

EPISTEMOLOGY  
OF THE CLOSET

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more gratefully for her revelation, so that they continued for some minutes silent, her face shining at him, her contact imponderably pressing, and his stare all kind but all expectant. The end, none the less, was that what he had expected failed to come to him. (386)

To the shock of the female face Marcher is not phobic but simply numb. It is only by turning his desire for the male face into an envious identification with male loss that Marcher finally comes into *any* relation to a woman—and then it is a relation through one dead woman (the other man's) to another dead woman of his own. That is to say, it is the relation of *compulsory* heterosexuality.

When Lytton Strachey's claim to be a conscientious objector was being examined, he was asked what he would do if a German were to try to rape his sister. "I should," he is said to have replied, "try and interpose my own body."<sup>35</sup> Not the joky gay self-knowledge but the heterosexual, self-ignorant acting out of just this fantasy ends "The Beast in the Jungle." To face the gaze of the Beast would have been, for Marcher, to dissolve it.<sup>36</sup> To face the "kind of hunger in the look" of the grieving man—to explore at all into the sharper lambencies of that encounter—would have been to dissolve the closet, to recreate its hypostatized compulsions as desires. Marcher, instead, to the very end, turns his back—recreating a double scenario of homosexual compulsion and heterosexual compulsion. "He saw the Jungle of his life and saw the lurking Beast; then, while he looked, perceived it, as by a stir of the air, rise, huge and hideous, for the leap that was to settle him. His eyes darkened—it was close; and, instinctively turning, in his hallucination, to avoid it, he flung himself, face down, on the tomb" (402).

35. Lytton Strachey, quoted in Michael Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey: A Critical Biography* (London: W. H. Heinemann, 1968), 2: 179.

36. Ruth Bernard Yeazell makes clear the oddity of having Marcher turn his back on the Beast that is supposed, at this late moment, to represent his self-recognition (in *Language and Knowledge in the Late Novels of Henry James* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976], pp. 37–38).

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## Proust and the Spectacle of the Closet

"Vous devez vous y entendre mieux que moi, M. de Charlus, à faire marcher des petits marins. . . . Tenez, voici un livre que j'ai reçu, je pense qu'il vous intéressera. . . . Le titre est joli: *Parmi les hommes*."

Proust, *A la recherche*

About the foundational impossibilities of modern homo/heterosexual definition, the questions we have been essaying so far have been, not how this incoherent dispensation can be rationalized away or set straight, not what it means or even how it means, but what it makes happen, and how. *A la recherche du temps perdu* demands to be a signaling text of such an exploration. While the figure of Wilde may have been the most formative individual influence on turn-of-the-century Anglo-European homosexual definition and identity (including Proust's), *A la recherche* has remained into the present the most vital center of the energies of gay literary high culture, as well as of many manifestations of modern literary high culture in general. It offers what seems to have been the definitive performance of the presiding incoherences of modern gay (and hence nongay) sexual specification and gay (and hence nongay) gender: definitive, that is, in setting up positions and sight lines, not in foreclosing future performance, since it seems on the contrary that the closet drama of *A la recherche* is still *in* performance through its sustained and changing mobilizations of closural and disclosural rage, excitement, resistance, pleasure, need, projection, and exclusion.

Two recent, gay-affirmative critical ways of dealing with the incoherences around homosexuality in Proust, opposite in tone and methodology and in many ways opposite in intent, seem to find it necessary to make similar gestures of compartmentalizing Proust's treatment of sexual specification, disavowing one side of it and identifying with and nourishing the other. J. E. Rivers's 1980 book *Proust and the Art of Love*, a treatment of the centrality of the homosexual "theme" in Proust that is full

of interesting scholarship and awful writing, undertakes essentially to set Proust straight on gay issues—and especially on his “negative stereotypes”—according to the latest in empirical research. The thrust of this research, as Rivers reproduces it, is to argue for the sheer *normality*—that is, ultimately, for the lack of heuristic interest—of homosexual orientation. The book is written with a flatness designed to discourage further textual production:

The fact is that homosexuality is a perennial adjunct of mammalian sexuality, neither a pathological condition nor a biological perversion. It has always existed, both among humans and among animals.<sup>1</sup>

[T]he two kinds of love [homosexual and heterosexual] can and often do involve comparable feelings of tenderness, comparable problems of adjustment, and a comparable potential for mutual respect and enrichment. (4)

