THIS ESSAY, like the novel on which it focuses, ends where it began. While teaching *Swann's Way* in a course in modern fiction, I was attracted, as a matter of simple curiosity, to the number of metaphors using theater and drama as their vehicles. Extending the examination of such metaphors to the whole of *A la recherche du temps perdu* revealed not only a large number of them, but a pattern and control in their deployment, a pattern so significant that its understanding required an examination of other theatrical material—allusions, quotations, and action—in the novel and Proust's other writings.

In his essay on Goethe, written at the turn of the century, Proust had commented somewhat prophetically on the use of theater in Goethe's novels, presenting observations which literally and metaphorically apply to his own later work. Even his metaphors in the passage are a faint prediction of his later practice:

Les arts, et les moyens par lesquels on s'y perfectionne, occupent beaucoup les romans de Goethe. L'art de l'acteur, l'art de l'architecte, l'art du musicien, l'art du pédagogue y jouent un grand rôle,
et en tout ceci ce qui est vraiment l'art. La difficulté d'obtenir un ensemble où chacun soit prêt le frappe évidemment comme faisant partie de l'essence même de l'effort artistique. D'où la part faite aux comédies de société, aux comédies improvisées, à cette première représentation où Wilhelm Meister veut jouer et ne sait quoi dire. . . .

Here Proust shows his awareness of materials which he was himself to carry further when he made extensive use of artists—particularly theatrical artists—and pursued the ramifications of society's comedies.

In *A la recherche*, Proust includes hundreds of metaphors drawn from theater, some brief, others extended. The metaphors are found in conjunction with a rather astonishing amount of non-metaphorical theater material. Independent of portions of the plot connected with the theater, close to seventy-five allusions to attending the theater are made—meeting at the theater, seeing friends in the audience, chatting in the lobby. A score and more characters from drama are mentioned, in comparisons, criticisms, and passing reference. Twenty-five or more actors and actresses, including what appears to be the whole of the Comédie Française troupe, are spoken of or appear in the action. Nearly fifty plays, classical and contemporary, are mentioned; half a dozen plays are quoted from, *Athalie, Esther,* and *Phèdre* more than a score of times. Close to thirty dramatists, from classical times to Proust's contemporaries, some of whom are asserted to be associates of the fictional characters, are alluded to or appear in the novel.

Much of this, of course, arises naturally from the world and culture which Proust portrayed, and from his own tastes and interests; but it is also made to serve more integrated purposes. In addition to almost five hundred metaphorical
and direct allusions to theater and drama, and quotations from drama, by Marcel and other characters, the plot continually involves the theater and its people. Besides Rachel and Berma, two other important characters are actresses—the Lesbian Léa, and Odette, who played Miss Sacripant, and was painted by Elstir in her costume for this character. Two leading characters figure as playwrights, both Bloch and Bergotte being shown as writers of comedies for presentation in fashionable drawing rooms. Berma, and especially Berma as Phèdre, is made the symbol of what is admirable in theater. Berma in an absolute sense, and Rachel in a comparative one, are marked as admirable by their devotion to the theater. If Proust often uses the admirable traits of these theater characters to denigrate society by comparison, in his metaphors he equates society with what is inferior and shoddy in the theater.

Two critics have written in general terms of the methods which can be illustrated in Proust's way with theater materials. Edmund Wilson has pointed to the interweaving of details which makes up Proust's organic structure:

. . . The "events" which may be taken arbitrarily as infinitely small or infinitely comprehensive, make up an organic structure, in which all are interdependent, each involving every other and the whole; so Proust's book is a gigantic mesh of complicated relations: cross-references between different groups of characters and a multiplication of metaphors and similes connecting the phenomena of infinitely varied fields—biological, zoological, physical, aesthetic, social, political, and financial.²

To this we may add "theatrical" and "dramatic." C. W. M. Johnson has dealt more specifically with Proust's methods of interweaving images:
A la recherche du temps perdu is a matrix of images related to each other in subtle ways. These images thread through the story, undergo development, and in general behave like the main characters, at times just present in a scene, at other times taking the center of the stage and delivering long monologues, and often demanding a reorientation of our thinking because of the metamorphoses they undergo. The figure is extravagant; but it points to an unrecognized source of unity in the work.

