come and move in with him, hoping this action will make Albertine jealous enough to return to Paris:

Il fallait sortir de cette situation, brusquer les choses, et j'eus l'idée suivante. Je fis immédiatement porter à Andrée une lettre [19 L 51] où je lui disais qu'Albertine était chez sa tante, que je me sentais bien seul, qu'elle me ferait un immense plaisir en venant s'installer chez moi pour quelques jours et que comme je ne voulais aucune cachotterie, je la priais d'en avertir Albertine. Et en même temps j'écrivis à Albertine [20 L 51] comme si je n'avais pas encore reçu sa lettre. [17 L 50]

This devious correspondence uses the letter as a catalyst—like a third party—sent to control the action of others. When Marcel wants to get out of an unpleasant situation, "brusquer les choses," he sends a letter. In this section of *Albertine disparue*, action is synonymous with writing a letter. Letters are fully integrated into the narrative "action" because they presumably connect the players. In effect, the reader is able to follow the storyline and the interaction between the participants by following the exchange of letters and telegrams, like, for example, the one between Marcel and Saint-Loup:

Mais quand j'eus reçu enfin un télégramme de Robert où il me disait qu'il avait vu Mme Bontemps, mais, malgré toutes ses

précautions, avait été vu par Albertine, que cela avait fait tout manquer, j'éclatai de fureur et de désespoir, car c'était là ce que j'avais voulu avant tout éviter. (10 T 34)

Thwarted, Marcel responds: "Furieux, je télégraphiai à Saint-Loup de revenir au plus vite à Paris pour éviter au moins l'apparence de mettre une insistance aggravante dans une démarche que j'aurais tant voulu cacher..." (11 T 36). This kind of "dialogue" at a distance allows the reader to see the development of the action through the correspondence of these two players.

This correspondence assumes a unique and privileged position in the first chapter of *Albertine disparue* compared to any other volume of *A la recherche du temps perdu*. The letter not only plays a major role in the development of the plot, and as Buisine says "y conditionne (le plus souvent négativement) les rapports humains," but also keeps the reader informed of what is happening and where the story is going. Clearly, letters drive the action of this narrative sequence. In fact, the narrative action is entirely dependent on these letters: If there were no letters or references to them in the narrative sequence of Albertine's departure and death, there would be no storyline. In essence, they sustain the narrative with connecting threads that make up the fabric of the action at a distance—a unique situation in the novel.

Although the implications that can be drawn from these letters will be studied in Chapter III, the form of the body of

letters is clear. The majority of the thirty-six letters and telegrams of Chapter I, written in the first thirty days of the story, forms a homogeneous, focused, personal correspondence of one individual centered around one subject--Marcel's preoccupation and obsession with the departure and death of Albertine. It is sustained by a manipulative correspondence typical of the *roman par lettres* that distinguishes this section of *Albertine disparue* from the rest of *A la recherche du temps perdu*. With the remaining thirty-two letters and telegrams, which are written over a period of two years, the focus shifts to a correspondence that is more general and varied in nature, resuming a pattern of correspondence typical of the rest of the novel.



## CHAPTER II

### Narrative Presence

The correspondence of *Albertine disparue* is not a simple exchange of letters. As an integral part of a narrative storyline, it is essential to understand exactly how the correspondence fits into the context of the plot. Before attempting to analyse the significance of the individual letters, I shall examine how they function within the rhythmic patterns of the chronology of the narrative. According to Gareth Steel, "a reader of literature must be able to detect a work's internal context in order to say what it signifies."<sup>1</sup> Given the nature of the Proustian narrative, it is useful to first establish what Steel calls a "contextual basis" for an interpretation of this correspondence.

As Steel himself advocates for the rest of Proust's *Recherche*, the body of letters in *Albertine disparue* can be studied from the point of view of the narratological terms used by Gérard Genette in *Figures III*, namely "récit" and "histoire." As the word *récit* is a general term, it is important to know

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<sup>1</sup>Gareth Steel, *Chronology and Time in "A la recherche du temps perdu,"* Droz: Genève, 1979, 203.

specifically what Genette means by it. When he says that he uses "le récit au sens le plus courant,"<sup>2</sup> he means the faithful transcription of events told in a story in either oral or written discourse. What Genette calls "le récit" in literature becomes, of course, "le discours narratif"—the written narrative text or simply, the narrative. Genette's analysis of the narrative discourse, then, involves a study of the relationships between the text and the events that it relates, i.e., the contents of the narrative which Genette calls "histoire" or "diégèse"; I shall call the latter the diagesis.

Following Genette's analytic model, this chapter will study the relationship between the narrative and the diagesis to see in what way the body of letters in *Albertine disparue* affects this relationship. Specifically, I will compare the order of the correspondence in the narrative with the sequence of these same letters in the diagesis to see whether the relationship is chronological or achronological. Subsequently, I will examine the variation in rhythmic patterns of the narrative caused by distortions in what Genette calls "la durée," or length of the narrative sequences, and by "la fréquence," or repeated references to the correspondence relative to these various narrative sequences.

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<sup>2</sup>Genette, *Figures III*, 74.

## Order

As the narrator tells the story of his past life, he refers to the letters and telegrams that would have been received in a consecutive order, i.e., other than the one they are referred to in the narrative. Although none of the letters is dated, there are indications in the text (contents of letter; sender/receiver) along with various temporal markers ("lorsque j'avais écrit autrefois à Gilberte," "lesquels avaient eu l'occasion de m'écrire peu auparavant"), which allow one to establish the original order of the letters. However, the precise date and location of the anachronistic letters often remain elusive because of the vagueness of the temporal markers.

In the graph "Order" (Fig. 1) all the letters and telegrams are plotted so that one can compare the sequence of letters as they appear in the narrative with the rearrangement of the letters in chronological order in the diagesis. Considering the order of the letters alone, one can see that the graph shows that the majority of the correspondence is in sequence: of the sixty-eight letters and telegrams, only eighteen are out of order, or anachronistic; of these, fourteen are analeptic and four proleptic.

Genette makes a distinction among the different types of analepse: first, the "analepse externe" referring to letters situated outside of the main narrative, i.e., before the



beginning of *Albertine disparue*. This would describe the situation for the following "old" letters with their approximate age:

Table 5

10 years	28 L 93	Gilberte → Marcel	<i>Swann</i> , 401
10 years	4 L 19	Marcel → Gilberte	<i>JFF</i> , 183
10 years	54 L 222	Marcel → Gilberte	<i>JFF</i> , 202
7 years	67 L 260	Saint-Loup letters	<i>JFF</i> , 230
7 years	49 T 199	Albertine → Albertine	<i>JFF</i> , 510
1 year	26 L 69	Albertine → Marcel	<i>SG</i> , 185
Unknown	37 L 138	Old letter from Albertine	no previous reference
8 months	48 L 198	Mme Verdurin → Albertine	<i>La P</i> , 82

Second, Genette's category "analepse interne" applies when the original "quoting" of the letter projects back into the storyline but still lies within the borders of *Albertine disparue*. The following, then, are internal analeptic letters which were received just prior to the time when they are mentioned by Marcel in the narrative:

Table 6

14 L 37	Marcel's mother → Marcel	one day
15 L 38	Marcel → Elstir	few days
36 L 130	Gisèle → Andrée	eight days
58 L 240	Charlus → Marcel	few weeks
59 L 240	Saint-Loup → Marcel	few weeks
66 L 257	Bobette → Saint-Loup	several weeks

Two short letters at the end of *Albertine disparue* are examples of prolepses, "qui viennent combler par avance une

lacune ultérieure"<sup>3</sup>: the *faire-part* letter (61 L 250) to the funeral of Mlle d'Oloron, and the letter from her young husband, "le marquis de Cambremer," received "quelque temps après la mort de sa femme" (62 L 252). Both letters are mentioned by the narrator during the sequence on the train when Marcel and his mother are coming back from Venice as part of the discussion they have about the wedding announcements of Mlle d'Oloron. Two other letters (2 L 10 and 3 L 10) concerning a fragment of narrative that describes a planned departure of one of Marcel's mistresses are treated here as a prolepsis, assuming that "une de mes maîtresses" refers to one of Marcel's mistresses who moved into his apartment in Paris after Albertine's death (256).

The study of the chronological order of the body of letters produces a symmetrical pattern with few anachronisms, providing a balanced, if floating, background for the more disturbing rhythms of the "durée" or interval, and "fréquence" or repeats. Genette describes the analysis of these two final aspects of rhythm as a relationship between time and space, between a temporal measurement (hours, days, years) and a spatial measurement (chapters and page numbers). According to Genette the pace of a novel, or

la vitesse du récit se définira par le rapport  
entre une durée, celle de l'histoire, mesurée en  
secondes, minutes, heures, jours, mois et années,

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<sup>3</sup> Genette, *Figures III*, 109.

et une longueur: celle du texte, mesurée en lignes et en pages.<sup>4</sup>

An analysis of the interval and the repeats produces similar results to the study of tempo in music: the rhythmic effects of the interval are characterized by a change of tempo in the narrative discourse—accelerations, retractions, ellipsis, and discontinuities. The repetition of words, phrases, or events produces an elongation or expansion of the narrative that disturbs the rhythmic flow. The variations in these patterns in the narrative are played against the constant measure of the diagesis which is assumed to be the ordered day-to-day progression of time. Discussing the subject of chronology in *Répertoire II*, Butor describes the dramatic confrontation of these two temporal suites, "comme deux voix en musique," producing the effect of a "dialogue entre deux temps."<sup>5</sup> In this dialogue, the pseudo-time of the narrative is played against the real time of the diagesis, creating all sorts of temporal distortions. An analysis of these distortions between the narrative and the reconstructed diagesis will reveal the rhythm of the narrative movement of *Albertine disparue*.

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<sup>4</sup>Genette, *Figures III*, 123.

<sup>5</sup>Michel Butor, *Répertoire II*, Les éditions de Minuit: Paris, 1964, 92.

### Interval

In order to produce a graph of these temporal distortions using the body of correspondence in *Albertine disparue*, we need first to reconstruct the story behind the narrative discourse. In Genette's terms:

Il faut tout d'abord déterminer ce que l'on considère comme grandes articulations narratives et ensuite disposer, pour la mesure de leur temps d'histoire, d'une chronologie interne approximativement claire et cohérente.<sup>6</sup>

However, he warns that although the first is easy to do, i.e., to divide the narrative sequences by major changes in time or place, the second, a chronological reconstruction, is not.

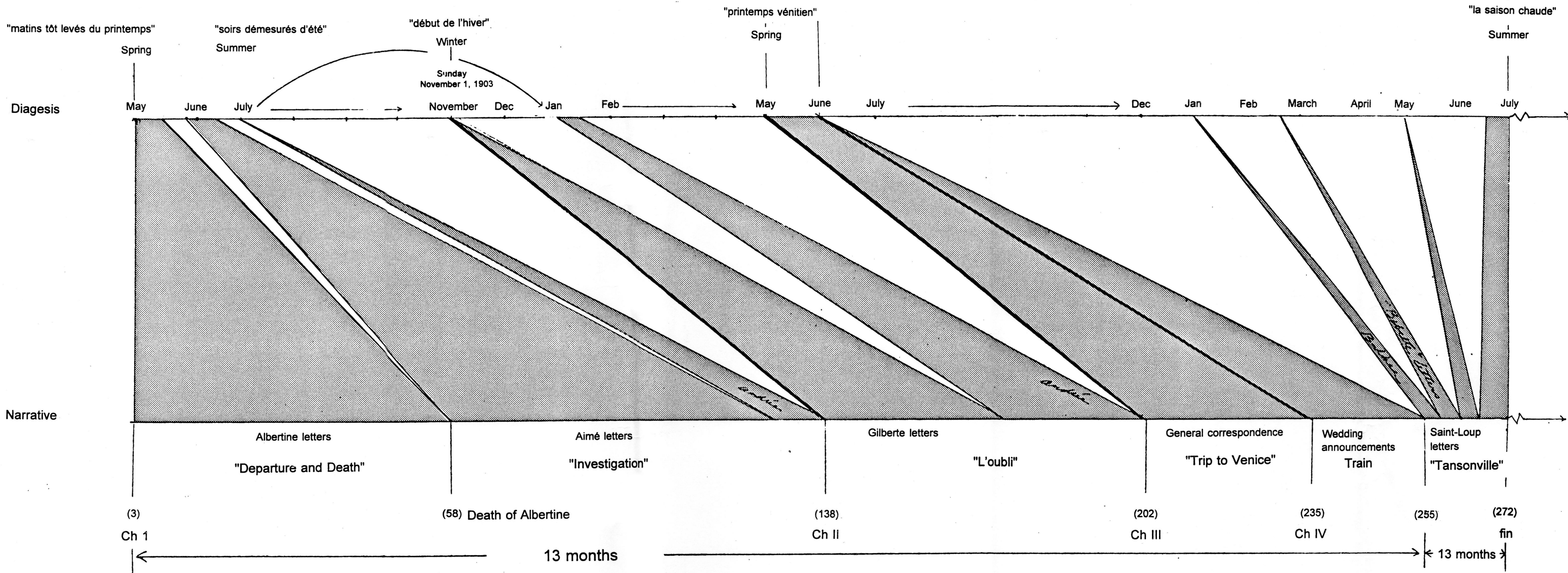
Indeed, the text of *Albertine disparue* divides easily into five narrative sequences which correspond to the four chapters, with two exceptions: Chapter I is divided in two by one of the most important events in the novel and certainly a major event in the life of Marcel—the death of Albertine—after which he says: "Alors ma vie fut entièrement changée" (60). The second exception involves the trip home on the train from Venice, which begins on the last few pages of Chapter III and continues through to the middle of Chapter IV. This is a transition period treated as part of the holiday in Venice. The hero and his mother are in transit from Venice to Paris and

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<sup>6</sup>Genette, *Figures III*, 124.



Figure 2: Interval



although the discussion on the train centers around three letters that they received while in Venice, the events arising from these letters will take place after they arrive back in Paris: the marriages of Gilberte and Saint-Loup, and the marquis de Cambremer and Mlle d'Oloron. Letters concerning the subsequent death and funeral of Mlle d'Oloron are also mentioned in a prolepsis by Marcel.

The following five narrative sequences, then, can be established by chapters and natural changes in time or place, forming around four major groups of letters:

Table 7

1.	<u>Departure and Death</u> - Ch. I: 3-60, The future of Albertine	Albertine letters
2.	<u>Investigation</u> - Ch. I: 60-126 After the death of Albertine there is a shift in the temporal point of view of the hero, from the future to the past: an investigation into the past of Albertine which is lived in the present--the "double harnais" of past/present.	Aimé letters
3.	<u>L'oubli</u> - Ch. II: 126-202 A shift in the temporal point of view to a more distant past--"temps plus ancien" with the process of working through the stages of l'oubli.	Gilberte letters
4.	<u>Trip to Venice</u> - Ch. III: 202-235 A change in place from Paris to Venice. A transition period - Ch. IV: 234-255 The trip home on the train	Wedding announcements
5.	<u>Trip to Tansonville</u> - Ch. IV: 255-272 Change of place: from Paris to Tansonville.	No correspondence

The problem of the chronology in *la Recherche* has given rise, according to Genette, to "un débat déjà ancien et

apparemment insoluble"<sup>7</sup> among various critics. A comparison of studies done by Genette, Georges Daniel, and Gareth Steel comes up with dates for the diagenesis of *Albertine disparue* that range from 1902-1903 for Genette,<sup>8</sup> an undetermined period of time between 1900 and 1911 for Daniel,<sup>9</sup> and two two-year periods between 1902-1904 or 1904-1906 for Steel.<sup>10</sup> In *Chronology and Time in "A la recherche du temps perdu,"* Steel even offers an alternative chronology for the diagenesis of *Albertine disparue* based on historical data (the Dreyfus affair, the Moroccan crises of 1905 and 1911, the Balkan crisis of 1912) with the result that the diagenesis covers a period from 1912-1914.<sup>11</sup> It is fair to say that Genette makes only passing references to the chronology of *Albertine disparue*, and he does so in discouraging terms due to the contradictory historical references of this problematic volume of *la Recherche* that cannot be accommodated in his overall "hypothèse chronologique."<sup>12</sup> His narratological analysis of Proust concentrates on establishing the chronology of the entire novel which itself can only be approximated, according to Genette, "qu'à la condition d'éliminer ces deux

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<sup>7</sup>Genette, *Figures III*, 125.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, 126.