Rivers quotes laboratory experiments demonstrating that homosexuals are *not* actually more creative than heterosexuals (pp. 181–82); he considers, on the subject of gay mutual recognition, that “it should be obvious to anyone who reflects for a moment . . . that homosexually oriented people do not organize or communicate with each other any more regularly or any more skillfully than other classes of people” (172);<sup>2</sup> and while he celebrates an ideal of androgyny, he dissociates it from homosexuality and indeed steadily denounces any resonance or cultural cathexis whatsoever between homosexuality and gender identification. In his zeal to correct “negative stereotypes” of homosexuality in Proust and to foster countervailing, normalizing positive (positivist) knowledge, Rivers repeatedly singles out one section of the book, the prefatory section of *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, the “Introduction to the Men-Women of Sodom”—the section often referred to as “La Race maudite”—and Proust’s treatment of the Baron de Charlus who features so prominently there, as embodying Proust’s “distortions, half-truths, outmoded ideas, and constant eruptions of . . . internalized homophobia” (205); while the later treatment of the sexually ambiguous Albertine is—apparently because it is *not* exactly about homosexuality—the object of Rivers’s repeated praise.

1. J. E. Rivers, *Proust and the Art of Love: The Aesthetics of Sexuality in the Life, Times, & Art of Marcel Proust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 14. Further citations from this volume will be incorporated in the text.

2. Having reflected on this for more than a moment, I must say I still can’t see why it should be obvious.

In a recent essay on Proust and Melanie Klein that is radically anti-positivist, and as deft with Proustian tones as Rivers’s book is deaf to them, Leo Bersani nevertheless performs the same act of division on the later books of *A la recherche* and makes the same double valuation of them. Bersani, like Rivers, singles out for dispraise the “Introduction to the Men-Women,” “the banal thematization of homosexuality . . . a thematization at once sentimental and reductive.” Bersani deprecates in this section the very fact of its explicitly crystallizing “the secondary, and, in a sense, merely anecdotal question of ‘sexual preference.’”<sup>3</sup> Like Rivers, Bersani concludes that this section of *A la recherche* should and can be “implicitly brushed aside” (416), once again by the effects of a later meditation associated with Albertine—a meditation on how desire may preserve its originary motility, its antisymbolic “appetitive metonymies” (414).

Bersani links this reading of Proust to an argument that the early work of Melanie Klein similarly suggests the possibility of an unanxious mobility of desire in the infant, a “primary pleasure” (407) prior and in opposition to the infant’s fantasmatic, fetishizing symbolic violence of dismemberment and reparation upon the mother’s body. Bersani attaches the highest value to this possibility of “primary pleasure” as against the aggression of definitional mutilation. This argument makes it, however, even more striking for Bersani than for Rivers that each of these two readers of Proust should be provoked to dramas of dismemberment and subsequent reparation of the textual body of *A la recherche* itself:<sup>4</sup> “The Men-Women of Sodom” as the poisonous breast to be excised, the geranium-cheeked and metamorphic Albertine as the nurturant breast to be, in its turn, plumped up with interpretive value.

It appears that Rivers in his almost heroically resolute banalization of the issue of sexual choice, and Bersani in his desire to envisage for Proust “a mode of excitement which . . . would enhance [the] specificity [of objects] and thereby fortify their resistance to the violence of symbolic intent” (420), may be motivated each by a differently produced resistance to the interpretation of homosexual identity. Rivers resists that interpreta-

3. Leo Bersani, “‘The Culture of Redemption’: Marcel Proust and Melanie Klein,” *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 2 (Winter 1986): 399–421; quoted from p. 416. Further citations from this essay will be incorporated in the text.

4. Bersani’s gesture of dismemberment and restitution of this text has a near-rhyme, too, in Deleuze and Guattari’s dichotomizing and double-valued treatment of the *race maudite*: “Proust . . . contrasts two kinds of homosexuality, or rather two regions only one of which is Oedipal, exclusive, and depressive, the other being anoedipal schizoid, included, and inclusive” (*Anti-Oedipus*, p. 70).

tion from the grounds of a normalizing minority politics of gay rights, Bersani out of the vision of an infinite “phenomenal diversity of the world” (419) and potentially of desire, too far dispersed to be done justice by the “sentimental and reductive thematization” of homosexual identity. I can see no reason to quarrel with this interpretive resistance in either Rivers’s minoritizing or Bersani’s universalizing framing (or refusal) of the issue of gay definition. Some form of such a resistance to interpretation is arguably the only nonvicious response to the historical fact of an extreme oppression that has, for most of a century, operated precisely through the hyperstimulation of one-directional capillaries of interpretation.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the gesture by which each reader violently repulses one polarity of a text while grappling for the appropriation of its opposite—this double thrust of denunciation and reproximation—is one, signally effective, way of hurling into motion the vast enactment of the text. Imagine a Calder mobile on the monumental scale, and what it must take to get it into action. This powerful move, however, already takes its performative shape from the turn-of-the-century crisis of incoherence in homosexual definition.