To exploit imagery in this fashion takes time and a prodigious amount of space. The reader must be occupied with other matters and allowed to forget, before conditions are right for recall and further development; but after the image has undergone several such variations it becomes so charged with associations that the slightest allusion to it is evocative.

These matters were the beginning and the end of the present study, but Proust's theatrical net also catches up relationships among autobiography and fiction, art and life, the chronology of the novel, major themes of the work, the working methods of its creator, and other fish both large and small.

The legend of Proust the recluse confined to his medically smoked, cork-lined room has been so firmly established that the idea of his interest and even indirect participation in anything so active as the theater is likely at first to seem improbable. Yet one of his first efforts written for "publication," in October, 1888, when he was seventeen, was some notes on the theater for the little Revue lilas; and in the year of his death, he wrote to Philip Sassoon of explaining to a waiter at the Ritz, who had prepared the role of Sosie, what Molière's play was about. In 1897, he wrote for the Revue d'art dramatique a piece on theatrical criticism called "Silhouette d'artiste." In 1903, he proposed to write regular theater reviews for the Renaissance latine, and was so annoyed when the scheme fell through that he referred to the review
as "la perfide Inconstance latine," "l'ingrate Jactance latine," "la choquante Inconvenance latine," "l'Indécence latine," and "la Méconaissance latine." He attended rehearsals in theaters and in drawing rooms, and on one occasion "with conspicuous lack of success, officiated as prompter." He asked the help of his friends Reynaldo Hahn and Gaston de Caillavet to obtain an audition for a singer at the Apollo. He suggested a passage of dialogue for insertion into a play of Antoine Bibesco's.

Most tantalizing is a remark in one of his letters, when he wrote to Madame de Caillavet, "Dites à Gaston et à Robert que j'ai en vue une assez belle (!) idée de pièce," but—and this is all we ever read of it in his letters—he immediately added, "et que je n'ai pas le courage de la faire." Though not a playwright, Proust was something of a theatrical angel: in 1922, the year of his death, he wished to sell some shares of stock he held in the Vieux Colombier theater. Probably one of the most peculiar rumors about Proust, late in his life, falsely suggested an even more unexpected theatrical accomplishment: that he had designed the decoration of a Montmartre theater—a rumor he decided neither to deny nor to complain of. These few particulars suggest that cork and smoke did not raise any insuperable barrier between Proust and the theater of his time. When we further consider the circles of his friends and his social life, we begin to see why theater and drama play what might have been regarded at first glance as an unexpectedly large part in A la recherche du temps perdu.

No reader of Du côté de chez Swann will be surprised to discover that the youthful Proust had a great enthusiasm for the theater. When he was thirteen, his "idea of earthly
happiness" was "to live in close contact with those I love, with the beauties of nature, with a quantity of books and music, and to have, within easy distance, a French theatre."\textsuperscript{14} As a schoolboy, Derrick Leon tells us, "it was the theatre that was his great topic of conversation. He would expatiate with equal vigour on the wonderful performance Bernhardt had just given in \textit{Hamlet} . . . or the great misfortune of not having been able to make use of an opportunity he was once offered, because his parents considered that he was too young to go out at night, of being taken to see Lemaître."\textsuperscript{15} Robert Dreyfus writes of the same period, "Et je suis certain de son enthousiasme d’enfant pour Mounet-Sully et pour Mme Sarah Bernhardt, dont il a transmué le génie dans son personnage de la tragédienne Berma."\textsuperscript{16} George D. Painter reports the amusement of one observer who saw the "little boy" buying the complete works of Molière.\textsuperscript{17} Mme Proust's letters to her son, when he was away on vacations, are full of references to theater and drama, as well as of quotations from plays. She apologizes for not having sent a requested copy of \textit{Ruy Blas} and refers to the play \textit{Tosca},\textsuperscript{18} and reports on theater articles of the day: "Il paraît que le \textit{Figaro} d’hier était amusant par Caliban et palpitant par Boulanger."\textsuperscript{19} Proust's return correspondence with his mother is also full of references to the reading of plays and of quotations from them.