<sup>9</sup>Georges Daniel, *Temps et mystification dans "A la recherche du temps perdu,"* A.G. Nizet: Paris, 1963, 121 and 127.

<sup>10</sup>Steel, 74 and 93.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid, 94.

<sup>12</sup>Genette, 126.

séries [des épisodes Balbec II et Albertine]."<sup>13</sup> Genette simply gives up on analyzing the historical inconsistencies of *la Recherche* and *Albertine disparue* in particular:

Je trancherai dans ces incertitudes pour établir une chronologie purement indicative, puisque notre propos est seulement de nous faire une idée d'ensemble des grands rythmes du récit proustien.<sup>14</sup>

For all intents and purposes Georges Daniel also gives up on establishing a specific chronology for *Albertine disparue*. In his opinion, all temporal logic breaks down in *La Fugitive*, as he calls it. According to Daniel, the irreconcilable historical references and the vague temporal indications of this volume make it impossible for a reader to even pretend to measure the passage of time: "sa fonction logique est à peu près nulle."<sup>15</sup>

After what can only be called an exhaustive study of the temporal references of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Steel concludes that for Proust's work, "no single integrated time scheme can be established."<sup>16</sup> If the chronology of *la Recherche* is complex and elusive, it is the consensus of opinion of these critics that *Albertine disparue* is the most enigmatic volume in *la Recherche*. According to Steel, it is the "most

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid, 126.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid, 126.

<sup>15</sup>Daniel, 129.

<sup>16</sup>Steel, 190.

hermetic for dating the narration, as for dating the diagesis."<sup>17</sup> And, of course, Genette concludes that only by eliminating the historical references, in the *Albertine* episodes in particular, can one attempt to establish a "chronologie approximativement cohérente."<sup>18</sup>

Apart from some minor anachronistic references to historical facts—the Rolls Royce first appeared in 1904 and the House of Fortuny was founded in 1907—the historical references of any consequence in *Albertine disparue* appear in one small scene in Venice describing a dinner party with the aging diplomat, M. Norpois, and Mme de Villeparisis who supposedly died in *La Prisonnière* (281), as part of an old love story resurrected. As the Norpois-Villeparisis love story and Norpois's involvement with the election of the prime minister of Italy lie outside Marcel's story, I shall take my cue from Genette and eliminate these historical references in my effort to establish the chronology of *Albertine disparue*.

So, for the purpose of this study I will attempt to recover the diagesis using only the internal chronology of the narrative as a reference, foregoing an analysis of historical data, to see what within the boundaries of the narrative of *Albertine disparue* itself allows the reader to reconstruct a plausible chronological storyline. Using Steel's method for

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid, 178.

<sup>18</sup>Genette, *Figures III*, 126.

establishing the chronology of a text,<sup>19</sup> I will concentrate on the temporal indications that refer exclusively to fictional events in *Albertine disparue*, corroborating this information with what Steel calls derived or indirect internal chronological markers that describe "natural phenomena... associated with passing time."<sup>20</sup> In using this method to establish the overall chronology of the novel, Steel does not do an extensive analysis of the internal temporal references in *Albertine disparue*. In Chapter 2 of his *Chronology and Time in "A la recherche du temps perdu"*, Steel devotes approximately one page to this volume of *la Recherche*, using temporal references from only a handful of letters (eight letters and telegrams from Chapter I of *Albertine disparue*, and the wedding announcements from Chapter III) and quoting the contents of only two letters: Saint-Loup's telegram to Marcel (6 T 32) and Aimé's letter to Marcel from La Touraine (35 L 105).<sup>21</sup> In Chapter 2 of his book concerning "derived internal chronology," Steel devotes only a dozen lines to the seasonal references in *Albertine disparue*. In fact, he calls his analysis of the seasonal indicators of the entire novel "a brief survey."<sup>22</sup> Steel's analysis is anything but brief for

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<sup>19</sup> Steel, *Chronology and Time in "A la recherche du temps perdu"*, Ch 2: Immediate Internal Chronology and Ch 3: Derived Internal Chronology.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid, 61.

<sup>21</sup>Steel, 56.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid, 66.

his study of what he calls "External Chronology" or historical markers which I have excluded from my thesis.

Following Steel's methodology then, I will use only the internal chronological markers that consist of: specific temporal references such as "trois mois plus tard" (10), "ces dames sont parties pour trois jours" (32), "à peu près six mois" (175); seasonal references such as "le printemps vénitien" (230), "ses soirs démesurés d'été" (63), "au début d'hiver" (139),; and, finally, the ubiquitous adverbial phrases "quelques temps après la mort d'Albertine" (73, 126), "quelques semaines à Venise" (202), "un peu plus tard quelques jours à Tansonville" (255), "quelques jours à Balbec" (258). Using these various temporal signals, I will attempt to reconstruct, step by step, the chronology of *Albertine disparue* in order to determine to what time of year each of the five narrative sequences refers. Subsequently, it will be possible to establish an approximation of the amount of time attributed to each sequence in the narrative, i.e., whether the narrative is accelerated, covering long periods of the storyline in a few pages or, conversely, protracted, taking many pages to cover just a few days. Finally, we will see in what way the body of correspondence fits into the chronology of the narrative sequence: the number of letters written and how often they were sent; whether there are intense periods of correspondence with letters criss-crossing or long periods with little or no

correspondence. This will allow us to determine how the letters impact on the rhythmic pattern of *Albertine disparue*.

The first narrative sequence, called "Departure and Death," begins with Albertine's flight to La Touraine which takes place the day after Marcel and Albertine took an evening walk which Albertine remembers in her letter (17 L 50) as: "cette promenade deux fois crépusculaire." Marcel wakes up the next morning of that fateful day to find Albertine gone:

Le beau temps, cette nuit-là fit un bond en avant  
comme un thermomètre monte à la chaleur. Quand je  
m'éveillai de mon lit par ces matins tôt levés du  
printemps. (*La Prisonnière*, 395)

The first narrative sequence (1-60) of *Albertine disparue* opens then on a warm spring morning with the disappearance of Albertine. Marcel, left only with a farewell letter (1L 5), lives through the first four days of Albertine's disappearance: "j'avais supporté les quatre jours qu'il y avait depuis qu'elle était partie" waiting anxiously for a telegram from Saint-Loup who has been dispatched to La Touraine to secure Albertine's return. Marcel finally learns from Saint-Loup's telegram that he has been detained "pour trois jours" (6 T 32). Later, Marcel sends what turns out to be his final letter to Albertine (20 L 51), who has now been gone for a total of eight days:

Albertine,...pouvait maintenant, depuis déjà huit  
jours, détruisant les précautions de chaque heure



que j'avais prises pendant plus de six mois à Paris, se livrer à ses vices, et faire ce que minute par minute j'avais empêché. (52)

Marcel sends one last desperate telegram (22 T 58) imploring Albertine to return but it arrives too late; just as he sends this telegram he receives a telegram from Mme Bontemps (23 T 58) informing him of Albertine's death. Although she never received his last telegram, Albertine had time, before her death, to receive Marcel's last letter concerning Andrée (20 L 51), and had time to respond (24 L 59). This was one of the last two letters received posthumously from Albertine, just after her death, although we are told the second one (25 L 60) is dated one day later:

En réalité elle avait dû les écrire à peu d'instantes l'une de l'autre...et antidater la première. (59)

This first narrative sequence, "Departure and Death," takes place then in the spring of the year and given the last flurry of letters and telegrams, probably an additional four to six days could be added to the eight days we are told specifically that Albertine was away before her death. It is a short, intense period of time of approximately twelve to fourteen days during which Marcel sends or receives the twenty-five letters that appear in the Albertine narrative sequence (nine telegrams and sixteen letters). Marcel's preoccupation with Albertine's departure creates an intense, emotional period with eight

imagined letters, three old letters, and some of the fourteen remaining real letters criss-crossing in Marcel's frantic efforts to secure Albertine's return as soon as possible.

Although the first narrative sequence, "Departure and Death," has a specific time frame of twelve to fourteen days, the second narrative sequence, "Investigation" (60-138), does not. After the death of Albertine, Marcel seems to lose track of chronological time. It is a period of intense introspection, grieving, and looking back to the past:

cette année finale...où s'était terminée la  
destinée d'Albertine m'apparaissait remplie,  
diverse, vaste comme un siècle. (66)

Time is felt rather than counted in this period of mourning where time seems to expand, not only because of the seasonally long days of summer, but because of the suffering caused by the death of Albertine. We sense Marcel's pain as he feels that time literally slows down--waiting, in vain, for the dead Albertine to return:

...que le temps me semblait si long jusqu'à son  
coup de sonnette que je pourrais maintenant  
attendre éternellement en vain. (65)

Although Marcel clearly places this period of mourning at the beginning of summer, "L'été venait, les jours étaient longs...il faisait chaud" (60), "que le jour est lent à mourir par ces soirs démesurés d'été" (63), he is just as definite when telling us further along in this narrative sequence after Aimé's trip to

Balbec that "on était au mois de mai" (103). Aimé's letters do not clear up this anachronistic chronology. When he writes from Balbec that the weather could not be more agreeable and that "la saison s'annonce bien pour cette année" (30 L 96), we understand from this reference that he was in Balbec at or near the beginning of "la belle saison," which is defined in the dictionary as: "fin de printemps, été et début de l'automne" (Robert). However, even with this definition, the seasonal indications of this letter remain vague: Aimé's trip to Balbec could have been either at the end of May or at the beginning of summer, and still be considered near the beginning of the tourist season, "qui s'annonce bien."

Other temporal references within the narrative tell us that Aimé was sent off on his missions to Balbec and La Touraine "quelque temps après la mort d'Albertine" (73). We have no way of knowing whether "quelque temps" means one week or one month after Albertine's death. However, we can deduce from his last letter from La Touraine—using Steel's reference in which he quotes from this letter—that it was not too long after Albertine's death because Aimé "claimed to have «vu encore la trace» of Albertine's bites on the arm of a «petite blanchisseuse»"<sup>23</sup> (35 L 105). There is therefore a small ellipsis of indeterminate length between the death of Albertine

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<sup>23</sup>Steel, 55.

and the beginning of Aimé's trip, which took place at the end of May or the beginning of summer.

It is difficult to be any more precise about the length of time of Aimé's two trips that it is about when they occurred. It is true that his letters do give us some temporal indications: we read that he was detained in Balbec because the person who knew about Albertine and "la doucheuse" was "absentée pour deux jours" (30 L 96). From his Touraine letters (30 L 105 - 35 L 105), we know he had time enough to write four letters to Marcel and to receive one in response. So taking into account the number of letters written, the detainment of two days, plus Aimé's travel time, one might suppose a total of at least ten days or two weeks for the two trips.

The elliptical character of the chronology in this narrative sequence is compounded by Andrée's visit to Marcel's apartment in Paris. It begins with exactly the same temporal references as Aimé's trips: "quelque temps après la mort d'Albertine Andrée vint chez-moi" (126). In this case we have no other temporal markers to assist us in discovering again whether "quelque temps" means exactly one week or one month. Although Andrée's visit comes after Aimé's trip in the narrative, it could easily have been concurrent with these trips in the chronology of the diagesis as they both begin with the adverbial modifier "quelque temps après la mort d'Albertine" (71, 126). Our only indirect clue is that Marcel found Andrée

beautiful: "Pour la première fois elle me sembla belle" (126). Clearly, he is over the worst of his grieving to the point where he can consider a new love interest in Andrée with whom he has "demi-relations charnelles" at their meeting six months later (176). In this case, "quelque temps" could refer to a period of as much as one or two months.

The imprecise temporal phrase, "quelque temps après la mort d'Albertine," which precedes both Aimé's trip to Balbec (71) and Andrée's visit in Paris (126), creates an indecisive storyline that leads to the natural temptation on the part of the reader to invent a hypothetical storyline in order to fill the void left in the diagesis. After Andrée's visit, the diagesis simply trails off into an ellipsis and we are unable to determine the interval of the second narrative sequence until the beginning of the third sequence when the diagesis picks up again after the ellipsis.

The third narrative sequence, "L'oubli," which corresponds to Chapter II of *Albertine disparue* and marks the start of Marcel's detachment from the memory of Albertine, "les quatre étapes de l'oubli" (139), begins with the only internal calendar date given in *Albertine disparue*:

La première de ces étapes commença au début de  
l'hiver, un beau dimanche de Toussaint... (139)

All Saints' Day is celebrated on the first of November.

Reference to a perpetual calendar shows that November 1 falls on

a Sunday in the years 1896, 1903, 1906, and 1914. None of the critics has indicated using a perpetual calendar to establish a fixed date for this reference to *La Toussaint*. Given the fact that the year 1903 falls within the hypothetical time frames for *Albertine disparue* suggested by Genette, Steel, and Daniel, the date of November 1st, 1903 would seem appropriate for this reference point as a temporal peg on which to hang the diagesis of *Albertine disparue*, if one is to attach the narrative to one particular calendar year. Given that for the analysis that follows it will be useful to have a specific time frame, I shall use this date, i.e., 1903, as the temporal reference for this volume of *la Recherche*. Only at this point can we determine the interval of the second narrative sequence, "Investigation," which covers a period of roughly six months from the death of Albertine sometime in May to the beginning of the third narrative sequence on November 1st, 1903.

The diagesis of the third narrative sequence, "L'oubli," concerning Gilberte Swann as Mlle d'Eporcheville, Mlle de L'Orgeville, and finally Mlle de Forcheville, has a narrow but consistent, interior chronology. It begins with the first sighting of Mlle d'Eporcheville on November 1st (138), and continues on with the second sighting, "quelques jours plus tard" (142). The telegram concerning Mlle de L'Orgeville arrives from Saint-Loup "le lendemain" (39 T 146), in time for the visit chez la duchesse de Guermantes after lunch, "le surlendemain" (145). This mini-diagesis culminates in the

discovery that the girl was actually Gilberte Swann now called Mlle de Forcheville. Even though this small fragment of the diagesis has a tight, logical storyline, the imprecise temporal marker, "quelques jours plus tard," in the middle of the story, requires the reader, once again, to approximate the interval of the passage.

A more complex elliptical pattern emerges with Andrée's two visits to Marcel's flat in Paris, which make up the residue of this third narrative sequence. Actually, Andrée's visits—one in the second narrative sequence (126) and these two in the third narrative sequence (175, 195)—make up a story line of their own with a consistent internal chronology and approximate time frame: The second visit is "à peu près six mois après" (175) the first visit, while the third takes place "une semaine plus tard" (193), one week after the second visit. The Andrée series or fragment has a mini-diagesis of its own that is composed of three visits each one day long, the first two six months apart and the last, one week later. Although they straddle the narrative sequences, none of the visits is attached to the main diagesis in a specific way. We are given only the vague indication that they began sometime after the death of Albertine. This little story floats freely within the larger story thereby creating a moving and indeterminate elliptical pattern that makes it impossible to determine, at this stage, the interval of the third narrative sequence, which again simply fades away into an ellipsis (see Fig. 2, "Interval").