Suppose we agree—as most readers, I among them, do—in perceiving Proust’s chapter on *la race maudite*, in its direct thematization of gay identity, as sentimental and reductive. But suppose we also follow Rivers’s scholarship which finds, like that of Maurice Bardèche, that it was Proust’s conception in 1909, in response to a major homosexual scandal in Germany, of the beginnings of “La Race maudite” that quite suddenly catalyzed into a single vast fictional project of an entirely new sort what had been until then a collection of miscellaneous, generically unstable fragments and ideas. Until 1908, Bardèche argues, Proust had two main parallel projects, an abortive novel and the essay dealing with Sainte-Beuve:

But suddenly we encounter, in the middle of Notebook 6 and the middle of Notebook 7 . . . two series of developments foreign at once to the novel of

5. It is instructive, for instance, that the sudden and virtually unanimous cultivation of a studied public agnosticism about the “causes of homosexuality” has turned out to be such an enabling crux in the development of civil rights-oriented gay politics. The rhetorical thrust of this unwavering agnosticism is typically double: to undo the historical alienation by certain explanatory disciplines and their experts of the propriodescriptive rights of gay individuals; and to press the question of causation, with its attendant mobilization of analytic visibilities and vulnerabilities, back in the direction of heterosexual object choice.

1908 and to the essay on Sainte-Beuve: the diverse fragments whose union will form the chapter entitled “La Race maudite” . . . and the first pieces devoted to the “little nucleus” of the Verdurins. Finally, as a decisive indication, in the middle of Notebook 7, we read about the entrance of the Baron de Charlus, presented here under the name of M. de Guercy; and at the same moment we rediscover the anonymous beach.

In Rivers’s summary, “Bardèche argues that these experiments with homosexuality as a literary theme gave Proust’s work a ‘new orientation.’ And he concludes that it was at about this time that Proust ‘realized that he could produce a book from his fragments.’”<sup>6</sup>

If “La Race maudite” is reductive and sentimental on the one hand, and yet a—arguably, *the*—catalytic node, on the other, of a larger work to which these epithets are not habitually applied, then we can look at what substantively we are saying and doing by their use. “Reductive” suggests a relation of part to whole, in which the part seems to claim to offer an adequate representation of the whole through simple *quantitative* condensation (like a reduced gravy), but which the negative inflection on the adjective then seems to adjudge biased or *qualitatively* different. As a description of the “Introduction to the Men-Women” in relation to the whole of *A la recherche* it is notably responsive to what I have been describing as the indissoluble, incoherent yoking in this century of conceptual incongruities between minoritizing and universalizing views of homosexual definition. That is, the chapter that reifies and crystallizes as a principle of persons “the secondary, and, in a sense, merely anecdotal question of ‘sexual preference’” necessarily misrepresents, in representing at all (any thematization here is “banal thematization”), what is elsewhere more universally and hence *differently* diffused as a narrative potential. But the bite, the tang and effectual animus of that diffusion depends unstably *on* the underlying potential for banal thematization; while the banal thematization itself (both in the form of the “Men-Women” chapter and in the body of M. de Charlus) displays, even as it uncontrollably *transmits*, the sheer representational anxiety of its reductive compaction.

After all, even though “La Race maudite” is almost universally thought of as distilling a certain minoritizing, gender-transitive paradigm of inversion in its purest form, it is even internally rife with versions of the same

6. Quoted (first part) and paraphrased (second part) in Rivers, *Proust*, pp. 150–51, from Maurice Bardèche, *Marcel Proust, romancier*, 2 vols. (Paris: Sept Couleurs, 1971), pp. 216–17.

contradictions that surround it. For instance, it is sensitive to a difference between aim and object: "Some [inverts] . . . are not greatly concerned with the kind of physical pleasure they receive, provided that they can associate it with a masculine face. Whereas others . . . feel an imperious need to localise their physical pleasure" (C 645).<sup>7</sup> Again, in the very same sentence in which he describes inverts as invested — albeit *by persecution* — "with the physical and moral characteristics of a race," the narrator also offers some elements of a historicizing constructivist view of homosexual identity. Inverts, he says, take

pleasure in recalling that Socrates was one of themselves . . . without reflecting that there were no abnormal people when homosexuality was the norm . . . that the opprobrium alone makes the crime because it has allowed to survive only those who remained obdurate to every warning, to every example, to every punishment, by virtue of an innate disposition so peculiar [*tellement spéciale*] that it is more repugnant to other men . . . than . . . vices better understood . . . by the generality of men. (C 639)