When Proust was twenty, he answered a questionnaire thus:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Who is your favorite hero of fiction?}

Hamlet.

\textit{Who are your favorite heroines of fiction?}

Phèdre [crossed out by Proust] Bérénice.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}
Lucien Daudet describes an early visit with Proust which is, in several details, similar to Marcel’s description in the novel of his visits at his Uncle Adolphe’s, and which involves the same interest in actresses: “... Devinant ma timidité après un premier essai de conversation très vague, il me dit: ‘Tenez, je vous ai préparé quelques photographies de gens célèbres, des actrices, des écrivains, des artistes, cela vous amusera peut-être, et aussi ce livre.’”21

Perhaps the clearest indication of Proust’s early interest in and knowledge of the theater is the piece which he wrote for the student magazine, the Revue lilas, when he was seventeen. Robert Dreyfus, calling it basically a pastiche of Jules Lemaître, quotes the piece, with explanatory footnotes. It is essentially a collection of random notes such as the following:

Vu Jules Lemaître pour la première fois. Jolie tête de jeune taureau, face de faune songeur avec deux yeux d’un bleu bien pur, bleu comme un reflet de pervenche dans une source claire. ... Presque égal au divin Mounet, il est au-dessus de toute comparaison avec n’importe quel autre tragédien. Pourquoi l’Odéon ne l’engage-t-il pas, au lieu de permettre à l’exécrable X ... de continuer à déshonorer les vers admirables d’Athalie? ... Excessivement remarquable, Alice Lavigne, dans les Joyeusetés de l’Année. Dans la Scène de la Danse, avec un sens merveilleux de l’eurythmie; très fine la charge vraiment éminente d’un entrechat imperturbablement continué et comme automatique pendant la conversation des deux danseuses. Du contraste, dirait tel maître*, jaillit un comique imprévu, et des fusées de rire traversent la salle. ... Bien faibles les Pieds de Mouton. Pour prendre une expression “que je vous cueille sur les lèvres mêmes de Mme Théo,”** on se tord à Mimi.22

Dreyfus is not sure whether this youthful effort of the theater-struck Proust was ever published, since the files of the review are lost, but he points to the way in which the manuscript presfigures later work:
Mais cet essai de chronique dramatique n'est-il point curieux? Par l'admiration de Racine et des grands interprètes de la tragédie classique (Athalie ou Phèdre), le "divin Mounet," c'est-à-dire Mounet-Sully, la Berma..., son auteur ressemble comme un frère à l'enfant de Swann... mais un frère aîné, plus dégourdi, qui fréquente les petits théâtres et lit avec ravissement, chaque dimanche, les délicats feuilletons de ce Jules Lemaître qu'il vient d'avoir le bonheur de rencontrer "pour la première fois" (probablement chez Madame Straus).

Dreyfus' parenthetical remark about Madame Straus indicates the next stage in Proust's interest in the theater and its people, for his social life gave him the opportunity to meet many of the theatrical luminaries of the day, and to see many of them taking part in drawing-room presentations of various kinds.

He was a friend of Mme Aubernon, who, during the Dreyfus affair, said, "I shall keep my Jews," since she "knew too well," as Derrick Leon points out, "from which quarter came so much of the talent that made her theatrical performances successful." These "theatricals" were said to be the basis for those of Mme de Villeparisis in A la recherche. Her salon included Becque, Lemaître, Sardou, and Dumas fils; but, as Leon indicates, her home became a center for more than literary and theatrical chit-chat:

The real importance of her influence was due to the theatrical performances which she staged in her house.... She had her own private company, and... organized ambitious productions, not only of the works of her "chosen," but also of hitherto unknown pieces from abroad. She was first to produce Becque's Parisienne, with Antoine and Réjane; and the comedy Village, by Octave Feuillet. It is also to her eternal credit that it was at her house that there were played for the first time in Paris Ibsen's Doll's House and John Gabriel Borkman.