The fourth narrative sequence, "Trip to Venice," Chapter III, begins with the hero in the third stage of indifference towards the memory of Albertine: "Un jour assez longtemps après la dernière visite d'Andrée, à Venise."<sup>24</sup>

The indefinite temporal reference of "assez longtemps après," which attempts to connect up chronologically with the fragmented, elliptical story of Andrée's visits that were not measured against any previous event, makes the interval of the diagesis at this point almost unmanageable—a sort of large, unsteady structure with an undetermined, discontinuous chronology in which ellipsis predominates. The movement is stopped by a seasonal reference just at the end of the Venice trip which stabilizes the chronology in the spring of that year, when Marcel refers to "le printemps vénitien" (230). It is only with this reference that we are able to establish the outer limits of the interval of the third narrative sequence, "L'oubli": from November 1st, 1903, according to the dates already established, to some time the following spring ("printemps vénitien"), before the hero leaves for Venice—a

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<sup>24</sup> In Proust's original manuscript the first paragraph of Chapter III began with a sentence that was scratched out. Although it appears in the 1954 *Pléiade* edition, it is omitted from the 1987 *Pléiade* edition and from the 1990 "Collection Folio" of *Albertine disparue*: "*Quand à la troisième fois où je me souviens d'avoir eu conscience que j'approchais de l'indifférence absolue à l'égard d'Albertine (et cette dernière fois jusqu'à sentir que j'y étais tout à fait arrivé), ce fut un jour, assez longtemps après la dernière visite d'Andrée, à Venise.*" (*Albertine disparue*, 325n.)



period of approximately six months. Once again the interval of the fourth narrative sequence, "Trip to Venice," although it is in the spring of the year, is imprecise:

Ma mère m'avait emmené passer quelques semaines à  
Venise. (202)

The ever present, vague adverbial phrase, in this case "quelques semaines," leaves the passage of time fluid and elusive; however, the stay in Venice and the trip home on the train represent the only section of the text where the interval, albeit imprecise, is non elliptic. The descriptive passages of this narrative sequence fill the space of the diagesis: "la première sortie du matin" (203), "le dîner avec Norpois et Mme de Villeparisis" (210), "des jours...des musées et des églises de Venise...et de Padoue" (226), "les sorties seul le soir" (229), etc. The series of letters surrounding the marriages of Saint-Loup and Gilberte and of Mlle d'Oloron and le jeune marquis de Cambremer occupy the entire transition period of the trip home on the train.

The Venetian trip provides a platform from which the narrative projects into the most fragmented and elliptical sequence of the novel. It begins with *un blanc* followed by the enigmatic: "J'allai passer un peu plus tard quelques jours à Tansonville" (255). This fifth narrative sequence consists of intermittent ellipsis of undetermined periods of time of up to several months; a series of fragmented pieces of the diagesis

that leave the reader unable to establish any reliable chronology. There are no precise temporal markers and only one seasonal marker at the end of the sequence when Marcel visits Gilberte, now Mme de Saint-Loup, at her home in Tansonville, outside of Combray:

On dînait maintenant à Tansonville à une heure où jadis on dormait depuis longtemps à Combray. Et à cause de la saison chaude...on n'allait se promener qu'environ deux heures avant le dîner. (266)

With this vague, single reference to the season we can assume the time of the visit to Tansonville was anywhere from early summer to as late as August.

However, this could not refer to the immediate summer following the trip home from Venice presumably in 1904, which would only allow two or three months for the whole list of events that are alluded to in this sequence to take place: Gilberte marries Saint-Loup (Marcel receives a letter from Gilberte announcing her wedding [55 L 230], just as Marcel and his mother leaves Venice, but we do not know when the wedding actually took place); Gilberte spends a few days in Balbec with an attentive husband, when she is pregnant and "déjà grosse" (250); then she is back home in Tansonville unhappy and ready to leave Saint-Loup after discovering his affair with Bobette (257); Marcel spends a few days in Tansonville (266), comforting a disillusioned Gilberte, but before leaving for Combray,

"quelques mois avant mon départ pour Tansonville" (256), he has time to make a discovery that Bobette is non other than Morel:

...parlant a Jupien...d'une correspondance  
amoureuse adressée à Saint-Loup et signée Bobette  
[66 L 257] que Mme de Saint-Loup avait  
surprise...la personne qui signait Bobette n'était  
autre que le violoniste-chroniqueur...qui avait  
joué un assez grand rôle dans la vie de M. de  
Charlus! (257)

There are many more of these incomplete vignettes alluded to in this segment: Saint-Loup and other mistresses (263), Marcel's most recent mistress ensconced in his apartment (256), a reappearance of Odette never more elegant or effective "dans la période de la chasteté finale" (263), among others. Given the number of these various events offered in a fragmented way, the interval of the last narrative sequence must, of necessity, extend over a period at least of one year: from the return home from Venice in the spring of 1904 until "la saison chaude" of the summer of 1905.

The interval between these narrative time frames is impossible to evaluate; the diagesis becomes progressively more elliptical to the point where it almost disappears (see Fig. 2). We are left with only small disconnected bits of stories that tell something of the order of the diagesis and nothing of the interval, the narrative covers a day or so in Paris (256); a few days in Balbec (258); "une soirée" with Saint-Loup in Paris (263); and a few days in Tansonville (266). As Steel says, the

relationship between these last events of *Albertine disparue* is so vague that "the reader is at liberty to imagine the events spread out as far as the internal chronology will allow—right up to 1914."<sup>25</sup> Conceivably, the lone seasonal marker of this last narrative sequence could refer to "la saison chaude" of 1913!

I have attempted to reconstruct the diagesis of *Albertine disparue* using only the internal chronology of the narrative as reference. The combination of indefinite seasonal markers with imprecise adverbial modifiers leads to a drifting, elliptical narrative. It is possible to establish only an approximation of the overall interval which technically remains open ended—potentially extending up to a ten year period.

Our hypothetical chronology, then, can be established covering an interval of approximately two years, from the spring of 1903 to the summer of 1905, based on the internal temporal references found within the boundaries of the narrative itself as follows:

Table 8

1. <u>Departure and Death</u> , Ch I	Spring	1903
2. <u>Investigation</u> , Ch I	(Spring) Summer	1903
3. <u>L'oubli</u> , Ch II	Winter	1903/1904
4. <u>Trip to Venice</u> , Ch III Transition on train home, Ch IV	Spring	1904
5. <u>Trip to Tansonville</u> , Ch IV	Summer	1905

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<sup>25</sup> Steel, 56

Following this chronology for the diagesis, along with other indications from the temporal markers including the number of letters in each segment, the overall pace of the narrative can be established as follows:

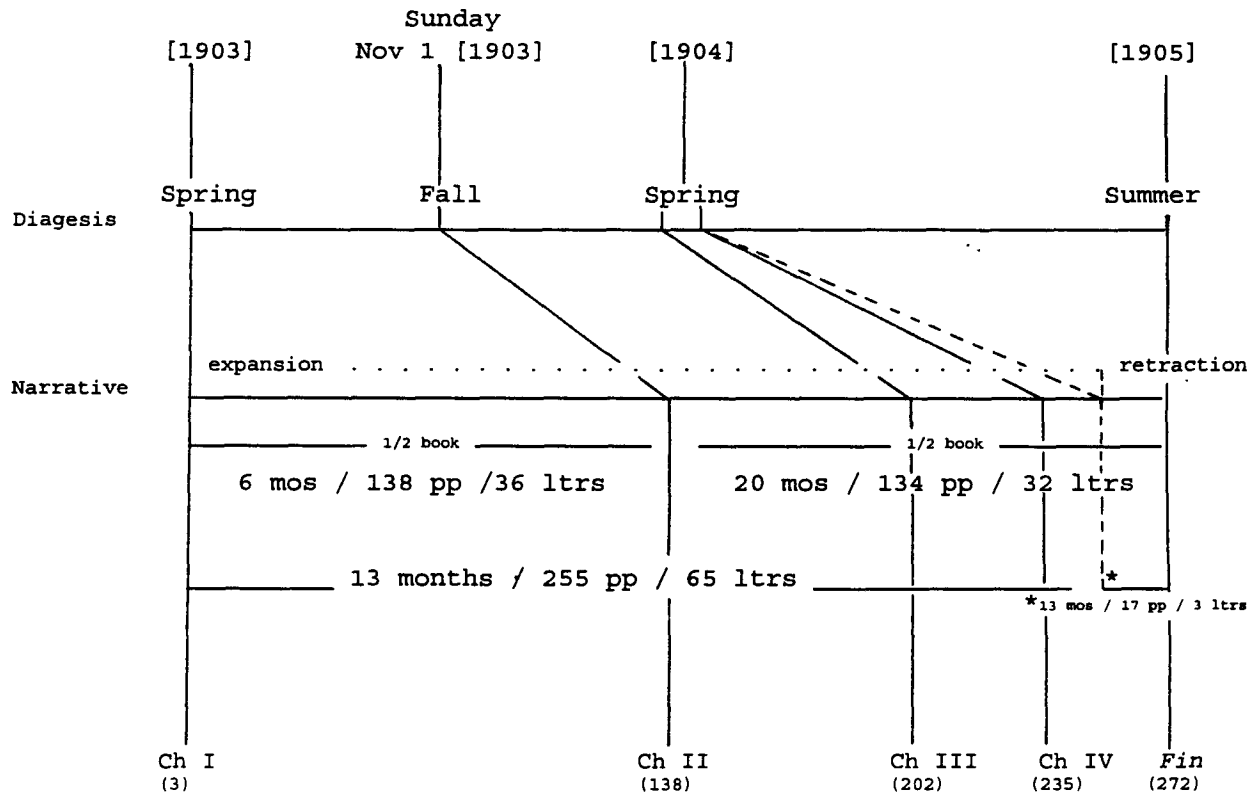
Table 9

1. <u>Departure and Death:</u>	60 pages for 2 weeks	25 letters
2. <u>Investigation:</u>	78 pages for 5½ months	11 letters
Diagesis:	2 weeks	
Ellipsis:	5 months, undetermined placement	
3. <u>L'oubli:</u>	64 pages for 6 months	13 letters
Diagesis:	2 weeks	
Ellipsis:	5½ months, undetermined placement	
4. <u>Trip to Venice:</u>	33 pages for 1 month	8 letters
Transition: train home	20 pages for one day	8 letters
5. <u>Trip to Tansonville:</u>	17 pages for 13 months	3 letters
Diagesis:	a few weeks	
Ellipsis:	12 months, indeterminate	

The graph given below (Fig. 3) is a schematic rendering of the information contained in Table 9. It shows two hundred and seventy-two pages of text covering twenty-six months of diagesis that includes a body of sixty-eight letters and telegrams. This translates into a ratio of ninety-four percent of the narrative devoted to approximately one year with only six percent of the narrative devoted to the other year. Such a ratio represents an enormous distortion in the pace or "vitesse," as Genette calls it, of the narrative text in relation to the period of time covered in the diagesis: Specifically, the first thirteen months of the diagesis, from May 1903 to May 1904, including Chapters I, II, III, and twenty pages of Chapter IV, cover two hundred and fifty-five pages;

the second thirteen months, from June 1904 to June 1905, are covered in the last seventeen pages of Chapter IV. In fact, this excessive variation in the distortion of the interval in *Albertine disparue* is captured in Chapter IV itself, where one day on the train covers the first twenty pages while one year of the diagesis is covered in the last seventeen pages.

Figure 3



Recalling Genette's words this graph depicts the "vitesse" of the narrative movement—the rhythmic distortions of the narrative represented in the relationship between "une durée celle de l'histoire," in this case a diagesis measured in changing

seasons of the year and "une longueur celle du texte," or narrative measured in number of pages and letters.<sup>26</sup> However, the true magnitude of this distortion can be appreciated by examining the elliptical character of the narrative content: approximately three months of narrative content are projected onto a massive ellipsis of approximately twenty-three months (see Fig. 2, "Interval"). Half of the novel is written around a period of approximately thirty days surrounding the death of Albertine (two weeks before the death, including a small undetermined period of time before Aimé's trips, and two weeks after, covering a hundred and thirty-eight pages of Chapter I); the rest of Chapter I fades out into a five month ellipsis. This stretching out, or expansion of, the text is typical of introspective literature, where the narrative expands or slows down as it examines or analyzes a small interval of time. The large number of letters and telegrams written in this first month literally allows the narrative to expand in textual terms: over half of the body of letters and telegrams, real and imagined—thirty-six in all—are written in this short period of time. Conversely, the final section of the text appears to show an acute acceleration of the narrative where just the last seventeen pages of Chapter IV cover a whole year. However, the narrative content of this period is very sketchy since only a few weeks of fragmented narrative material are projected in an

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<sup>26</sup>Genette, *Figures III*, 123.

intermittent fashion onto a twelve month ellipsis. Rather than saying the narrative accelerates, one might say that the narrative disintegrates or fractures, revealing a discontinuous, fragmented diagesis.

In striking opposition to the first thirty days of the narrative that contained half of the letters written in the novel, there is virtually no correspondence at all in the final year of the story, for Marcel has stopped writing. As for the Bobette package of love letters (66 L 257) and the Saint-Loup letters (67 L 260), they represent old correspondence, and the final general letters of Charlie or Morel (68 L 264) refer to the fact that he, "comme tous les artistes," does not write letters:

(Charlie s'intitulait ainsi sans conviction et sans orgueil pour s'excuser de ne pas répondre aux lettres, ...d'une foule de défauts qu'il croyait faire partie de la psychologie incontestée des artistes). (264)

In an allusive way, the "Charlie" letters reflect the elliptical character of the last chapter of *Albertine disparue*'s non responsive, empty diagesis.

Thus, the two opposing blocks of narrative of Chapter I and Chapter IV embody the magnitude of the variation of the distortion in the treatment of the interval in *Albertine disparue*. The interval or "durée" of these two chapters has an inverted character: half of the narrative text of the volume representing only thirty days of the diagesis on the one hand,



and half of the diagesis of the volume represented by a twelve month ellipsis with only a few scattered days of disconnected narrative content on the other--like a literary yin-yang.

The central section of the text, "Séjour à Venise," Chapter III, provides the only stability to the strong rhythmic swings of these two opposing chapters. Being the only section of *Albertine disparue* which is not elliptic, Chapter III anchors the diagesis in the center, thereby providing a state of equilibrium in which Marcel reaches the final stages of "l'oubli":

J'avais définitivement cessé d'aimer Albertine. De sorte que cet amour après s'être tellement écarté de ce que j'avais prévu; après m'avoir fait faire un détour si long et si douloureux, finissait lui aussi par rentrer...dans la loi générale de l'oubli. (223)

The internal chronology of *Albertine disparue* reveals a strong asymmetrical narrative movement characterized by the special use of the ellipsis. The evolving pattern is one of an ever diminishing narrative content and an ever increasing black hole. The ellipsis intrudes on the narrative in such a pervasive way that it finally predominates to a point where it threatens the very existence of the narrative text. Genette's description of the distortion of the interval in *la Recherche* in general can be applied to *Albertine disparue* in particular:

...on observe d'une part un ralentissement progressif du récit, par l'importance croissante de scènes très longues couvrant une très petite durée d'histoire; et d'autre part, compensant d'une certaine manière ce

ralentissement, une présence de plus en plus massive des ellipses: deux aspects que l'on peut aisément synthétiser ainsi: discontinuité croissante du récit. Le récit proustien tend à devenir de plus en plus discontinu, syncopé, fait de scènes énormes séparées par d'immenses lacunes, et donc à s'écarter de plus en plus de la "norme" hypothétique de l'isochronie narrative.<sup>27</sup>

The correspondence plays an essential role in the reconstruction of the diagesis of *Albertine disparue*: the number of letters written, their order and frequency along with the temporal and seasonal references in them have allowed us to establish the interval of the narrative and reveal the character of the rhythmic movement of this narrative—a sustained expansion followed by acute retraction. An examination of what Genette calls "la fréquence" or recurring narrative will show that it is not just the letters themselves that cause the narrative to expand but repeated references to them. It is these repeats that literally fill the pages of the first half of the novel.