Yet by the end of the chapter it is made explicit that far from being *tellement spéciale*, these "exceptional" creatures "are a vast crowd" — "If a man can number the dust of the earth, then shall th[eir] seed also be numbered" (C 654–55). Furthermore, the narrator all but dares the reader to discover that his minoritizing account also explains the "insolent" and self-protective motives and feelings with which a narrator (himself?) might offer a *falsely* minoritizing account of sexual inverts:

a reprobate section of the human collectivity, but an important one, suspected where it does not exist, flaunting itself [*étalée*: spread out, displayed, disclosed], insolent and immune, where its existence is never guessed; numbering its adherents everywhere, among the people, in the army, in the church, in prison, on the throne; living, in short, at least to a great extent, in an affectionate and perilous intimacy with the men of the other race, provoking them, playing with them by speaking of the vice as of something alien to it — a game that is rendered easy by the blindness or duplicity of the others. (C 640)

7. Except where otherwise noted, Proust quotations are from *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, 3 vols. (New York: Random House/Vintage, 1982). Citations within the text will refer by initial to individual books and give page numbers within the volume in which the book appears. Volume I contains *Swann's Way* (S) and *Within a Budding Grove* (W); Volume II, *The Guermantes Way* (G) and *Cities of the Plain* (C); and Volume III, *The Captive* (Cap), *The Fugitive* (F), and *Time Regained* (T).

One might think from such a passage that no one is finally imagined to be "of the other race" except the reader to whom it is addressed! But of course, its "affectionate and perilous" aggression involves, as well, the insinuation in its last five words that even that reader is likely to have his own, identical reasons for colluding in the definitional segregation of *la race maudite*.

In terms of gender, as well, this supposed locus classicus of the Ur-doctrine of sexual inversion, *anima muliebris in corpore virili inclusa*, actually presents a far more complex and conflicted cluster of metaphorical models. At the crudest level, the explanation that Charlus desires men because deep down he is a woman, an explanation that the chapter and indeed the whole book repeatedly proffers, is seriously undermined even in the short space between the narrator's first realization that Charlus reminds him of a woman (C 626) and the later epiphany that he had looked like one because "he was one!" (C 637). What the narrator has witnessed, however, in the interval is not at all a conquest of this female-gendered self by another self contrastively figured as male. Instead, the intervening pickup between Charlus and Jupien has been presented in two other guises. Primarily it is seen as a mirror-dance of two counterparts "in perfect symmetry" (C 626), tacitly undermining the narrator's decision to reject the term "homosexuality" on account of its reliance on a model of similarity. At the same time — startlingly indeed, and not the less so because the aporia goes unmarked — the transaction is figured as the courtship by a *male*-figured Charlus of a *female*-figured Jupien. "One might have thought of them as a pair of birds, the male and the female, the male seeking to make advances, the female — Jupien — no longer giving any sign of response to these overtures, but regarding her new friend without surprise" (C 628).

The gender figuration is even further destabilized by an overarching botanical metaphor in which sex/gender difference and species difference keep almost-representing and hence occluding one another. The framing of "La Race maudite" involves the display, in the Guermantes's courtyard window, of a rare orchid ("they're all ladies") that can be fertilized only through the providential intervention of exactly the right bee. As the duchess explains, "It's a kind of plant where the ladies and the gentlemen don't both grow on the same stalk. . . . [T]here are certain insects whose duty it is to bring about the marriage, as with sovereigns, by proxy, without the bride and bridegroom ever having set eyes on one another. . . . But the odds are so enormous! Just think, he would have to have

just been to see a person of the same species and the opposite sex, and he must then have taken it into his head to come and leave cards at the house. He hasn't appeared so far" (G 535–36). And in the last sentence of "La Race maudite" the narrator is "distressed to find that, by my engrossment in the Jupien-Charlus conjunction, I had missed perhaps an opportunity of witnessing the fertilisation of the blossom by the bumble-bee" (C 656).

The point continually emphasized in the analogy between Charlus's situation and that of the orchid is simply the pathos of how unlikely fulfillment is, of how absurdly, impossibly specialized and difficult is the need of each. This point is explicitly undone by the universalizing move at the end of the chapter ("I greatly exaggerated at the time . . . the elective character of so carefully selected a combination" [C 654]). Furthermore, it is silently undone by the entire remaining stretch of *A la recherche*, in which the love relationship entered into on this occasion between Charlus and Jupien is demonstrated—though it is never stated—to be the single exception to every Proustian law of desire, jealousy, triangulation, and radical epistemological instability; without any comment or rationalization, Jupien's love of Charlus is shown to be steadfast over decades and grounded in a completely secure knowledge of a fellow-creature who is neither his opposite nor his simulacrum.