That Proust's friendship with Mme Aubernon included attending her theatricals we know from what he wrote about
Village to Pierre Lavallée: “... J’ai été obligé de partir au milieu du Village mais [Robert de Fiers] a été étourdissant dans la première pièce.”

Other friends offered Proust similar opportunities to meet theater people and to see more or less elaborate private performances. One of these friends was Mme Lemaire, at whose home Réjane, Bernhardt, Coquelin, and Mounet-Sully performed on various occasions. Another friend was Comte Robert de Montesquiou, the aesthete, flamboyant snob, and minor Symbolist poet who served as one of the models for the Baron de Charlus. This friendship gave Proust an entree to the worlds of society, the arts, and the tangled relationships of Montesquiou’s male friends. Of the close relationship between Montesquiou and the divine Sarah, Mme Clermont-Tonnerre gives one rather grotesque bit of evidence: “Il eut pour Sarah Bernhardt une admiration éternelle, une amitié qui dura jusqu’à l’Aiglon, et un amour physique de 24 heures qui amena chez lui une triste réaction: huit jours de vomissements incoercibles.” Another friend of Proust’s who was intimate with Sarah Bernhardt (apparently with less violent results) was Reynaldo Hahn, of whom Proust wrote to the Comtesse de Noailles in 1901:

... J’ai reçu de Bruxelles (où il est avec Sarah Bernhardt) (confidentiel) une lettre de Reynaldo Hahn. ... Il a emporté avec lui le Coeur innombrable dont il est fou, et l’a lu à Sarah. Elle en a été enthousiasmée, vous trouve le plus grand des poètes, un grand génie, etc., et a aussitôt appris l’Offrande à Pan et la récitera jeudi chez M. de Montesquiou.

This reading took place on May 30, at Montesquiou’s Pavillon de Muses, as he called his house, with Proust’s mother in the audience. Derrick Leon describes Montesquiou as “surrounding himself with famous poets, actresses and professional beauties; the friend of Bernhardt, Duse, Rostand,” and adds that “his poems were recited frequently by Sarah Bernhardt
The Theater in the Fiction of Marcel Proust

at the exclusive receptions of the Duchesse de Rohan."\textsuperscript{31} Clearly, Proust would have had more than public knowledge of Bernhardt of which to avail himself in the creation of Berma.

Of two of Montesquiou's evenings which Proust attended, we have some idea. Of one, Derrick Leon tells us: "The evening was a memorable one. Sarah Bernhardt recited for the first time \textit{Le Coucher de la Mort}; and later, with Bartet and Reichenberg, as a trio, Chénier's \textit{Ode to Versailles}."\textsuperscript{32} One of Proust's early letters to Montesquiou includes the acknowledgment, "Vous avez bien voulu me permettre d'aller vous voir le soir où Mlle Bartet a récité vos vers chez Mme Lemaire."\textsuperscript{33} Even had Proust never set foot in a theater, which is far from being the case, his social life would have given him an unusual knowledge of its people, and drawing-room productions some acquaintance with its workings.

Proust had been more directly involved in drawing-room theater in several capacities. Painter gives an account of Proust as an unsuccessful prompter, and of his being asked to act. His prompting was less than useful, since he was so pleased with the costumes and his friends' abilities that instead of lines, he fed them laughter and bravos. He refused the role of Pierrot in Gaston de Caillavet's \textit{Colombine}, although (or perhaps, because) he was told, "You're just right for the part, you're so pale and your eyes are so big!"\textsuperscript{34} To the same file that contains the play that Proust never wrote, one must regretfully consign the thought of the role Proust never acted.