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<sup>27</sup>Genette, *Figures III*, 127.

## Repeats

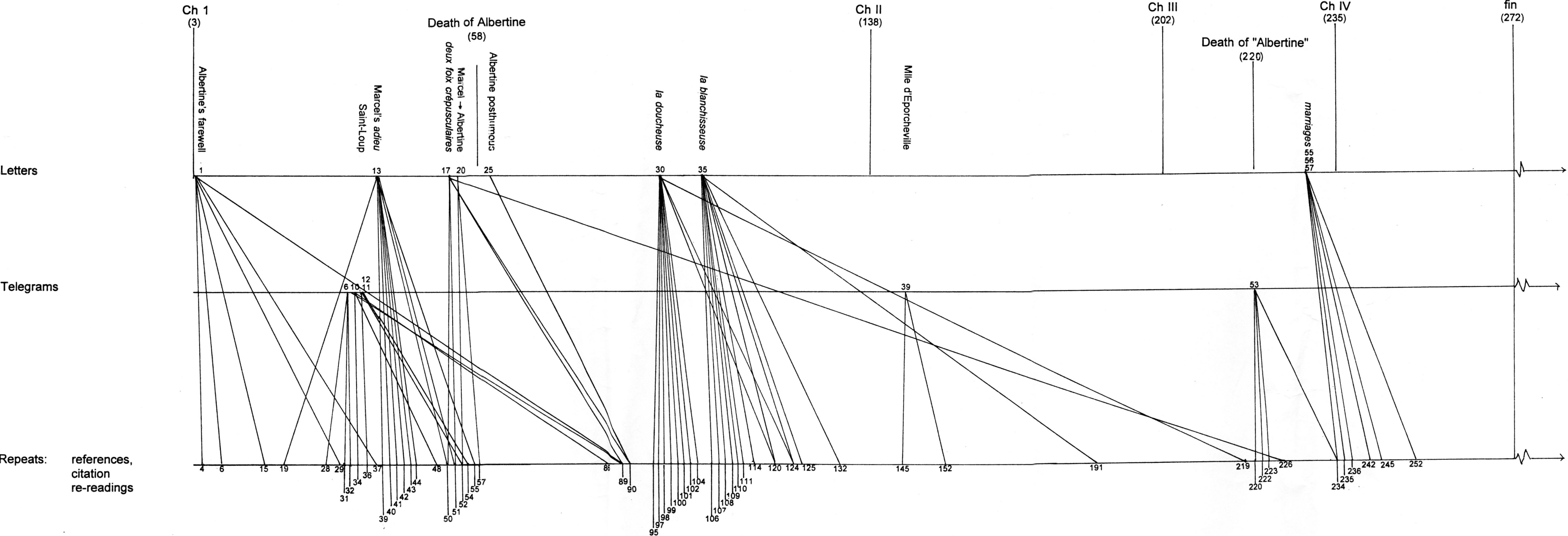
Genette makes a distinction between different types of recurring narrative in his study of "la fréquence" or repeats, showing how often and in what different ways the content of the diagesis is repeated in the narrative text: the repetitive narrative when a single event in the diagesis is repeated several times in the narrative, which has the effect of expanding the narrative text; the iterative narrative when an event that occurs habitually or several times in the diagesis is related only once in the narrative, which has the effect of reducing the narrative text, for example: "Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure", "tous les jours", etc. According to Genette, the dominant form of recurring narrative in Proust is the iterative: *la Recherche* exuberates "une sorte d'ivresse de l'itération."<sup>28</sup>

For the purpose of this study, however, I will be dealing with the repetitive form of recurring narrative rather than the iterative. The repeat, as it is used with the body of letters in *Albertine disparue*, takes the form of ordinary repetition where certain letters that appear only once in the diagesis are subject to repeated quotations, rereadings, and references in the narrative, which has the effect of expanding the text.

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<sup>28</sup>Genette, *Figures III*, 153.

Figure 4: Repeats



Not all of the correspondence in *Albertine disparue* is subjected to repeated narrative references. A total of ten letters and six telegrams are recalled by approximately ninety recurrent references. The majority of these repeats occur in Chapter I where seven letters and four telegrams are referred to, or quoted from, a total of seventy-one times—some letters such as Marcel's *lettre d'adieu* (13 L 37) are referred to as often as six times on a single page (41). There are virtually no repeats for the majority of the thirty-two letters and telegrams in Chapter II, III, and IV. Of the nineteen repeats in this second half of *Albertine disparue*, three refer to letters concerning Albertine that appear in Chapter I, and four refer to the final Venetian telegram presumably from the dead "Albertine." Apart from two references to a telegram from Saint-Loup about Mlle de L'Orgeville (39 T 146), the remaining ten of the repeated references concern the wedding announcements of Gilberte and Saint-Loup (55 L 230, 57 L 230), and of Mlle d'Oloron and the young marquis de Cambremer (56 L 230) (on pages 234 and 235 there are three references on each page).

Although all of the references, quotations, and rereadings have been plotted on the graph "Repeats" (Fig. 4), I will look specifically at two of these letters, and the effect that the use of recurrent references to these letters has on the narrative text: Marcel's *lettre d'adieu* to Albertine (13 L 37) and Aimé's letter from La Touraine (35 L 105). These two letters differ in their prospects: Marcel's *lettre d'adieu* is

part of the Albertine letters (direct letters of the "Personal Correspondence" in Table 4) that focus on the future, i.e., negotiating Albertine's return to Paris. The second letter is part of the Aimé letters (indirect letters of the "Personal Correspondence" in Table 4) that are prompted by Marcel's obsessive investigations into Albertine's past.

Generally, the repeated references to the letters and telegrams in the first narrative sequence slow down the speed of the narration with Marcel's agonizing analysis of these letters: He worries over the appropriateness, timing, and responses to the letters that he sends, and struggles with the credibility of the intentions and contents of the letters that he receives.

Marcel's *lettre d'adieu*, (13 L 37) contributes substantially to the protraction of the narration in the first sequence. The repeated references sweep across thirty pages of the narrative (19-51), through various stages of planning, writing, mailing, anticipated responses, and imagined reactions to these different responses. There are eighteen repeated references to the letter in the narrative—often several on one page (see Fig. 4). First, Marcel refers to his devious plans to write a deceptive letter of farewell to Albertine, "je me proposais d'écrire une lettre d'adieu" (19). The long letter itself covers three pages (36-39). There are three different references to the letter on the following page (40), including quotes from the text of the letter, a description of the

techniques of writing a *lettre feinte*, and its possible responses:

Sans s'arrêter en effet aux intentions que j'énonçais dans cette lettre...je lui disais: "Adieu pour toujours" c'est parce que je voulais la revoir... Hélas, cette lettre feinte, en l'écrivant pour avoir l'air de ne pas tenir à elle...j'aurais dû d'abord prévoir qu'il était possible qu'elle eût pour effet une réponse négative. (40)

Marcel even worries about his own reaction which could be suicidal if Albertine's response is negative: "Et j'aurais dû toujours avant d'envoyer ma lettre me demander si, au cas où Albertine répondrait sur le même ton et ne voudrait pas revenir, je serais assez maître de ma douleur" (40). However, Marcel reassures himself that the response will be positive with six references to that subject on one page (41):

Mais, je ne prévis rien de tout cela. Le résultat de cette lettre me paraissait au contraire de faire revenir Albertine au plus vite. Aussi, en pensant à ce résultat, avais-je eu une grande douceur à écrire la lettre...le résultat de cette lettre me paraissait certain, je regrettais de l'avoir envoyée. (41)

The mailing of the letter itself takes four pages (41-44): because of Marcel's indecision about the timing of the letter: "j'avais fait une folie d'écrire; j'aurais dû reprendre ma lettre hélas partie" (41); Françoise comes back with the letter, uncertain of the postage, so that Marcel is able to retrieve it, "Françoise me la rapporta" (41). Again, he agonizes over the effect the letter will have on Albertine: "je

voulus rendre la lettre à Françoise" (41); "venant à rendre à Françoise ma lettre" (42); finally giving the letter to Françoise: "Ces réflexions n'avaient d'ailleurs rien changé à ma détermination, je tendis ma lettre à Françoise pour qu'elle la mît enfin à la poste" (43). In the end, Marcel is indifferent to his own reaction: "celle qui me faisait tenir à ce que ma lettre partît, et, quand je la croyais partie, à le regretter" (43). His final instructions are given to Françoise with a note of optimism:

J'avais donnée la lettre à Françoise en lui disant d'aller vite la mettre à la poste. Dès que ma lettre fut partie, je conçus de nouveau le retour d'Albertine comme imminent. (44)

The last two references to Marcel's *lettre d'adieu* further along in the text refer again to Françoise mailing the letter (50), and to a final analysis of Marcel's intention disguised in a quoted text of his *lettre feinte*:

...en somme, quand je lui avais dit que je ne voulais pas la voir par peur de l'aimer. J'avais dit cela parce qu'au contraire je savais que dans la fréquentation constante mon amour s'amortissait et que la séparation s'exaltait; mais en réalité la fréquentation constante avait fait naître un besoin d'elle infiniment plus fort que l'amour des premiers temps de Balbec. (51) [My italics]

Marcel's emotional turmoil over his inability to control the future of Albertine produces a profusion of repeats in Chapter I and provides the mechanism for expanding the narrative in this chapter. Marcel's indecisive preoccupation with controlling the



events in the future by using a deceptive letter and Albertine's indifferent response to what Marcel thinks is his decisive *lettre d'adieu* prove he failed: "mais en somme la lettre d'Albertine n'avancait en rien les choses" (51). Marcel learns an important lesson in his apprenticeship as a writer, i.e., that he can have neither the possibility nor the illusion of being in control of future events.

The use of the repeat in the second narrative sequence, "Investigation", has a more complex effect on the narrative text. The letter written by Aimé from La Touraine concerning Albertine and la "blanchisseuse" (35 L 105) has eighteen references and quotations fanning out over eighty-six pages (105-191) which, like the repeated references of Marcel's *lettre d'adieu*, contribute to the expansion of the narrative text.

After Albertine's death, Marcel turns his focus from the future to the past and particularly to his doubts about Albertine's past:

Jadis, je songeais sans cesse à l'avenir  
incertain...Et maintenant...ce n'était plus l'avenir  
d'Albertine, c'était son passé. (72)

Marcel dispatches Aimé to Balbec and La Touraine to find out what he can about Albertine's past and her lesbian connections. Aimé's letter (35 L 105) implicates Albertine as a "gomorrhéenne." The painful analysis of the content of this letter creates an obsessive rereading of one particular phrase: "tu me mets aux anges" which is quoted five times (106, 107, twice on 109,

110) as Marcel struggles with the thoughts of Albertine's pleasure with "la blanchisseuse":

Ces goûts niés par elle et qu'elle avait, ces goûts dont la découverte était venue à moi, non dans un froid raisonnement, mais dans la brûlante souffrance ressentie à la lecture de ces mots: "tu me mets aux anges". (107)

The discovery from Aimé's letter that Albertine "en est une aussi" (107) is like finding out she was another person whom he did not know "comme une sombre fleur inconnue" (127). Marcel realizes he must correct his memories of Albertine and replace them with a new version of the past that includes the painful fact that all the time he was living with Albertine, she was an active lesbian. Marcel, realizing his perception of Albertine is probably based on lies and misunderstandings, struggles to create a re-ordered sequence of events given this new information about Albertine's movements, friendships, and lesbian activities surrounding "la blanchisseuse": "Telle avait été la souffrance causée—la «complication» amenée—par les lettres d'Aimé relativement à l'établissement de douches et aux blanchisseuses" (114). Marcel uses the information gathered from Aimé's letters referring in particular to "l'histoire de la blanchisseuse" thirteen times (three times on 108, 109, 110, 111, 114, 120, twice on 124, 125, 132, and 191) to try to find what Steel calls a "protodiagnosis"<sup>29</sup>—the true diagnosis behind

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<sup>29</sup>Steel, 200.

the illusion of innocence of the earlier Albertine as Marcel remembered her.

Finally, we see the whole foundation of even the protodiagnosis crumble since Marcel has no real basis of facts that he can trust on which to consolidate his reconstructed past:

Comme j'aurais fait si Albertine avait été vivante, je lui demandai tendrement si l'histoire de la blanchisseuse était vraie. Elle me jurerait que non, qu'Aimé n'était pas très véridique et que voulant paraître avoir bien gagné l'argent que je lui avais donné, il n'avait pas voulu revenir bredouille et avait fait dire ce qu'il avait voulu à la blanchisseuse. (111)

Aimé's motives become suspect in Marcel's mind "si l'histoire de la blanchisseuse est vraie" (111); "Les révélations d'Aimé, même si je les acceptais..." (125). In the end, Marcel cannot rely on his own memory (he was obviously a dupe of Albertine in the past and his memories of her are based on falsehoods and errors) but he is not sure whether Aimé can be trusted, and so he finds it difficult to accept this new information about Albertine. As Marcel struggles to create this re-ordered sequence of events of his past life, the reader realizes that he is doing just that: creating a new diagnosis based on Aimé's letters that are themselves possibly based on misinformation or lies. In fact, the reader is led to conclude that Marcel has no access to his past.

The use of the recurring narrative with the Aimé letters marks the beginning of the disconnection between the plot and the story—a lack of communication between the narrative and the diagesis. Finally, the reader understands through the process of the repeats that Marcel's narrative is based on a creative process of inventing a hypothetical diagesis or past from which he composes his fictional storyline. If Marcel, in fact, has no access to his past because of his misconceived personal memories of Albertine and the uncertainty of the confessions of unbelievable witnesses to that past, the reader, in turn, has no access to a protodiagesis, i.e., the "truth" behind the fiction. In fact, the narrator himself acts like a reader searching for a diagesis. "What the reader at first takes to be a diagesis, a primitive sequence of events serving as a source for the fiction, turns out to be itself a fictional story, a re-ordering of a more remote and more dispersed diagesis."<sup>30</sup> In essence, the hero and the reader are only left with a fictional narrative in the absence of an elucidated diagesis. Marcel's search for the truth about Albertine remains truly fugitive. In fact, in Steel's analysis, "The reader of R.T.P. [*la Recherche*] never discovers the extent to which Albertine's character was a figment of the hero's imagination."<sup>31</sup> Even Marcel is aware of the fictional nature of Albertine:

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<sup>30</sup>Steel, 195

<sup>31</sup>Steel, 195

...les êtres que nous aimons sont ceux dont la physionomie intellectuelle et morale est pour nous le moins objectivement définie, nous le retouchons sans cesse au gré de nos désirs et de nos craintes, nous ne les séparons pas de nous, ils ne sont qu'un lieu immense et vague où extérioriser nos tendresses. (77)

The assumption inherent in the study of the repeats is that if one insists on a rigid chronological diagesis based on the truth, one is forced to invent it, just as we see the hero doing throughout the "histoire de la blanchisseuse." Faced with the unknown—the reality of Albertine's past—Marcel is forced to invent it as he did with the uncertainty of Albertine's departure: "Je construisais si bien la vérité..."(10). The desire for the truth, for a consistent and coherent "story," is based on a belief that reality can be represented, i.e., that the chronology can be reconstructed, that past time is recoverable. Marcel's attempts to read into the future, "l'avenir incertain qui était déployé devant nous, j'essayais d'y lire" (72), and fails with his deceptive correspondence. He tries to recover the past with the same unfortunate results:

Et maintenant ce qui était devant moi comme un double de l'avenir—aussi préoccupant qu'un avenir, puisqu'il était aussi incertain, aussi difficile à déchiffrer, aussi mystérieux, plus cruel encore parce que je n'avais pas comme pour l'avenir la possibilité, ou l'illusion, d'agir sur lui...c'était son passé. (72)

Marcel's search for the truth follows a discernable pattern in *Albertine disparue*: his original perception of Albertine based on errors of misinterpretation and

misunderstanding; his efforts to correct this misconceived viewpoint of Albertine (to create a second "true" diagnosis) made on the basis of possible lies and misinformation supplied by unreliable witnesses who cannot be believed. Finally, the hero is enlightened by these experiences with the understanding that he cannot find the truth about Albertine's past: "Je savais bien qu'elle m'était inconnue" (126). The truth is that he cannot know the "truth" about another person.