Even while the pathos of the rarity and fragility of orchid-mating is let stand, however, the analogy opens gaping conceptual abysses when one tries—as the chapter repeatedly does—to compare any model of same-sex desire with the plight of the virginal orchid. After all, the difference between the situation of the non-proximal orchids and that of any normative heterosexual human pair is not that the orchid partners are both of the same sex, nor that either or both have a misassignment or misattribution of sex: one orchid is still just plain male, the other just plain female. Rather, the peculiarity of their situation is that, being immobilized, they must employ a third party—of a different species, sex unspecified—as a go-between. No mapping of Jupien or Charlus as either the bee or the other orchid does anything to clarify or deepen a model of sexual inversion; and the narrator's introduction of the red herring of botanical hermaphroditism (to indulge another cross-species conjunction) makes the possible decoding of the metaphor all the more dizzyingly impossible. So much so, indeed, that this layering of images from "nature," each with its own cluster of contradictory, moralizing-cum-scientific appeals to what is finally "natural," may have most the effect of denaturing nature itself as a resort of the explanatory, leaving it, instead, only as the name of a space

or even a principle of high-handed definitional flux. To give only one, not atypical example:

The laws of the vegetable kingdom are themselves governed by increasingly higher laws. If the visit of an insect, that is to say the transportation of the seed from another flower, is generally necessary for the fertilisation of a flower, that is because self-fertilisation, the insemination of a flower by itself, would lead, like a succession of intermarriages in the same family, to degeneracy and sterility, whereas the crossing effected by insects gives to the subsequent generations of the same species a vigour unknown to their forebears. This invigoration may, however, prove excessive, and the species develop out of all proportion; then, as an anti-toxin protects us against disease, as the thyroid gland regulates our adiposity, as defeat comes to punish pride, as fatigue follows indulgence, and as sleep in turn brings rest from fatigue, so an exceptional act of self-fertilisation comes at the crucial moment to apply its turn of the screw, its pull on the curb, brings back within the norm the flower that had exaggeratedly overstepped it. (C 624–25)

Whether nature operates at the level of the survival of the individual, the species, or some overarching "norm" of "proportion"; whether, on the other hand, punishment for moral failings or, alternatively, the mitigation of their punishment is the telos of nature; whether "the crossing effected by insects" may best be understood as a crossing of boundaries of the individual, of genders, or of forms of life; why nature may have chosen to exempt M. de Charlus from her regime of thyroid homeostasis: these are among the questions the narrative provokes at the same time as overrides.

One thing the triangle of orchid-bee-orchid does suggest, however, as a persistently foregrounded analogy to the encounter in the courtyard, is a possible dependence of that apparently two-sided eros on the highly invested busy-ness of some mobile, officious, vibrant, identification-prone third figure who both is and isn't a transactor in it. On, in short, the narrator and/or the variously indeterminate, acrobatic spying boy he represents to us; and perhaps as well a dependence on us insofar as we are invited at once to scrutinize and to occupy his vicariated positionings. As we discussed in Chapter 3, this foregrounding of voyeuristic reader relations of the tacitly vicarious may well be part of the claim on our attention here, also, of the other damning category adduced by Bersani about this chapter of Proust: the category "sentimental."

About the phenomenon of "sentimentality," we have said, as more specifically about such subcategories of vicarious knowledge-relation as prurience, morbidity, knowingness, and snobbism, two things can be

said. First, and crucially: *It takes one to know one*. But the apparent symmetry of that epistemological catchphrase, in which the One who Knows and the One who is Taken appear interchangeable, belies the extreme asymmetry of rhetorical positioning implicit in the projectile efficacy of these attributions. The ballistics of “the sentimental” requires the freeze-framing of one targeted embodiment of sentimentality, its presentation *as spectacle* to a further sentimentality whose own privileged disembodiment and invisibility are preserved and reenabled by that highly differential act of staging. Thus, in the second place, it must be said that sentimentality *as spectacle* is structured very differently from sentimentality *as viewpoint* or habitation; that this difference is rhetorical; and that it is most powerfully charged for textual performance.