Proust's most direct involvement in drawing-room theater, when he was made a character in the dramatic action, was even less fortunate. Robert Dreyfus gives a rather complete account of the affair, including the lines that offended Proust:
Enfin Marcel Proust poursuivit au loin une sorte de carrière aérienne, offrait aux salons les Plaisirs et les Jours. . . . Que de “scènes de revue” tentèrent notre imagination!

La revue s’intitula les Lauriers sont coupés. . . . Le hasard d’une scène évoquant les débuts littéraires de Marcel Proust pourrait seul sauver d’un oubli total ce divertissement éphémère.

Mais à quoi bon l’analyser, cette scène? Elle fit de la peine à Marcel Proust, voilà ce qu’il suffit de retenir. En vérité, notre pastiche de son langage et de sa politesse dans le monde, nos plaisanteries sur son “snobisme” ou sur le prix inabordable de son livre, tout cela était fort anodin. . . . Mieux armé que personne au monde pour faire rire d’autrui s’il avait voulu, Marcel Proust ne cédait qu’à regret à ce penchant condamnable. . . .

Il avait trop de dignité pour faire entendre aucune plainte, mais il s’abstint d’assister au spectacle du Chat-Bourbon.85

Dreyfus presents part of the scene in a footnote:

Proust, s’adressant à Ernest La Jeunesse. —Est-ce que vous l’avez lu, mon livre?

La Jeunesse. —Non, Monsieur, il est trop cher.

Proust. —Hélas! c’est ce que tout le monde me dit ... Et toi, Gregh, tu l’as lu?

Gregh. —Oui, je l’ai découpé, pour en rendre compte.

Proust. —Et toi aussi, tu as trouvé que c’était trop cher?

Gregh. —Mais non, mais non, on en avait pour son argent.

Proust. —N’est-ce pas? ... Une préface de Monsieur France, 4 francs ... Des tableaux de Madame Lemaire, 4 francs ... De la musique de Reynaldo Hahn, 4 francs ... De la prose de moi, un franc ... Quelques vers de moi, cinquante centimes ... Total treize francs cinquante, ça n’était pas exagéré?

La Jeunesse. —Mais, Monsieur, il y a bien plus de choses que ça dans l’Almanach Hachette, et ça ne coûte que vingt-cinq sous!
The Theater in the Fiction of Marcel Proust

Proust, éclatant de rire. —Ah! que c’est drôle! ... Oh! que ça me fait mal de rire comme ça!

Dreyfus concludes, "Ces 'blagues' peuvent paraître un peu grosse, mais leur gaieté était sans fiel." The gaiety escaped Proust. As Derrick Leon reports, "He was rather more pained than indignant. Apparently it never occurred to him to be amused. . . . 'I don't understand it,' he remarked, with sad bewilderment. 'I simply don't understand it.'"

As well as providing this example of the theatrical activities of one group of Proust's contemporaries, Dreyfus presents an account of Charles Haas (one of the originals of Swann) involved in amateur theatricals. Proust wrote, "Ta revue jouée par Haas à Mouchy m'a tiré des larmes," a remark for which Dreyfus offers the following explanation:

Or, voici que, dans ma Petite Histoire de la Revue de fin d'année, j'avais nommé les interprètes [Haas among them] d'une revue de M. de Massa—les Cascades de Mouchy—jouée au château de Mouchy, le 19 décembre 1863. . . .

Swann au château de Mouchy! Swann acteur mondain! Swann jouant dans une revue de salon, avec les membres du Cercle de la rue Royale peints auprès de lui par Tissot!

Pour tout bon lecteur de Swann, la petite phrase de cette lettre de Marcel Proust . . . devient évocatrice comme une autre "petite phrase" de Vinteuil.

The thread of drawing-room theater runs from Swann-Haas before Proust was born, through Proust's own life, into the society, characterization, plot, and metaphors of his own life's work.