In fact, the use of recurring narrative not only marks the disconnection between the plot and the story, it also marks the beginning of the separation of language from a fixed meaning. With the Aimé letters Marcel's beloved Albertine fractures into a myriad of "nombreuses Albertines" (110) making her virtually unknowable. With the stories of *la blanchisseuse* and *la doucheuse*, the sign literally splits apart into a single name or noun generating a plethora of potential and contradictory meanings—Albertine "innocente," Albertine "coupable," Albertine "douce," Albertine "vicieuse," Albertine "traître,"...

Ce fut surtout ce fractionnement d'Albertine en de nombreuses parts, en de nombreuses Albertines, qui était son seul mode d'existence en moi. (110)

Carried along by the proliferation of signs generated by the Aimé letters, Marcel experiences a new way of looking at his world—a new perception of reality and the relativity of meaning:

Et ce fractionnement n'était-il pas au fond juste qu'il me calmât? Car s'il n'était pas en lui-même

quelque chose de réel... ne représentait-il pas à sa manière une vérité bien objective celle-là, à savoir que chacun de nous n'est pas un, mais contient de nombreuses personnes qui n'ont pas toutes la même valeur morale... (110)

The fluidity and imprecision of the sign is confirmed by dint of this "lived" experience. Through the personal pain of a deceived lover, Marcel arrives at the troubling consciousness of language as a proliferation of free-floating signifiers.

The recurring narrative in *Albertine disparue* has the most profound implications for Marcel's understanding of language. However, the repetitive narrative also has a definite effect on the narrative text itself. The repeats, or "fréquence" play a strategic role in the "vitesse" of the narrative text as they actually supply the material to expand the interval or "durée" in the first chapter of *Albertine disparue*. Referring to Fig. 4 "Repeats," one can see how the extensive use of repetition contributes to the protracted narrative in the first half of *Albertine disparue* with regard to the two selected letters (Marcel's *lettre d'adieu* and Aimé's letter about *la blanchisseuse*) as well as to other major letters in Chapter I: farewell letter from Albertine (1 L 5)—six repeats, "deux fois crépusculaire" letter from Albertine (17 L 50)—five repeats, Aimé's letter concerning *la doucheuse* (30 L 96)—eleven repeats, to name but a few. The duration of Chapter I is measurably extended by the fact that eighty percent of the repeats occur in this chapter. One might conclude that

there is an exuberant use of repetitive narrative with reference to the letters in this section of the novel in the same way that there is an "ivresse d'itération" to which Genette refers for the whole of Proust's *Recherche*. Conversely, the minimal amount of repeated references to the correspondence in the remaining three chapters along with the absence of correspondence in the last half of Chapter IV contribute to the contraction of the narrative.

The repeated fragments of letters form the central drama of this first half of *Albertine disparue* as they reveal the process of disintegration or deconstruction of the diagesis. As we see the "story" of Albertine changing, time stands still as the narrative slows down and expands in order to re-examine, re-adjust, and re-create a new, supposedly true diagesis in Marcel's mind. A process that Ricardou describes as the "reprises textuelles":

Un phénomène comparable à celui qu'impose la description se produit alors. Une rupture tend à séparer les deux axes: tandis que la narration se prolonge, la fiction au contraire, en quelque façon, s'immobilise...elle en serait le drame.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Jean Ricardou, *Problèmes du nouveau roman*, Seuil: Paris, 1967, 169. Ricardou uses different terminology while studying the same subject as Genette: Ricardou uses "narration" for Genette's "récit" and "fiction" for Genette's "histoire" (diagesis). In other words, Ricardou opposes "narration" to "fiction" whereas Genette opposes "récit" to "histoire."



The narratological study of this volume of *la Recherche* has revealed a dramatic separation between these two temporal suites where the narrative becomes separated from the diagesis—Genette's "récit" separated from the "histoire." In chronological terms the present has no access to the past. In studying the rhythmic patterns of *Albertine disparue*, we see the hero move into the fictional world. Like the reader, Marcel only has access to a hypothetical diagesis on which to base a narrative that is both elliptical and repetitive as it searches in vain for evidence of the truth. The ellipses of the "durée" and the repeats of the "fréquence" become part of the creative process. As Marcel deconstructs his perceptions of the past (breaks down the old), he recreates new "corrected" versions of the past that are, in turn, based on possible lies and misinformation, thereby keeping the creative wheel spinning.

Readers, in turn, are caught up in this creative process. The distortions of the rhythmic patterns of the narrative cause them to get involved: the indeterminate, floating ellipsis of the *durée* (twenty-three months) invites them to make assumptions in the absence of a consistent storyline—to fill in the gaps caused by the fragmented, often discontinuous narrative and the elliptical, inaccessible diagesis. The imprecise temporal references that leave the passage of time fluid and elusive make it necessary for readers to approximate the time that is left vague by the ubiquitous adverbial phrases. With the extensive references and

quotations, like those of the Aimé letters for example, readers have the illusion of being connected to a storyline from the past, but the excessive repetition of these references reveals a pattern of lies and misinformation, overloading the narrative with information that is unreliable. Finally, readers, like Marcel, are set free to imagine their own storyline, to make up their own version of the fiction: "lire déjà, dans une version différente, toutes ses trahisons et ses fautes" (190). In this sense, *Albertine disparue* is as much about the development of the reader as it is about the development of Marcel's career as a writer.

The overwhelming impression that one has of *Albertine disparue* is separation and alienation at the most crucial level of the narrative. In effect, the hero is separated from his story. The repeated references to the Aimé letters destroy the credibility of the hero/narrator since Marcel does not know the real "story." For Marcel, Aimé's letters represent a descent into hell:

...c'était le fragment d'un autre monde, d'une planète inconnue et maudite, une vue d'enfer. L'enfer c'était tout ce Balbec, tous ces pays avoisinants d'où d'après la lettre d'Aimé elle faisait venir souvent les filles plus jeunes qu'elle amenait à la douche. (99)

Steel has suggested that one must "detect a work's internal context in order to say what it signifies." The narratological analysis of this chapter has revealed that the

notion of separation is inherent in the rhythmic distortions of this volume of *la Recherche*. As the plot becomes separated from the story it is, ultimately, inaccessible to both the hero and the reader. We are left simply with a narrative present creating itself while the diagetical past is destroying itself. The result of repeated analysis of "l'histoire de la blanchisseuse" in the content of Aimé's letters alone threatens the integrity of the narrative itself and its ability to access a true diagesis. It is a problem shared by *la Recherche* as a whole, according to Steel:

The true diagesis, the protodiagesis, is effectively inaccessible to the reader...<sup>33</sup>

As I have mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Michel Butor, while discussing the subject of chronology in general in *Répertoire II*, describes the relationship between the two temporal worlds of the narrative and the diagesis "comme deux voix en musique"<sup>34</sup> reverberating echos of reality. However, the image that emerges from the contextual study of *Albertine disparue* is more like a song of separation rather than a "dialogue entre deux temps" as Butor describes the confrontation of these two temporal spheres. The two isolated voices of our study have produced disintegrating echoes that,

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<sup>33</sup>Steel, 201

<sup>34</sup>Butor, *Répertoire II*, 92.

finally, do not respond or correspond. In essence, the Aimé letters initiate a process of deconstruction at a very basic literary level: as the narrative text no longer corresponds to the events that it purports to relate, the fiction itself disconnects from the notion of a stable reality which it no longer reflects. By implication, language itself does not generate fixed meaning--the sign no longer represents a stable, permanent, knowable reality--the signifier is released from a single signified. The fictional world of language, meaning, and reality becomes unhinged in this penultimate volume of *la Recherche*, and the "désagrégation" (172) of this literary triangle throws into jeopardy any notion of communication.

### CHAPTER III

#### Narrative of Absence

A study of the form (Chapter I) and the context (Chapter II) of the correspondence in *Albertine disparue* raised profound questions about writing and its capacity to represent reality. And, by implication, serious doubts are raised concerning language and its ability to generate stable meaning. The narratological analysis of *Albertine disparue* revealed a narrative that, finally, does not accurately relate the events from the past with any consistency that might allow the reader to constitute a coherent story about Marcel's fugitive mistress. I shall turn now to some individual letters that are written or received by Marcel to see in what way the content of these letters reflects the elusive reality of Marcel's beloved Albertine.

Correspondence assumes absence and separation—one writes letters to absent friends and lovers, keeping in touch, communicating from a distance. For the young hero of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, the letter represents "un fil délicieux" (*Swann*, 30) reuniting him with his absent mother. Past his bedtime, the young boy attempts to draw his adored mother away from the dining table and guests, back up to his

room for one last goodnight kiss, by way of a note sent with Françoise: "je sentis qu'en écrivant ce mot à maman en m'approchant au risque de la fâcher, si près d'elle que j'avais cru toucher le moment de la revoir" (32). The letter, which breaks down the barriers of separation, is, in his mind, a substitute for her presence. In his personal correspondence Proust describes this absent "presence" while responding to a letter that he received from Mme de Noailles:

Et j'ai eu cette chose plus émouvante que toute,  
votre écriture sur du papier d'ici, une présence  
qui se retire, l'envie de courir après vous.<sup>1</sup>

These letters, both fictional and non-fictional, go beyond the notion of simply communicating at a distance. It is as if the actual writing on the page has the power to restore the absent person in the mind of the writer. In his analysis of "le roman par lettres," Jean Rousset describes the emotional power of letters:

...elles s'efforcent de restituer la présence: "il me semble que je vous parle, quand je vous écris, et que vous m'êtes un peu plus présent". Avec une absence créer une présence, tel est bien le pouvoir paradoxal et de la passion et de la lettre."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Marcel Proust à Madame de Noailles, June 20, 1905. In Philip Kolb, editor, *Correspondance de Marcel Proust*, Paris: Plon, 1979, Tome V, 241.

<sup>2</sup>Jean Rousset, *Forme et Signification*, Paris: José Corti, 1962, 78.

A closer look at the kinds of letters written in *Albertine disparue* raises the question what is the actual nature of the relationship of the correspondents and what, exactly, is being communicated by the wide variety of letters that appear in this novel. Although twenty-five percent of the correspondence is between Marcel and Albertine, there are letters from people whom Marcel does not know; letters that arrive from the wrong person and letters not addressed to the right person. Albertine writes letters to herself, and Marcel writes deceptive letters to Albertine and others. There are imaginary letters that are never sent and telegrams that arrive from the dead. One letter even "arrives" in a dream.

Given Marcel's fifty letters, of which thirty-four are received by him and only sixteen sent, reading and interpreting letters are equally if not more important than writing them. In other words, the process of decoding is at least as crucial as encoding letters in the production of meaning or in the interpretation of what is being communicated by the correspondents. Accordingly, first I will review some letters written by Marcel and others that reveal the process of encoding and, second, I will study several letters received by Marcel to examine his process of decoding. A close study of how these letters are conceived, received, and interpreted will reveal more about the senders and the receivers and their ability to communicate through this exchange of letters. And, taking it

further, I will explore how language functions as a sign-the message plus the meaning-throughout this body of letters.

### Encoding the Letter

Writing letters often causes a kind of dysfunction in *Albertine disparue*, and this malaise is generally the by-product of a "lettre feinte" (40). Deceptive letters are found throughout *la Recherche* from the first letter that Marcel ever writes (to his mother) and the first early childhood love letters to Gilberte through to the end of the novel. Buisine refers to a concise paradigm of the deceptive letter found in *Le Temps retrouvé*, where Saint-Loup sends an excuse to Gilberte for one of his frequent absences with a telegram:

...une de ces dépêches dont M. de Guermantes avait spirituellement fixé le modèle: "Impossible venir, mensonge suite." (*Le Temps retrouvé*, 9)<sup>3</sup>

Actually, Buisine considers this short message "un résumé concis de n'importe quelle correspondance dans *la Recherche*, cascade de mensonges, succession de tromperies et de duperies."<sup>4</sup> In fact, this accurately describes the *lettres feintes* in *Albertine disparue*; however, it perhaps overstates the case for all of the

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<sup>3</sup>Quoted by Buisine, *Proust et ses lettres*, 102.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, 102.



general correspondence in this volume. In discussing deceptive correspondence in *la Recherche* in general, Buisine refers to certain letters that he classifies as "méfaits épistolaires," typical of the kind of correspondence that exudes "de la fausseté et de l'insincérité."<sup>5</sup> Of the sixteen examples of letters chosen from the entire novel to illustrate this kind of correspondence, only three are from *Albertine disparue*. Buisine simply identifies the first two letters as deceptive without offering any detailed analysis of them: a brief reference to Marcel's *lettre d'adieu* (13 L 37); an imagined telegram from Marcel to Albertine (5 T 30). The third letter to which Buisine refers is the telegram Albertine arranges to have sent to herself in Balbec so she can have an excuse to leave the seaside and Marcel in order to return to Paris:

Un beau jour elle s'est fait envoyer une dépêche qui la rappelait à Paris, c'est à peine si on a eu le temps de faire ses malles. Or elle n'avait aucune raison de partir. Tous les prétextes qu'elle a donnés étaient faux... Elle disait elle-même qu'elle ne savait pas pourquoi elle était partie...  
(49 T 199)

For Buisine, this telegram—someone sending a deceptive message to herself—is the epitome of all of the correspondence in Proust's novel:

On ne saurait imaginer de missive plus typiquement proustienne puisqu'aussi bien tout y est faux, les raisons données aux autres et à soi-même, les

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<sup>5</sup>Buisine, *Proust et ses lettres*, 101.

prétextes fallacieusement invoqués, le dispositif postal lui-même puisque dans ce cas destinataire et destinataire sont une seule et même personne. Un comble quand même que cette perversion du courrier de la part de la nièce de M. Bontemps, Directeur du Cabinet du ministre des Postes.<sup>6</sup>

Although Buisine only refers to three deceptive letters from *Albertine disparue*, *lettres feintes* are found in abundance in the first chapter of *Albertine disparue*. All of the letters that make up the Personal Correspondence in Table 4 (thirty-five letters and telegrams), either claim to be "feintes" or are suspected of being deceptive by Marcel. (Only Mme Bontemps's telegram is exempt.) Virtually fifty percent of the letters in *Albertine disparue* are written in the first thirty days of the narrative, and almost one hundred percent of these are *lettres feintes*: Marcel and Albertine knowingly exchange deceptive letters, and Aimé and Saint-Loup write letters of which Marcel doubts the sincerity. I will examine how these letters are composed to see what implications they have for the way language is used by the people who write them and those who receive them.