*It takes one to know one*: Need I make explicit that the first resort of such a structure in Proust is the epistemology of the closet? “For,” Proust announces in the “Introduction to the Men-Women,”

the two angels who were posted at the gates of Sodom to learn whether its inhabitants (according to Genesis) had indeed done all the things the report of which had ascended to the Eternal Throne must have been, and of this one can only be glad, exceedingly ill chosen by the Lord, Who ought to have entrusted the task to a Sodomite. Such an one would never have been persuaded by such excuses as “I’m the father of six and I’ve two mistresses,” to lower his flaming sword benevolently and mitigate the punishment. . . . These descendants of the Sodomites . . . have established themselves throughout the entire world; they have had access to every profession and are so readily admitted into the most exclusive clubs that, whenever a Sodomite fails to secure election, the black balls are for the most part cast by other Sodomites, who make a point of condemning sodomy, having inherited the mendacity that enabled their ancestors to escape from the accursed city. (C 655)

This important passage, of course, enacts exactly the process it describes: both Proust’s biography and, more important, the passage itself tell us that the authoritative worldliness that alone can underwrite such sweeping attributions is available only to an observer who both is himself a “descendant of the Sodomites” and at the same time has himself “inherited the mendacity” of homophobic denial and projection. This suggests, however, as a corollary, that an ability to articulate the world as a whole, as a universe that includes (while it may transcend) “the worldly,” may well be oriented around the tensely attributive specular axis between two closets: in the first place the closet viewed, the *spectacle of the closet*; and

in the second its hidden framer and consumer, the closet inhabited, the *viewpoint of the closet*.

If this is true—or, at a minimum, true of “the world” as we have it in Proust—then it makes all the sense *in* the world that it was exactly the invention, for the story’s purposes, of the Baron de Charlus, in the sentimental matrix of “La Race maudite” in 1909, that should conversely have had the power to constitute for the first time as a speaker of more than fragmentary and more than sentimental narrative the thereby disembodied interlocutor whose name is probably not Marcel. “La Race maudite” may be the least appetizing neighborhood of *A la recherche*, but its genius loci M. de Charlus is nonetheless the novel’s most ravishingly consumable product. And the endless, endlessly lavish production of M. de Charlus—as spectacle; as, to be specific, the spectacle of the closet—enables the world of the novel to take shape and turn around the steely beam of his distance from the differently structured closet of the narrative and its narrator.

Reassure yourself here: the by now authentically banal exposure of Proust’s narrator as a closeted homosexual will not be the structuring gesture made by the reading ahead. Yet I don’t see how that banality, either, can be excluded from the text or even so much as rendered optional to it. The novel seems both to prohibit and to extort from its readers such a violence of interpretive uncovering against the narrator, the violence of rendering his closet, in turn, as spectacle. The least bathetic question would seem to be how the reader, in turn, gets constituted in this relation: how, among the incoherent constructions of sexuality, gender, privacy, and minoritization, a dangerously enabling poetics and politics of exemption may construct themselves in and through her.

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The irresistibility of the Baron de Charlus: subject as inexhaustible, and as difficult of approach, as is, Proust remarks, that of the profanation of the mother—to which, we must add, it is anything but irrelevant. Charlus is the prodigal gift that keeps *opening itself* to the wonder and pleasure of the reader. At least, that is the experience of the reader, who is invited not to concentrate too much on the mechanics of this miraculous proffer. Like the faithful on the little train, readers of certain long stretches of *A la recherche* may feel that

if M. de Charlus did not appear, they were almost disappointed to be travelling only with people who were just like everybody else, and not to

have with them this painted, paunchy, tightly-buttoned personage, reminiscent of a box of exotic and dubious origin exhaling a curious odour of fruits the mere thought of tasting which *soulèverait le coeur*. (C 1074)<sup>8</sup>

(I give the last phrase in French because Scott Moncrieff renders it so attractively as “stirs the heart”;<sup>9</sup> Kilmartin doughily corrects it to “would turn the stomach.”) Infatuated with Charlus—ostensibly in spite of his homosexuality, but in fact “quite unconsciously” because of it (C 1075)—the Verdurin circle nonetheless generates a ceaseless spume of homophobic wit about him, uttered beyond the reach of his appreciation but delicately reproduced for ours. The cautious or daring tracery of the involuted perimeters of Charlus’s “secret” lends his presence an endlessly renewed vibrancy, for the faithful as for their readers. The entire magnetism of every element of instability in the twentieth-century epistemology of the closet radiates toward and from, if it cannot ever be said to belong to, the Baron.