Many of Proust's friends and acquaintances worked in various areas of theater. Gaston de Caillavet was his friend before he was a playwright, and when his Lys rouge was produced, Proust, having seen it, sent him a congratulatory
telegram, and, according to Derrick Leon, "was among the small party of friends who gathered to celebrate the occasion." Another playwright whom he knew well, Paul Hervieu, he took to the second night of *Le Sieur de Vergy*, by Caillavet and Flers, "where in his enthusiasm at his old friends' success he 'narrowly missed blacking Hervieu's eye three times over with my clapping hands.'" The name Doncières," we are told, "comes from a character in *Connais-toi*, a play by Paul Hervieu, whom Proust knew well, produced at the Comédie Française in 1909." Of Reynaldo Hahn, Proust wrote to Mme Straus, "Il est venu une fois ou deux auprès de mon lit, composer la musique de son ballet pour l'Opéra. . . ." The ballet was *Le Dieu bleu*, composed for Diaghileff, whom Proust also knew.

When Proust was forced to move in 1919, Jacques Porel arranged for Proust to rent a furnished apartment in the house of his mother, the celebrated actress Réjane. Porel apparently felt that Proust knew his mother well enough to be asked to write a memorial piece after her death, but Proust declined because of his health. Besides Bernhardt and Réjane, Proust was well acquainted with a third and younger actress, Louisa de Mornand.

"We know, too," Derrick Leon writes, "that . . . Robert's affair with Rachel was based on the liaison of one of [Proust's] friends with Louisa de Mornand." But Robert Vigneron asserts a less remote liaison in a discussion of Proust's mother:

She had favored his affair with Louisa de Mornand, the young actress from the Vaudeville, who sometimes came to see him late at night, after the theatre: when she knew in advance of such a visit, Mme Proust obligingly retired early, in order to leave in complete freedom these two young people whom she could not
help believing to be lovers. Perhaps she hoped that normal love affairs would succeed in curing Marcel of the sordid aberrations that she suspected; but, aside from a few spicy interludes, it seems that Marcel did not make of Louisa, who had a real protector anyway, anything more than a sort of fausse maîtresse designed to ward off any overt suspicion of his less orthodox amusements.46

Proust's brother, ignoring this aspect of her life, asserts that Louisa's theater career provided the basis for Rachel's career in the theater:

On voit Marcel s'intéresser à l'évolution du talent artistique de Louisa de Mornand. . . . Il y a quelque chose d'analogique, quoique bien entendu je ne veuille susciter aucune comparaison ni aucune recherche de clef (puisque j'ai dit qu'il n'y en avait pas), à la façon dont a progressé le talent de Rachel depuis ses premiers essais incompris jusqu'à l'affirmation définitive de son talent, ceci bien entendu si on dissèque le personnage de Rachel et qu'on n'en considère que le côté artistique.47

In the preface to the Mornand letters in the same volume, Fernand Nozière gives an account of Louisa de Mornand, with a slightly different reaction from Leon's or Robert Proust's:

Marcel Proust était un ami de sa famille et, comme Mlle de Mornand voulait être comédienne, il la présenta à Henry Bataille. Ainsi les premiers pas de la petite actrice unissent le dramaturge audacieux et pathétique au romancier qui ne fut ni moins pathétique ni moins audacieux. . . .

Ainsi Mlle Louisa de Mornand entra au Vaudeville. . . . Ces comédiennes du Vaudeville auraient dû fournir à Marcel Proust des sujets, des caractères d'un modernisme aigu. . . . Je ne crois pas qu'il soit possible de trouver dans son œuvre un croquis de femme qui ressemble nettement à Louisa de Mornand. C'est pourtant un type qui aurait du l'intéresser. . . . Mais la banalité de l'existence les sépara.48
They may have become separated, but not before an acquaintanceship of some duration, during which she had appeared in several plays, "would sometimes look in, after the theatre, to say good night," 49 and Proust had written her a number of letters that show him to have been au courant with her theater career and to have seen her act several times.