From the beginning of *Albertine disparue*, it is understood by Marcel that a letter is not something you take at face value. When he reads Albertine's farewell letter where she says in part,

Aussi ma décision étant irrévocable avant de vous  
faire remettre cette lettre par Françoise, je lui

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid, 102.

aurai demandé mes malles. Adieu, je vous laisse le meilleur de moi-même. Albertine. (1 L 5),

Marcel's immediate response is: "Tout cela ne signifie rien... elle ne pense rien de tout cela." The assumption is that the letter is a deceptive message: "elle ne l'a évidemment écrit que pour frapper un grand coup" (5). What is said is not what is meant. For Marcel this letter is simply a trap to get him to marry Albertine. He takes it for granted that writing deceptive letters is part of the strategy, especially in the game of love, used to: "agir sur le monde extérieur...en faisant jouer la ruse" (35). The fact that Albertine's next communication with Marcel is a telegram saying: "J'aurais été trop heureuse de revenir!" (12 T 36) proves to Marcel his theory that she lied when she first wrote "ma décision étant irrévocable..." (1 L 5). Believing that Albertine "ne cherchait qu'un prétexte pour revenir" (36), Marcel is encouraged to continue playing the game and he openly declares that the deceptive letter, "cette lettre feinte" is part of his arsenal: "Je me proposais d'écrire à Albertine une lettre d'adieu où je considérerais son départ comme définitif, tandis que j'enverrai Saint-Loup exercer sur Mme Bontemps et comme à mon insu, la pression la plus brutale pour qu'Albertine revienne au plus vite" (19).

Of course, this kind of correspondence is not new to the *roman par lettres*. Jean Rousset, in his discussion of the letters in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, describes the deceptive letter in the following terms: "on doit surtout dire ce que l'on

ne pense pas. Plus encore qu'un moyen d'échange, la lettre est ici un moyen d'action qui vise le destinataire comme une cible."<sup>7</sup> Marcel, himself, explains the cynical strategy of the deceptive letter in the preparation of his *lettre d'adieu* (13 L 37), which is an inversion of what he actually thinks and wants:

...maintenant c'était parce que je voulais absolument qu'elle revînt dans les huit jours que je lui disais: "Adieu pour toujours"; c'est parce que je voulais la revoir que je lui disais: "je trouverais dangereux de vous voir"; c'est parce que vivre séparé d'elle me semblait pire que la mort que je lui écrivais: *Vous avez eu raison, nous serions malheureux ensemble.*  
(39) [Proust's italics]

This method of communication implies a process of encoding lies or misinformation—like baiting a trap. Marcel feels Albertine knows the game and thus should be able to decipher the inverted message:

...Car, Albertine eût-elle été moins intelligente qu'elle n'était, elle n'eût pas douté un instant que ce que je disais était faux. Sans arrêter en effet aux intentions que j'énonçais dans cette lettre [13 L 37] le seul fait que je l'écrivisse, n'eût-il même pas succédé à la démarche de Saint-Loup, suffisait pour lui prouver que je désirais qu'elle revînt et pour lui conseiller de me laisser m'enfermer dans l'hameçon de plus en plus. (40)

With the deceptive letter what is not said is more meaningful than what is said since the intended purposes of the letter are concealed or withheld. The original message is

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<sup>7</sup>Rousset, *Forme et signification*, 95.

meaningless taken on face value. The deceptive correspondence between Marcel and Albertine is a manifestation of the deceptive sign between lovers as Gilles Deleuze describes "les signes amoureux" in Proust's *Recherche*: "ce sont des signes mensongers qui ne peuvent s'adresser à nous qu'en cachant ce qu'ils expriment, c'est-à-dire l'origine des mondes inconnus, des actions et des pensées inconnues qui leur donnent un sens... l'interprète des signes amoureux est nécessairement l'interprète des mensonges."<sup>8</sup> To comprehend the real significance of the *lettre feinte* requires an apprenticeship in decoding messages, interpreting lies, learning to read between the lines, so to speak.

Marcel is not the only one who sends deceptive letters, since they are written by others as well. Although the *lettre feinte* is consciously composed of lies for the purpose of manipulating the targeted receiver in the Albertine letters, some of the correspondence is suspected of being deceptive simply because it contains misinformation without malicious intent. The Aimé letters fall into this category.

Aimé is suspected by Marcel of either gratuitously or unwittingly encoding lies in his two major letters from Balbec (30 L 96) and La Touraine (35 L 105). The integrity of the information supplied by *la doucheuse* about Albertine's contact with women in the bath house at Balbec is questioned by the

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<sup>8</sup>Gilles Deleuze, *Marcel Proust et les signes*, Presses Universitaires de France: Paris, 1964, 7.

hero. Marcel wonders: "Quelle portée pouvait avoir ce qu'avait dit la doucheuse à Aimé?...peut-être pour se vanter, la doucheuse exagérait-elle" (102). At one point Marcel is uncertain, "que les révélations de la doucheuse fussent fausses" (104). However, he is reassured by a remark made in the past by his grandmother about *la doucheuse*: "c'est une femme qui doit avoir la maladie du mensonge" (101).

In the letter from Aimé concerning *la blanchisseuse* from La Touraine where he is sent by Marcel to find the truth about Albertine's relationships, Marcel receives what he thinks is reassuring news in the one line that is quoted from that letter:

Mais dans une seconde lettre Aimé me disait avoir appris d'une petite blanchisseuse de la ville qu'Albertine avait une manière particulière de lui serrer le bras quand celle-ci lui rapportait le linge. *Mais, disait-elle, cette demoiselle ne lui avait jamais fait autre chose.* (32 L 105) [Proust's italics]

However, in a following letter (35 L 105) Aimé tells a devastated Marcel that the *blanchisseuse* was in fact lying and that Albertine was indeed guilty of his worst fears: "Elle était partie goûter jusqu'à pâmoison, jusqu'à mordre cette petite blanchisseuse qu'elle retrouvait au soleil levant, sur le bord de la Loire, et à qui elle disait: 'Tu me mets aux anges.'" (35 L 105). Marcel's initial high hopes were the result of wishful thinking and misinformation. However, the original lie casts doubt on the veracity of the second confession from *la blanchisseuse*.

Even Aimé becomes a suspect. In an imagined "conversation" the dead Albertine swears to Marcel that the story told by *la blanchisseuse* is a lie:

...qu'Aimé n'était pas très véridique et que voulant paraître avoir bien gagné l'argent que je lui avais donné, il n'avait pas voulu revenir bredouille et avait fait dire ce qu'il avait voulu à la blanchisseuse. (111)

Considering Aimé's past as the *maître d'hôtel* at Balbec, it is not inconceivable that he might invent a "truth" in order to please a paying customer, so to speak. Thinking of his pleasant excursion to Balbec at Marcel's expense, "du petit voyage que Monsieur m'avait ainsi procuré et qui m'a été très agréable" (97), the real truth may not have been uppermost in Aimé's mind when he wrote to Marcel "Je ne voulais pas revenir les mains vides" (96).

Although *Albertine disparue* seems to renew the tradition of the *roman épistolaire* with its unique use of the letter as a "moyen d'action" rather than as a "moyen d'échange"—to use Rousset's terms again—the correspondence in *Albertine disparue* goes one step further, i.e., beyond the game of power and deception. What is uncanny about this misguided, deceptive correspondence is that it is a source of revealed knowledge: the truth unfolds through this epistolary network of deception and error.

The *lettre feinte* is exposed to the same process of misinterpretation and error that all of the correspondence is

subject to and with the same unexpected results. As far as the communication between the correspondents is concerned the pattern is the same: the misleading or meaningless original message on face value; the possible misinterpretation of that message; and the ultimate real message of the truth that is effectively communicated by this process at a later date. According to the narrator, not only is the truth revealed by error in the process of decoding but it is also communicated eventually to the author in the process of encoding through deception and lies:

Le temps passe et peu à peu tout ce qu'on disait par mensonge devient vrai, je l'avais trop expérimenté avec Gilberte; l'indifférence que j'avais feinte quand je cessai de sangloter avait fini par se réaliser peu à peu la vie, comme je disais à Gilberte en une formule mensongère et qui rétrospectivement était devenue vraie, la vie nous avait séparés. (44)

From the beginning, Marcel knows the risk inherent in deceptive letters: "Le danger des lettres d'une indifférence qui, feinte d'abord, finit par devenir vraie"(19). And in fact, the insincere words that he writes to Albertine in his farewell letter come true, for Marcel and Albertine will be separated permanently by her death. The truth is hidden in his false phrases: "vous avez eu raison, nous serions malheureux ensemble...Adieu pour toujours" (39). Albertine herself was unaware of the prophetic truth inherent in her deceptive words:

dans ses dernières lettres enfin, quand elle avait écrit probablement en se disant "je fais du chiqué":



*Je vous laisse le meilleur de moi-même* (et n'était-ce pas en effet maintenant à la fidélité, aux forces, fragiles hélas aussi, de ma mémoire, qu'étaient confiées son intelligence, sa bonté, sa beauté?) (89)  
[Proust's italics]

Marcel's suspicion of the sincerity of a letter "elle ne pense rien de tout cela" (5) is a natural reaction based on his own experience with writing letters in *Albertine disparue*. In this volume of *la Recherche*, all of Marcel's personal correspondence is false and insincere; he uses the letter exclusively as a vehicle of deception. In effect, over half of the correspondence in *Albertine disparue* reveals a perverse use of language. The "formule mensongère" of the *lettre feinte* involves a conscious separation of the message and the meaning—deliberately using words that misrepresent true feelings. Writing personal letters in *Albertine disparue* amounts to a deliberate use of language to misrepresent reality.

### Decoding the Letter

The act of sending a letter seems relatively harmless—one expects the person to whom one writes will receive the letter and read it. But nothing is that simple in Proust, and especially not in *Albertine disparue*. A wide variety of problems arise, in the reception of certain types of letters whether they involve cases of mistaken identity, misread

addresses, unreadable or mysterious signatures; letters that are intercepted, ill-timed, or simply not delivered. Some letters suffer from a combination of these difficulties, creating layers of misunderstanding and misinterpretation that ultimately determine what is effectively communicated. I will examine some specimens of these kinds of letters received by Marcel in order to see what patterns evolve that will shed some light on the subject of language and communication in the Proustian scheme of things: letters of mistaken identity, untimely letters, and make-believe letters.

Many errors are made in the decoding of letters in *Albertine disparue*, especially with a type of correspondence where the sender or receiver is either unknown, or whose identity is mistaken by Marcel, only to be discovered at a later date. I will study three letters of mistaken identity, among them one of the most important pieces of correspondence in *Albertine disparue*—the final telegram Marcel receives from the dead Albertine (53 T 220). These letters or telegrams will allow us to determine the role that error plays in the pursuit of truth throughout the correspondence.

The first of these letters, which I shall call the letter from *l'Américaine*, is quoted in a prolepsis just after Albertine's departure when the narrator, seeing a pattern of deception, compares her flight to the departure of one of his mistresses: "...ayant un jour ouvert par erreur une lettre pour une de mes maîtresses, lettre écrite en style convenu et qui

disait: *Attends toujours signe pour aller chez le marquis de Saint-Loup, prévenez par coup de téléphone, je reconstituai une sorte de fuite projetée*" (2 L 10) [Proust's italics]. Although it is unclear when this event takes place, Marcel could be referring to the mistress with whom he is living just before the trip to Tansonville in Chapter IV: "ma maîtresse actuelle que je cachais aux visiteurs et qui remplissait ma vie comme jadis Albertine" (256). However, this is a supposition as there is no primary reference for this letter in the narrative. Since the timing of the letter within the chronology of the story is uncertain, the letter remains problematic.<sup>9</sup>

Assuming the single line quoted from the text of the letter refers to a coded message for some planned escape by his mistress, Marcel suffers unnecessarily before realizing his error: "Or la lettre n'était pas adressée à ma maîtresse, mais à une personne de la maison qui portait un nom différent mais qu'on avait mal lu" (10). With this discovery the meaning of the enigmatic message "en mauvais français" becomes immaterial since the letter is not meant for Marcel's mistress. In fact, the significance of the letter is effectively inaccessible to Marcel because he does not know either the sender or the person

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<sup>9</sup> A phrase included in the 1989 Pléiade edition of *Albertine disparue* and left out of the 1990 Folio edition resolves the ambiguity in the text of the Folio edition that confuses the identity of "une de mes maîtresses" with Albertine: "...mais cette fois-ci ayant bien le sens du signal et Albertine avait-elle ainsi prémédité depuis longtemps sa fuite. Ce malheur était le plus grand de toute ma vie" (11). [My italics]

to whom it was addressed. Marcel's misinterpretation of the letter also invalidates the analogy that he made between Albertine's departure and that of his mistress because it is based on the assumption that the intercepted letter contains a coded message of betrayal. This letter is one of the most complex letters in *Albertine disparue* with a single unknown author and three "destinataires": Marcel who opens the letter by error; his mistress to whom he thought the letter was addressed; and "une personne de la maison," the intended receiver who never receives the letter. There are also three messages: the original intended message of unknown meaning; the unintended misinterpretation of this first message as a coded signal; and the third and final message which is not "received" until later.

No one connects on a meaningful level in this seemingly futile correspondence. There is no communication with the unintended correspondents: Marcel, the intercepting receiver, and the unknown sender whose signature is an undecipherable foreign name that Marcel misinterprets as a nickname for someone whom he later discovers is *une Américaine*—a friend of Saint-Loup. And, of course, there is no communication between the intended correspondents: *l'Américaine* and "une personne de la maison" who, presumably, never receives the letter.

Ironically, Proust uses this apparently meaningless piece of correspondence as a way of portraying one of the major issues in *la Recherche*—the pursuit of the truth. The letter from *l'Américaine* is a paradigm of how language signifies in

*Albertine disparue*. This letter, surrounded by errors of mistaken identity, misread addresses, cryptic signatures, misinterpreted messages, and false analogies, harbors a kernel of prophetic truth. Although the narrator on that day was "donc, ce jour-là, trompé de tout au tout" (10), the suspected assignation materialized at an unspecified later date in the very way he imagined it, by error, in the first letter:

...trois mois plus tard, ma maîtresse... m'avait quitté, ça avait été d'une façon absolument identique à celle que j'avais imaginée la première fois. Une lettre vint [3 L 10], ayant les mêmes particularités que j'avais faussement attribuées à la première lettre [2 L 10], mais cette fois-ci ayant bien le sens du signal. (10)

With this turn of events, the letter from *l'Américaine* takes on new significance. The original message becomes useful to Marcel not because of its intended meaning, which is still obscure, but because it is the source of Marcel's misinterpretation of the letter as a coded message that now forms the basis of comparison for a valid analogy. In effect, the false analogy that Marcel draws between Albertine's disappearance and the suspected departure of his mistress eventually becomes true when his mistress actually leaves him three months later.

This short sequence of two letters identifies one of the central issues of *la Recherche*—the demythologization of the intellect, "l'armature intellectuelle," that formulates these errors and false analogies: "qui...avait relié ces faits tous faux" (10). In these letters it proceeds from mistaken premises

and false assumptions through errors of mistaken identity and misinterpretation to false analogies that, in the end, become true. When the truth does eventually surface through this network of errors, it is by chance more than anything else.

The letter from *l'Américaine* has a delphic quality about it. The cryptic message "Attends toujours signe...", which is meaningless to the hero, is used unwittingly as a source of misinterpretation and error forming the basis of a false analogy that in time turns out to be true. Proust uses one of the most abstruse letters in *Albertine disparue* to portray a basic premise of *la Recherche*: the truth is revealed through error and over the course of time. It is as if the depiction of errors and false interpretations are necessary on the road to the discovery of the truth—the long and arduous detours of the literary apprenticeship.