To begin with, he is alienated from the authority to describe his own sexuality. This appears most symptomatically in the tropism by which the narrator’s presentations of Charlus persist in reaching out toward an appeal to, and identification with, the medical expert:

A skilled physician need not even make his patient unbutton his shirt, nor listen to his breathing—the sound of his voice is enough. How often, in time to come, was my ear to be caught in a drawing-room by the intonation or laughter of some man whose artificial voice . . . was enough to indicate: “He is a Charlus” to my trained ear . . . ! (C 688)

When the previously hypervirile Charlus grows more effeminate with the passage of time, the narrator diagnoses:

he would now utter involuntarily almost the same little squeaks (involuntary in his case and all the more deep-rooted) as are uttered voluntarily by those inverts who hail one another as “my dear!”—as though this deliberate “camping,” against which M. de Charlus had for so long set his face, were after all merely a brilliant and faithful imitation of the manner that men of the Charlus type, whatever they may say, are compelled to adopt when they have reached a certain stage in their malady, just as sufferers

8. The French is from the Pléiade edition, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), 2: 1043. Further citations from this edition will be given in the text.

9. Marcel Proust, *Cities of the Plain*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff (New York: Random House/Vintage, 1970), p. 314. Further citations from this translation will be given in the text as *Cities* and the page number.

from general paralysis or locomotor ataxia inevitably end by displaying certain symptoms. As a matter of fact—and this is what this purely unconscious “camping” revealed—the difference between the stern, black-clad Charlus with his hair *en brosse* whom I had known, and the painted and bejewelled young men, was no more than the purely apparent difference that exists between an excited person who talks fast and keeps fidgeting all the time, and a neurotic who talks slowly, preserves a perpetual phlegm, but is tainted with the same neurasthenia in the eyes of the physician who knows that each of the two is devoured by the same anxieties and marred by the same defects. (Cap 209)

The narrator scarcely says that medicine is the discursive system under which M. de Charlus can be most adequately considered. The physicians enter these passages only metaphorically, yet they roll up to the door, over and over, with all the regularity of the bygone time of house calls.<sup>10</sup> Their function here is not themselves to assume jurisdiction over Charlus and his confrères. But the fact that since the late nineteenth century it was by medicine that the work of taxonomy, etiology, diagnosis, *certification* of the phenomenon of sexual inversion was most credibly accomplished means that even the vestibular attendance of the medical consultant ratifies a startling, irreversible expropriation. For, once there is known to exist a system by which the authority of the classified invert to say what in him is voluntary and what compelled, what authentic and what imitative, what conscious and what unconscious, can be not only abstracted from himself but placed in an ironclad epistemological receivership, the result is that not only the medical expert but *anyone* who witnesses and identifies the invert feels assured of knowing more about him than he knows about himself. The very existence of expertise, to whomever it belongs, guarantees everyone who is not its designated object an empowering and exciting specular differential of knowledge that seems momentarily insulated from the edginess of “It takes one to know one.”

Thus, if Charlus’s being in the closet means that he possesses a secret knowledge, it means all the more that everyone around him does; their incessant reading of the plot of his preserving his secret from them

10. When Charlus and some other guests are exchanging gay gossip at a party, for instance: “There is no social function that does not, if one takes a cross-section of it and cuts sufficiently deep, resemble those parties to which doctors invite their patients, who utter the most intelligent remarks, have perfect manners, and would never show that they were mad if they did not whisper in your ear, pointing to some old gentleman going past: ‘That’s Joan of Arc’” (Cap 245). More examples: C 1083; T 868–69.



provides an all the more eventful plot for them to keep secret from him.<sup>11</sup> Undoubtedly the insistence of this drama is a sign of how predatory and wasting is the conscious imaginative life of the Verdurin circle. Still, the narrator circulates it as his and hence our imaginative life as well. "Oh!" whispers unhilariously the sculptor Ski on the train, "If the Baron begins making eyes at the conductor, we shall never get there, the train will start going backwards" (C 1075); but it is in the narrator's own voice that Charlus's "proud erectness, his eagerness to be admired, his conversational *véve*" are offered to us so thickly plastered to the ritually desubordinated corporeal ground of, faced away from himself and thus exposed to everyone's interpretive *espial* but his own, "*un derrière presque symbolique*" (C 890, *Pléiade* II: 861).

Of course, it is hardly unheard-of in Proust—in fact, it is the law—that characters in general take on vitality and momentum to the degree that they are mystified about their own involuntary, inauthentic, or unconscious motivations. Charlus is not an exception to the law but its blazing sacrificial embodiment, the burning bush, very flesh of that word. The pressure of the *presque* in the *presque symbolique*, the resistance to Charlus's conclusive subsumption under some *adequately* intelligible interpretive system, suggests that the scandalizing materiality of this fat man is too crucially productive at the enabling nexuses of incoherence in the text to be allowed to be fully sublimated. Those enabling incoherences include the unstable dichotomies that we have discussed as contested sites that have been most ineffaceably marked by the turn-of-the-century crisis of homo/heterosexual definition. Most obvious of these are secrecy/disclosure and private/public; masculine/feminine, as well, for Charlus, is too all-pervasive a definitional and descriptive problematic to require or permit any *précis*.<sup>12</sup> The transfer, effected by the taxonomic gaze, of the