In several of his letters, he asks for news of her progress and pays her compliments: "Dites-moi aussi si Mlle de Mornand a été dans Maman Colibri une aussi exquise 'Louisa' qu'elle l'est dans la vie réelle et si le public a paru être de l'avis de ses amis." 50 He also reports compliments which he has heard: "On m'a dit que vous étiez radieuse de beauté dans la pièce de Prévost." 51 He sends messages to the theater by his friends and offers good wishes for her success. He several times tries to arrange meetings, either after or at the theater. 52 Their relationship may have been as brief as Nozière suggests, but the tone of Proust's letters shows that he knew well what remarks would please and encourage a young actress.

Proust also took an active part, if a minor one, in furthering her career by getting "puffs" on her behalf into various publications: "Il paraît que je vais peut-être pouvoir faire passer au Gil Bias quelques mots sur vous, j'en suis content." "Dites-moi le nom de la pièce où vous allez jouer et les noms des journaux où vous désirez une mention aimable." "J'ai fait le 'médaillon' Louisa de Mornand pour le Gil Bias. Je ne sais quel jour il paraîtra." 53 At least once, she was able to do a theatrical favor for him, and she received a charming acknowledgment:

Grâce à vous la jeune personne est placée! . . . Cette action va avoir un grand retentissement dans le monde des théâtres et dans le monde où Mlle N... comptait des protectrices. A l'heure qu'il est, Sarah Bernhardt, Mme le Bardy, Mme Georges Menier
doivent se dire: “Quelle puissance, quelle grâce, quelle charité à cette exquise Mlle de Mornand!”

The plays mentioned in all of this correspondence being of the first decade of the century, it is evident that Proust's interest in and knowledge of the theater continued to be direct and personal at least into his thirties.

In his youth, attendance at the theater was evidently one of Proust’s frequent and favorite pastimes, shared with the circle of his friends. There were “visits to the opera and the theatre with Jacques Bizet and Jacques Baignères,” and “Lucien Daudet would fetch him from the Institut and take him off to spend a few hours at the Louvre, or to a matinée of classical drama at the Comédie Française.” Daudet wrote of these latter occasions, “D’autres jours, nous allions au théâtre, voir une pièce dont je le prévenais d’avance ‘que je la détesterai,’ quelque Classique au Théâtre Français. (Je me souviens, entre autres, d’une matinée de l’Avare. Peut-être, sans lui, je n’aurais jamais compris Molière.)

In several Proust letters of this period (1889-1901), there are references to visits to the theater. His mother wrote to him when he was away on vacation, “Malgré ta lettre reçue ce matin . . . où tu me parles retour et Tosca je me berce de l’espoir que . . . tu pourras prolonger.” In an itemization of his expenses, Proust explained to his mother, “Places de théâtre signifie Tour du Monde et Guillaume Tell je pense que je t’ai parlé de cela.” Several of Proust’s letters to Montesquiou, written from the Boulevard Malesherbes, where Proust lived from 1893 to 1900, allude to attendance at plays or other theatrical performances. In three letters, he inquires about arrangements for seeing the Folies Bergères. Twice he refers to theater engagements as reasons for not having
met Montesquiou. Even these few allusions to visits to the theater are significant, since Proust later gives the impression that he never went to the theater at all after the turn of the century, although additional allusions in the letters contradict this.