The same pattern of error and misinterpretation is seen throughout the correspondence in *Albertine disparue*. The love letters found by Gilberte, "une correspondance amoureuse adressée à Robert et signée Bobette que Mme de Saint-Loup avait surprise" (66 L 257), produce a similar problem of communication due to errors of mistaken identity by an unintended receiver. Again, Proust creates a double layer of misinterpretation: the identity of the sender, Bobette, is unknown to the second, unintended receiver, Gilberte, and therefore the significance of the letters is misunderstood. Because of the mysterious signature, "Bobette," Gilberte assumes she has been betrayed by

another woman but, in reality, and unknown to her, she has been betrayed by a man. At an earlier meeting, Jupien informed Marcel that Bobette is actually Morel, the ex-lover of Charlus, confirming that Saint-Loup is homosexual or at least bisexual. (As mentioned earlier, the name Bobette is a diminutive for Bobby Santois, the name Proust used at the beginning of the novel for the character Charlie Morel [see 343n].)

The misinterpretation of these love letters falls into the same pattern of error created in other letters in *Albertine disparue*: a false assumption (based on a mysterious signature in this case) leads to a misreading of the message, and, ultimately, in Gilberte's mind, to the creation of a new message with regard to Saint-Loup's indiscretions. As the pattern goes, there are, in this case, one sender (Bobette), two receivers (Saint-Loup, Gilberte), and three messages: the message of the original letters, which forms the basis by error of the fictional message conjured up by Gilberte. And, as usual the final message is "delivered" at a later date when Gilberte discovers the truth, i.e., that she is being deceived by her husband, but in a way different than she thought.

In a final example of mistaken identity, Proust uses a telegram from a dead person to illustrate the perverse relationship between words and their meanings in the correspondence of *Albertine disparue*. Language is again subject to misinterpretation delivered in the guise of error as it leads the hero along the pathway to the perception of truth. This is

perhaps the most important document in *Albertine disparue* as it completes the process of *oubli* and finalizes Albertine's death in Marcel's mind. While in Venice the hero receives a telegram, purportedly from Albertine who by then has been dead for a year!

Mon ami vous me croyez morte, pardonnez-moi, je suis très vivante, je voudrais vous voir, vous parler mariage, quand revenez-vous? Tendrement. Albertine. (53 T 220)

Errors are made at every level of this disturbing telegram: in the identification of the sender and of the receiver, as well as in the transcription and the interpretation of the message. It is not until the end of his stay in Venice when Marcel receives a letter from Mlle de Forcheville (55 L 230) who announces her marriage to Saint-Loup, that Marcel realizes that "la dépêche que j'avais reçue dernièrement et que j'avais crue d'Albertine était de Gilberte" (234). Gilberte's illegible, floral handwriting caused the telegraph operator to misread her complicated signature full of "queues et arabesques," which he deciphered as the name Albertine!

The initial error in transcription is compounded when the telegram is delivered. The address on the envelope is so badly written that the identity of the receiver is in doubt as well:

...le portier me remit une dépêche que l'employé du télégraphe était déjà venu trois fois pour m'apporter car à cause de l'inexactitude du nom du destinataire (que je compris pourtant à



travers les déformations des employés italiens être le mien), on demandait un accusé de réception certifiant que le télégramme était bien pour moi. (220)

After seeing the signature on the telegram, Marcel, assuming there has been some mistake, refuses to accept it: "Au matin je rendis la dépêche au portier de l'hôtel en disant qu'on me l'avait remise par erreur et elle n'était pas pour moi" (223). However, the porter himself refuses to take back the opened telegram and Marcel pockets it, determined to deny that he ever received it: "Je me promis de faire comme si je ne l'avais jamais reçue" (223).

Reading the telegram is just as confusing as trying to decipher the address. Marcel has problems interpreting the message not only because he assumes at the time that the message could be from Albertine but also because it is badly written, "un libellé de mots mal transmis" (220):

Qu'en dehors de cela deux ou trois mots eussent été mal lus, pris les uns dans les autres (certains, d'ailleurs, m'avaient paru incompréhensibles), cela était suffisant pour expliquer les détails de mon erreur... (235)

With this telegram Proust creates multi-layers of misinterpretation: complications in the composition of the telegram (Gilberte's illegible handwriting) cause errors in the transmission of the message; a badly transcribed address causes confusion in the reception; and the mistake in the identity of

the sender leads to a complete misunderstanding of the message. Given the series of almost unbelievable circumstances surrounding this disastrous telegram, there is a total lack of communication between the unintended correspondents: the resuscitated "Albertine" and the reluctant Marcel. By the time he realizes the true identity of the sender and the significance of her message, it is too late for any meaningful communication between the real correspondents: Gilberte and Marcel.

Ironically, the major significance of this telegram has nothing to do with the original sender or her intended message. Time separates the reception and attribution of the telegram since the recognition of the meaning of the intended message from Gilberte—"parler mariage"—is deferred to a point in time where it loses any meaning it may have had originally since by then Gilberte is already married to Saint-Loup. The lack of communication between the correspondents acquires meaning only because it forms the basis for what is effectively communicated to Marcel through the misinterpretation of that message—the reality of his final indifference to Albertine. As in the letter to *l'Américaine*, the deceptive interplay between the senders and the receivers again delivers the ultimate message to the hero: the truth is communicated by error in time.

What is noteworthy about this disturbing telegram is Marcel's reaction of complete indifference to the shocking news—the supposedly real message that Albertine is still alive: "la nouvelle qu'elle était vivante ne me causa pas la joie que

j'aurais cru"(220). In his advanced stage of indifference or *oubli*, Marcel writes "Albertine ne ressuscitait nullement pour moi avec son corps"(220). This telegram is not only a case of mistaken identity: it is completely inopportune since it arrives after the death of Albertine but also after the death of love. While "Albertine" is reclaiming life, Marcel has accepted her death. The message that Marcel is so reluctant to receive marks the end of the cycle of forgetting with his comment: "J'avais définitivement cessé d'aimer Albertine"(222).

As with most of the erroneous correspondence in *Albertine disparue*, there are several messages connected with this cable: the original intended message which is badly transmitted; the second, unintended, false message from a resuscitated Albertine, that, in the end, has the most significance for Marcel. Ironically, this meaningless and thoroughly deceptive telegram "delivers" the third and most important message of the hero's life—the truth about Albertine.

What makes this telegram the most important document that Marcel receives is not simply due to the fact that it teaches him one of the significant lessons of *l'apprentissage*—the role of error in the pursuit of truth. This misleading message informs Marcel of the more practical aspects of his chosen *métier* and one of the essential elements of language, i.e., how the sign signifies. Marcel finally learns what Albertine represents for him. Opening this envelope does not give Marcel access to the truth about Albertine's past. He does

not penetrate the infinite plurality of meaning that Albertine potentially represents. But he does become aware of the reality and limitation of his ability to know Albertine, to know the other, to know that she can represent for him nothing more than "un faisceau de pensées":

Maintenant qu'Albertine dans ma pensée ne vivait plus pour moi, la nouvelle qu'elle était vivante ne me causa pas la joie que j'aurais cru. Albertine n'avait été pour moi qu'un faisceau de pensées, elle avait survécu à sa mort matérielle tant que ces pensées vivaient en moi; en revanche maintenant que ces pensées étaient mortes, Albertine ne ressuscitait nullement pour moi avec son corps. (220)

With this final cable, Marcel learns how language signifies for him. In effect, thought constructions, "le faisceau de pensées," become more significant and prolific in the production of meaning and, in that sense, more substantial than the material world of the physical body--*le corps d'Albertine*. The process of encoding signs, as Marcel describes it, is an internal process that needs little support from the outside, physical world. Marcel had already learned from his experience with the Aimé letters that his love for Albertine was "moins un amour pour elle qu'un amour en moi" (137):

On aime sur un sourire, sur un regard, sur une épaule. Cela suffit; alors dans les longues heures d'espérance ou de tristesse, on fabrique une personne, on compose un caractère. (111)

With the Aimé letters, although Albertine is dead, she continues to generate signs as she continues to live on in Marcel's thought; with the "Albertine" telegram, even though she is revived, Albertine—"son corps"—is incapable of generating signs. The resuscitated Albertine finds an absence of any response in the thoughts of the indifferent Marcel.

With the Venetian cable, Albertine moves from the status of absent referent to that of absent signified as the thoughts that supported her persona in Marcel's mind are dead. Marcel is left simply with a neutral signifier—*un nom*, a noun, a word, absent of meaning. In Marcel's world, with the final separation of the signifier first from the referent, then from the signified, i.e., with the disconnection of the word from reality and meaning, Albertine is truly dead. Effectively, for Marcel, Albertine is killed by language and not simply by *un accident de cheval*.

The production of meaning in Proustian terms is an inner reality all but divorced from the referential, material world of an external reality that, in any event, remains elusive and unknowable. This situation creates a serious stumbling block to communication because so much of the content of the "faisceau de pensées" is self-generated, fabricated personal associations. The narrator describes the basis of this dilemma:

Nous n'avons de l'univers que des visions informes, fragmentées et que nous complétons par des associations d'idées arbitraires, créatrices de dangereuses suggestions. (154)

In other words, so much of Marcel's so-called knowledge of the other person, of Albertine, is invented that communication with that person becomes problematic and, in the final analysis, impossible. Clearly, communication is not a simple process in Proust.

Although problems of mistaken identity and misinterpreted messages are most often responsible for the lack of communication between the sender and the receiver in *Albertine disparue*, some letters received by Marcel minimize the communication due to *timing*: the letter or telegram arrives too early or too late or not at all to make an effective connection between the correspondents. The so-called anachronistic letters accentuate the gulf that exists between the author and the reader of this type of correspondence. In one of these inopportune letters where the identity of the receiver is unknown, no real connection is made between Marcel and the mysterious admirer who sends a letter of congratulations concerning the publication of the hero's first article in *Le Figaro*:

Je reçus une autre lettre [44 L 169] que celle de Mme Goupil, [43 L 169] mais le nom, Sautton, m'était inconnu. C'était une écriture populaire, un langage charmant. Je fus navré de ne pouvoir découvrir qui m'avait écrit. (170)

The identity of the unknown admirer, Sautton, is not revealed until much later in *Le Temps retrouvé* as Théodore: "'C'était lui qui m'avait écrit pour mon article du Figaro!' m'écriai-je en

apprenant qu'il s'appelait Sautton"(7). Théodore, who was a childhood acquaintance of Marcel and Gilberte Swann, was "L'enfant de chœur de l'église de Combray...et il est maintenant pharmacien à Méséglise"(269). However, this revelation is too late to have the same impact on Marcel that it would have if he had known who had sent the letter when it arrived. The emotional intensity of the moment of his first publication has passed when he might have enjoyed the praise of Théodore. Again, time plays a role in the relationship of the correspondents. A connection is finally made but in these anachronistic letters, time separates the reception and the attribution of the letter and defers the effective communication between the sender and the receiver. The letter is, in a sense, too early.

The lack of communication so typical of the correspondence in *Albertine disparue* is epitomized by the letters that do not arrive at all. These absent letters often make as much of an impression on the hero as those that are received. For example, the letters of congratulations that do not arrive after the publication of his article in *Le Figaro* have more effect on Marcel than the two letters he does receive from virtual strangers: the unknown Sautton (44 L 169) and "l'une de Mme Goupil, dame de Combray que je n'avais pas revue depuis tant d'années et à qui, même à Combray je n'avais pas trois fois adressé la parole" (43 L 169). The wished for letters from admired friends are painfully absent: Bloch "dont j'eusse tant

aimé savoir ce qu'il pensait de mon article, ne m'écrivait pas (45 L 170), and Bergotte, "un grand admirateur de mon article, qu'il n'avait pu lire sans envie...ne m'avait absolument rien écrit" (46 L 171). Marcel analyses Bergotte's humiliating silence:

Je m'étais seulement demandé s'il eût aimé cet article, en craignant que non. A cette question que je me posais, Mme de Forcheville m'avait répondu qu'il l'admirait infiniment, le trouvait d'un grand écrivain. Mais elle me l'avait dit pendant que je dormais: c'était un rêve. (171)

This dream correspondence concerning Bergotte bears a noticeable resemblance to a letter from Proust's personal correspondence. In the letter to Mme de Noailles mentioned earlier, Proust describes a strikingly similar experience:

Je m'endors, je rêve que le plus grand poète de tous les temps m'écrit que je suis merveilleux, que j'ai du talent, je me réveille, je suis déjà impatient de ne pas avoir la lettre de ce poète sublime.<sup>10</sup>

Although there is no effective communication between the correspondents in these dream letters; they are a reflection of the unconscious desire of the receiver, in the absence of valued letters of appreciation, to invent fictional letters of praise from respected admirers "qui n'ont pas de lendemain" (171).

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<sup>10</sup>*Correspondance de Marcel Proust*, Tome V, 1905, 241



There is a whole subtext of correspondence in *Albertine disparue* that consists of imagined letters. Fifteen of these make-believe letters—ten of which occur in Chapter I—concern Albertine. Marcel's volatile emotional state after Albertine's departure causes him to invent seven letters and telegrams involving Albertine in addition to the exchange of real letters. Marcel vacillates between wishing Albertine would not come back, "J'aurais voulu lui télégraphier de ne pas revenir" (5 T 30), and, conversely, imagining her return:

On sonnait: c'est une lettre d'elle [8 L 33], c'est elle-même peut-être! Si je me sentais bien portant pas trop malheureux, je n'étais plus jaloux, je n'avais plus de griefs contre elle, j'aurais voulu vite la revoir, l'embrasser, passer gaiement toute ma vie avec elle. Lui télégraphier: Venez vite (9 T 33).

Should Albertine refuse to come back, Marcel cannot imagine himself resisting the temptation to telegraph a last desperate appeal: "Revenez" (16 T 40). But, of course, Marcel does not send these telegrams and Albertine does not send the letter. This make-believe correspondence does not bring Albertine back. Marcel's brief moment of hope is quickly followed by the painful awareness of the Albertine's absence: "cette chose atroce: l'absence d'Albertine" (35).

These imaginary letters, which are fictional *au deuxième degré*, accentuate the delusional nature of the powerful emotional desire to recreate the "absent presence," "de

restituer la présence" as Rousset says,<sup>11</sup> to make the connection with the absent other. But, more importantly, the hero begins to move into the world of fiction-making with this imaginary correspondence. The long letter Marcel imagines receiving from the dead Albertine is inspired by his strong emotional desire to restore her presence: "l'espoir incessant de la voir entrer" (94). *Faute de mieux*, faced with her permanent absence, Marcel restores an imagined "presence." The hero creates a fictional Albertine:

...me faisant penser maintenant que j'allais recevoir un mot d'Albertine m'apprenant qu'elle avait bien eu un accident de cheval mais pour des raisons romanesques (et comme en somme il est quelques fois arrivé pour des personnages qu'on a cru longtemps morts) elle n'avait pas voulu que j'apprenne qu'elle avait guéri et, maintenant repentante, demandait à venir vivre pour toujours avec moi. (29 L 94)

Of course, this "letter" is never received. It becomes part of the correspondence that Buisine refers to as "tragiquement absente."<sup>12</sup>

The imagined letter is an expression of the emotional need of the hero to make a connection with the absent other, even to the extent of recreating that person as a fictional being. If the interpretation of souls is the dream of the hero, separation is his experience. If the imaginary correspondence attempts to break down the walls of separation in a fictional

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<sup>11</sup>Rousset, *Forme et Signification*, 78.

<sup>12</sup>Alain Buisine, *Proust et ses lettres*, 77

sense, the real correspondence in *Albertine disparue* has just the opposite effect. Generally, there is a complete lack of communication between the senders and the receivers in the often ineffective, erroneous, or ill-timed correspondence due to a variety of self-conceived errors or unintended deceptions made by others.

Certain untimely letters in *Albertine disparue* lead to a complete breakdown, or rather a breaking off, of communication between the correspondents. In the case of Marcel's last telegram to Albertine, there are tragic overtones:

Je laissai toute fierté vis à vis d'Albertine, je lui envoyai un télégramme désespéré lui demandant de revenir à n'importe quelles conditions, qu'elle ferait tout ce qu'elle voudrait, que je demandais seulement à l'embrasser une minute trois fois par semaine avant qu'elle se couche. Et elle eût dit: "une fois seulement", que j'eusse accepté une fois.  
(22 T 58)

Marcel has no hope of a response. The telegram arrives too late; he is tragically unaware that Albertine had already died before it was sent: "Mon télégramme venait de partir que j'en reçus un"—the fateful telegram from Mme Bontemps telling him of Albertine's accidental death: "Mon pauvre ami, notre petite Albertine n'est plus..." (23 T 58).

Albertine's two posthumous letters, the one accepting Marcel's decision to have Andrée move in with him (24 L 59) and the second, probably written the same day, asking that if he has not written to Andrée yet, "Consentiriez-vous à me reprendre?"

(25 L 60), leave Marcel unable to respond, for all communication has been cut off by death.

The tragic criss-crossing of these last ill-timed letters and telegrams underscores the notion of separation in the correspondence of *Albertine disparue* and accentuates the reality of the two solitudes: the sender and the receiver. Marcel's last telegram to Albertine with its pleading, solitary voice in a discontinued dialogue and Albertine's final appeals from the dead symbolize the inability of the correspondents to communicate, whether in life or in death.

The analysis of these few letters received by Marcel illustrates the unavoidable separation of the correspondents and their message either by the intervention of fate or by what seems inevitable errors both self-conceived or unwittingly inflicted by others. The disconnected relationship between the sender and the receiver that is so characteristic of the correspondence in *Albertine disparue* produces a body of letters that are often misread, misunderstood, misinterpreted, or simply out of sync with the emotions that they might have touched had they arrived at another time. A study of how these letters are received and interpreted reveals the decisive role that time and error play in the process of reading, interpreting, or decoding the text of a letter and how they affect the ability of the correspondents to communicate. The line of communication in the correspondence of *Albertine disparue* is, for the most part, not directly between the senders and the receivers or by implication

between the author and the reader or, taken further in language, between the word (Sa) and its meaning (Sé). The connection is not made through what is said or read, for, in reality, the point of contact lies somewhere between the "petits signes noirs" and what they conjure up, usually in error, in the mind of the reader with "un faisceau de pensées."

As we have seen, the notion of error can be perceived as a creative force in the correspondence of *Albertine disparue*. What Marcel "reads" upon receiving a letter is often a false interpretation of the original message which he invents, like an altered translation, through a screen of false premises, misguided assumptions, suspicions, or inappropriate associations. The effect of this erroneous process of decoding a text is almost like sending a letter to yourself. Essentially, Marcel creates his own messages through error; in reading he becomes an author, recreating his own text—his own misinterpretation of the original letter.

According to the narrator, "on devine en lisant, on crée." Error ends up by being a positive force in *Albertine disparue* as it allows the process of decoding to be more fluid and creative. Marcel, as the reader of the correspondence, and the implied reader of the novel in turn, are not anchored to one meaning or a single interpretation. It allows the significance or meaning of a text to float free from its moorings. Error and the creative misinterpretation of the message turn the receiver into an author of his own misguided fictions and, in a sense, the reader becomes a writer. By extension, the narrator

suggests that these erroneous interpretations have wider philosophical implications about our inability to communicate directly at any level with reality.

Combien de lettres lit dans un mot une personne distraite et surtout prévenue, qui part de l'idée que la lettre est d'une certaine personne? Combien de mots dans la phrase? On devine en lisant, on crée; tout part d'une erreur initiale; celles qui suivent (et ce n'est pas seulement dans la lecture des lettres et des télégrammes, pas seulement dans toute lecture), si extraordinaires qu'elles puissent paraître à celui qui n'a pas le même point de départ, sont toutes naturelles. Une bonne partie de ce que nous croyons, et jusque dans les conclusions dernières c'est ainsi, avec un entêtement et une bonne foi égales, vient d'une première méprise sur les prémisses. (235)

### Letters and Language

The quest of the aspiring writer in *la Recherche* has been a search for the truth but his experience with language in the reading and writing of letters in *Albertine disparue* has sent him on a long detour in the opposite direction, down the path of lies, error, and deception—"un détour si long et si douloureux" (223). Marcel's unique experience with letters in this volume has shown that the path to the truth in Proust's novel is not exclusively the quasi-mystical experience of the "mémoire involontaire," "la voie courte" as Descombes calls it,<sup>13</sup> of instantaneous revelation. In the *Albertine* sequence,

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<sup>13</sup>Descombes, *Proust, Philosophie du roman*, 122.

the hero explores what Descombes refers to as "la voie longue" that involves the trials of unfulfilled love: suffering, separation, indifference, *oubli*—a dialectic process that takes time, like a Dantesque descent into hell through experiences of deception and error preceding the illumination of the Truth. The novelistic episodes like those in *Albertine disparue*—where Marcel's involvement with a large corpus of letters leads him to a new perception of the truth and allows the hero time to become adept at the practice of interpreting signs—are, according to Gilles Deleuze, more important than the involuntary reminiscences and illuminations that Marcel experiences throughout the novel:

L'essentiel dans la *Recherche*, ce n'est pas la mémoire et le temps, mais le signe et la vérité. L'essentiel n'est pas de se souvenir, mais d'apprendre.<sup>14</sup>

Learning, however, is a slow process for Marcel. His bungled experiences with correspondence could almost be considered humorous: if something can go wrong, it does. Marcel intercepts the wrong mail, misinterprets his own mail, receives garbled messages, and generally sends letters designed to deceive and confuse to the people whom he most wants to impress. It does not seem to matter what Marcel reads or writes, he always "gets" the wrong message or, alternately, sends messages that create

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<sup>14</sup>Gilles Deleuze, *Marcel Proust et les signes*, 81.

the wrong response—a discouraging situation for a literary apprentice searching for the truth.

Language itself plays a passive role in this epistolary muddle. It is subject to misinterpretation and misunderstanding and only acquires meaning through error. In fact, it appears on the surface that *Albertine disparue* is solely about how language malfunctions. Language in the Proustian letter does not communicate anything directly for different reasons: either in writing the letter when lies or misinformation are encoded or in receiving the letter when errors of misunderstanding or misinterpretation are decoded. The messages of the letters are obscure or immaterial since what they have to say is insignificant in the end.

It was Marcel's wish to find an authentic language that truthfully represented reality—words that signify with the same directness and authenticity as a blush:

Les paroles elles-mêmes ne me renseignaient qu'à la condition d'être interprétées à la façon d'un afflux de sang à la figure d'une personne qui se trouble, à la façon d'un silence subit. (*La Prisonnière*, 80)

However, during his literary journey with letters, Marcel only finds words that conceal, confuse, deceive, trick, and entrap. Nevertheless, these very words attain quasi-mystical powers that, in time, do inform Marcel of the truth. The most distinctive characteristic of the correspondence in *Albertine disparue* is the notion that the words themselves harbor the prophetic truth whether it is encoded in lies or decoded by



error. The power of the word is not considered in its usual sense, to denote or connote, but to reveal by inversion if not by perversion. The seemingly ineffectual correspondence in *Albertine disparue* deals in knowledge by revelation. With deceptive letters, the author becomes the receiver of the truth, which is revealed in time through his own consciously deceptive words. With erroneous correspondence, the reader of the letters becomes the author of his own misguided fictions through misinterpretations and errors that eventually lead to the truth. In this Alice-in-Wonderland upside down Proustian world, what is not said is what is meant, and what is false becomes true.

Although in this section of Proust's *Recherche* the hero becomes aware of the truth without the experience of "la mémoire involontaire," the process is still, in some sense, involuntary. The truth comes unbidden through language—using words. For Marcel, becoming aware of reality is still a mysterious experience but in this case it is a passive, receptive waiting game involving time rather than the gratuitous and instantaneous revelations of "la mémoire involontaire" or the aggressive, acquisitive pursuit of the truth, objectively pursued, as in the experience of "la mémoire volontaire." The narrator experiences language and the sign as ambiguous, expansive, and mysterious. There is a human, almost visceral quality about Proustian words—living entities burdened with the truth: "ces petits êtres familiers, à la fois vivants et couchés dans une espèce d'engourdissement sur le papier" (105).

Communication of the truth is insular or circulating within the self in Proust's novel; the truth is self-generating in a mysterious, creative way. It is not found "out there" to be communicated from one to another since it lies within, "in here." By implication, the truth cannot be told to someone in the form of a transferable message whether in a letter or book: "...nous ne pouvons recevoir la vérité de personne ... nous devons la créer nous-même..."<sup>15</sup> In this sense, the correspondence acts as a kind of *mise en abyme* of the whole question of (mis)representation in *la Recherche*. In the Proustian scheme of things, the truth cannot be consciously encoded in language; consequently, by extension, the author cannot communicate the truth to the reader. The narrator himself questions the ability of authors, like Stendhal, who recount someone's life story pretending to represent past events in an informed way:

Combien nous voudrions quand nous aimons, c'est-à-dire quand l'existence d'une autre personne nous semble mystérieuse, trouver un tel narrateur informé!  
(131)

Actually, the problem of communication becomes a central issue in *Albertine disparue*. Speaking generally, whether the letters are studied from the point of view of encoding or from the point of view of decoding, both views underscore the profound limitations of communication in Proustian terms.

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<sup>15</sup>Proust, "Journées de lecture" in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, Paris: Gallimard (Pléiade), 1971, 171.

First, the information received is suspect and, second, the interpretation of this information, or what is probably misinformation, by a receiver who must translate the text through a screen of his or her assumptions, suspicions, or "prémisses" (235), as the narrator calls them, defies the possibility of the direct communication of any kind of truth or "hard information" about human relationships. The truth waits, hidden behind a tangled web of errors, misinterpretation, and lies. This causes the narrator to comment:

...combien de fois sans le savoir, sans le vouloir, nous les avions dites en des paroles crues sans doute mensongères par nous mais auxquelles l'événement avait donné après coup leur valeur prophétique...Mensonges, erreurs, en deçà de la réalité profonde que nous n'apercevions pas, vérité au-delà, vérité de nos caractères dont les lois essentielles nous échappaient et demandent le temps pour se révéler, vérité de nos destins aussi. (89)

The effect of the letters in general can be described in the same way as the narrator describes the telegrams of Saint-Loup in particular: "leur attente...inutile, leur résultat nul" (86). *Albertine disparue* describes a profound sense of separation and isolation on the part of the narrator, and the letters do not bridge the gap: "les liens entre un être et nous n'existent que dans notre pensée...l'homme est l'être qui ne peut sortir de soi, qui ne connaît les autres qu'en soi et en disant le contraire, ment" (34).

When the youthful Marcel imagines his mother reading his first letter, he muses:

Maintenant je n'étais plus séparé d'elle; les barrières étaient tombées, un fil délicieux nous réunissait. (Swann, 30)

With the devastating words from Françoise, "Il n'y a pas de réponse" (Swann, 31), it was clear that no connection had been made. This early separation between sender and receiver persists throughout the correspondence of *Albertine disparue*. The letters and telegrams do not connect the correspondents with an imaginary thread. Instead, the kinds of letters that are found in *Albertine disparue* tend to break the lines of communication: deceptive letters or *lettres feintes* that consciously hide true feelings and pass along false information; erroneous letters that are misread or misinterpreted due to the mistaken identity of the sender or receiver; inopportune or ill-timed letters that arrive too late to be effective; and dreamed of or make-believe letters that never arrive. In effect, the encoding of misinformation is the hallmark of the letters in *Albertine disparue* and in the process of decoding, error is the byword. This situation represents in Buisine's terms a correspondence "qui ne correspond pas."<sup>16</sup>

Studying the body of letters in *Albertine disparue* reinforces the same profound sense of separation revealed by the analysis of their form and context within the narrative. The sequence of Albertine's departure, death, and ultimate disappearance through *oubli* demonstrates that we are dealing with a correspondence that does not correspond and a narrative

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<sup>16</sup>Buisine, *Proust et ses lettres*, 74

that does not tell a consistent story. The body of letters presents a form that is partial, fragmented, and discontinuous while the text of these letters reveals a content that is deceptive, complicated, confusing, and erroneous. The narrative text, which is often repetitive and imprecise, represents a diagesis that is elliptical to the point of being inaccessible to the reader.

Given this disjointed state of affairs, the theme of separation has a more profound significance than the mere reality of Albertine's physical departure or of Marcel's trip away from Paris. There is disconnection or separation at every level in this volume of *la Recherche* among elements that one might consider "natural" pairs: hero/heroine, plot/story, narrative/diagesis, senders/receivers, medium/message, form/content, language/meaning, signifier/signified. On the physical level the hero is separated from the heroine, the perennially absent referent; on the fictional level the narrative does not correspond to the diagesis since Albertine is separated from her "story." In the correspondence, the sender does not communicate with the receiver as one or the other disconnects from the intended message. The medium itself is often confused with the message, and in deceptive correspondence the form consciously misrepresents the intended content. On the linguistic level, language is divorced from stable meaning--the signifier from a single signified.

One of the elements of these pairs is generally absent or misrepresented in a way that finally affects the kind of

fiction that is produced in *Albertine disparue*, which under the circumstances can only be called a narrative of absence. The list of absentees is strategic in the Albertine sequence: the referent is, of course, "l'être absent" (104)—the fugitive body of Albertine literally disappears from Marcel's life even as he attempts, unsuccessfully, to restore the absent "presence" through writing letters and telegrams. The absent referent then becomes an empty signifier by degrees as she is separated from her past or her "story" by virtue of a repetitive narrative text that is unable to access an elusive diagesis that literally self-destructs with the arrival of damaging letters from Aimé that destroy Marcel's memories of Albertine. As the memories fade other letters further confirm the advance stage of indifference that Marcel has arrived at:

Une lettre de mon coulissier [52 L 218] rouvrit un instant pour moi les portes de la prison où Albertine était en moi vivante, mais si loin, si profond, qu'elle me restait inaccessible. (218)

With the delivery of the Venetian telegram, Albertine no longer exists even as a signified—a source of meaning. The memories have died—the "faisceau de pensées" that represented and supported the persona of Albertine in Marcel's mind: "ces pensées étaient mortes" (220). The derealization of Albertine is symbolized in the words of Jean-Pierre Richard: "l'enveloppe signifiante reste neutre."<sup>17</sup> Albertine disappears from

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<sup>17</sup>Jean-Pierre Richard, *Proust et le monde sensible*, Seuil: Paris, 1974, 148.

Marcel's thoughts, from the correspondence, and from the novel, aided by the process of *l'oubli* " dont je commençais à sentir la force et qui est un si puissant instrument d'adaptation à la réalité parce qu'il détruit peu à peu en nous le passé survivant qui est en constante contradiction avec elle" (137). As Albertine retreats into neutrality, she becomes incapable of generating signs:

Mais au fur et à mesure que ces impressions étaient affaiblies, l'immense champ d'impressions qu'elles coloraient d'une teinte angoissante ou douce avait repris des tons neutres. (221)

Ultimately, Albertine is unable to produce any associations for Marcel: "la femme qui l'inspire et qui est absente, remplacée par un cygne inerte" (109). And her mystery, like the "mystère de tout être," remains intact. For Marcel, Albertine has become a *signe inerte*, a neutral signifier, absent of meaning with simply the potential to generate new associations, new relationships as a fictional presence in Marcel's *livre à venir*. For the moment, Albertine returns into the sealed envelope.

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