Georges de Lauris cites instances of Proust's attending the theater after 1907. He writes, referring to the time when Proust moved to the Boulevard Haussman, which was in 1907, "Il lui plaisait d'offrir une soirée au théâtre. Alors, il prenait magnifiquement loges ou baignoires. Le nombre des invités augmentait toujours." Proust's arrangements for a theater party appear in a letter of 1909. A letter of the following year suggests, although it does not prove, another occasion when Proust attended the theater: "... Je l'ai rencontré au Casino [Cabourg] où on jouait Arsène Lupin." That Proust could, and did, still attend the theater is shown by a remark in a 1910 letter: "J'ai été aux Ballets Russes, vous sans doute aussi, c'est bien joli n'est-ce pas?" This was not a unique occasion; according to Derrick Leon, "When he was well enough to go out, he would sometimes accompany Mme Sheikevitch and Jean Cocteau to the Diaghileff ballet." Despite the difficulties caused by his health, Proust attended the theater on at least four more occasions, two of them mentioned in his correspondence with Mme Straus. The first of these was the Martyre de Saint Sébastien, May 21, 1911. The second of these occasions, the dress rehearsal of Kismet, December 17, 1912, suggested—as will be shown later—the basis for an important scene in A la recherche. Although it is known that Proust attended the theater as late as 1920, there is evidence of only infrequent attendance during the ten years preceding his death. In 1914,
he writes to Jacques Rivière, “Déplorable représentation des Ballets Russes hier soir!”  

Proust, in 1919, protested the limitations of his life, in a letter to Paul Souday, saying that he had not visited the Louvre for ten years, and had attended only one concert in that time. As early as 1912, he wrote to Mme Straus, “Moi qui vais si rarement au théâtre, le hasard fait que j’ai connu dans une loge une de vos amies, . . . Mme Standish.” But two letters to Mme Straus in 1912-13 show him as still seriously considering the possibility of accepting her invitations to a theater party:

Que vous avez été gentille de m’inviter pour la centième de “La Gifle”. . . . Je ne suis pas venu pour beaucoup de raisons, dont l’une est que si cela m’amuse infiniment d’aller au théâtre avec vous, c’est parce que c’est avec vous et pas du tout parce que c’est au théâtre. Je veux dire que si c’était au théâtre sans vous, cela m’ennuierait.

Despite the boredom with theater registered here, which is also reflected in the handling of theater material in *A la recherche*, Proust in a later letter honestly seems to regret being unable to see certain productions. In 1917, he wrote to Walter Berry, “Je vous envie beaucoup d’avoir été à Cléopâtre. Ces spectacles de Gémie sont la seule chose que j’aie eu envie de voir au théâtre depuis bien des années.” And in 1920 he managed to go to the theater at least twice.

In a footnote to a letter from Proust to Jacques Rivière in July, 1920, mentioning Gide’s translation of Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, Philip Kolb writes, “On avait donné, le 14 juin 1920, la répétition générale de la pièce à l’Opéra. . . . Proust assista à cette représentation de gala dans la loge de la princesse Soutzo; il apprit pendant l’entr’acte, la mort de
The daily press treated Gide’s play so badly that it made of Régis Gignoux, who reviewed it unfavorably in the *Figaro*, what Proust called “un véritable ennemi personnel, un démolisseur de beauté.” In the year of his death, he was equally distressed at the reception of Gide’s *Saul*. Proust, in a letter to Mme Straus, dated April 20, 1920, describes his distress at an opera gala:

... Je suis allé à cause des heures tardives, à l’absurde soirée de gala à l’Opéra où j’étais invité. Quelle tristesse d’y apprendre—si le renseignement est exact—que Bakst qui a fait cette géniale Schéhérazade... serait enfermé et pour une maladie qui ne peut durer que quelques années (paralysie générale). On ne donnait pas de beaucoup meilleures nouvelles de Nijinski qui fut le bondissant créateur de ces ballets russes, ... Le spectacle de l’Opéra était affreux... Schéhérazade même défigurée, ce qui, si l’état de Bakst est vrai, est, devant son impuissance à défendre son œuvre un terrible sacrilège.

Thus we have Proust within two years of his death, despite the seclusion imposed upon him by his health, still able on occasion to attend the theater, and still very much—and personally—interested in the various creators of the ballet.

The idea of a real connection between Proust and the theater is far less improbable than visions of the cork-lined room make it first appear, and his knowledge of theater and drama, like all other aspects of his life, plays its part in *À la recherche*. And like the other aspects, it is transformed to artistic ends and becomes another instrument of his literary purposes.