11. The passage C 1075–88 offers a good concentration of instances of this effect.  
12. If one had to choose one passage, however, it might be this:

Mme Verdurin asked him: "Did you try some of my orangeade?" Whereupon M. de Charlus, with a gracious smile, in a crystalline tone which he rarely adopted, and with endless simperings and wriggings of the hips, replied: "No, I preferred its neighbour, which is strawberry-juice, I think. It's delicious." It is curious that a certain category of secret impulses has as an external consequence a way of speaking or gesticulating which reveals them. If a man believes or disbelieves in the Immaculate Conception, or in the innocence of Dreyfus, or in a plurality of worlds, and wishes to keep his opinion to himself, you will find nothing in his voice or in his gait that will betray his thoughts. But on hearing M. de Charlus say, in that shrill voice and with that smile and those gestures, "No, I preferred its neighbour, the strawberry-juice," one could say: "Ah, he likes the stronger sex," with the same

authority to designate what is natural/artificial, healthy/decadent, and new/old (or young/old), is clear in the sentence from which I have already quoted a phrase:

Now, in a light travelling suit which made him appear stouter, as he waddled along with his swaying paunch and almost symbolic behind, the cruel light of day decomposed, into paint on his lips, into face-powder fixed by cold cream on the tip of his nose, into mascara on his dyed moustache whose ebony hue contrasted with his grizzled hair, everything that in artificial light would have seemed the healthy complexion of a man who was still young. (C 890)

The decadence of mien (in the Swiftian literalness of its decomposition into separate pieces), which seems to be the same thing as the self-exposure as artifice of each of those pieces, is revealed through a chiasmic relation between the object and the circumstance of its viewing (since what looks natural in artificial light looks artificial in natural light) by which the viewer is perceptually exempted from the representational fissures framed in the description.

Not only is Charlus not alone in his self-mystification on each of these points, but he is written, of course, into a text in which each of them is quite pivotally problematized. Whatever one may want to say about modern Western culture at large, Proust is hardly Exhibit A if one wants to demonstrate—even if only for immediate deconstruction—the normative privileging of, for instance, masculine over feminine, majority over minority, innocence over initiation, nature over artifice, growth over decadence, health over illness, cognition over paranoia, or will over involuntariness. But again, it seems to be the very ambience of destabilization that renders so focal and so (for the process of reading) precious the *winter-*

certainty as enables a judge to sentence a criminal who has not confessed, or a doctor a patient suffering from general paralysis who himself is perhaps unaware of his malady but has made some mistake in pronunciation from which it can be deduced that he will be dead in three years. Perhaps the people who deduce, from a man's way of saying: "No, I preferred its neighbour, the strawberry-juice," a love of the kind called unnatural, have no need of any such scientific knowledge. But that is because here there is a more direct relation between the revealing sign and the secret. Without saying so to oneself in so many words, one feels that it is a gentle, smiling lady who is answering and who appears affected because she is pretending to be a man and one is not accustomed to seeing men put on such airs. And it is perhaps more gracious to think that a certain number of angelic women have long been included by mistake in the masculine sex where, feeling exiled, ineffectually flapping their wings towards men in whom they inspire a physical repulsion, they know how to arrange a drawing-room, to compose "interiors." (C 999)

mitted frontal glee with which the vision of Charlus's glass closet is presented to the hungry window-shopping eye. Every ethical valuation, every analytic assignment has its own volatile barometric career, and not least in their interimplications with the figure of Charlus. But the relations of who views whom — who, that is, describes and who consumes whom — guaranteed by Charlus's unkeepable secret enable him to dazzle and dazzle from his unfluctuating, almost immobilized eminence of unrationalized representational office.

Take the famous moment from "La Race maudite" when the narrator, from his place of concealment, witnesses a sudden secret eye-lock between Charlus and Jupien in the courtyard.

I was about to change my position again, so that he should not catch sight of me; I had neither the time nor the need to do so. For what did I see! Face to face, in that courtyard where they had certainly never met before . . . the Baron, having suddenly opened wide his half-shut eyes, was gazing with extraordinary attentiveness at the ex-tailor poised on the threshold of his shop, while the latter, rooted suddenly to the spot in front of M. de Charlus, implanted there like a tree, contemplated with a look of wonderment the plump form of the aging baron. But, more astounding still, M. de Charlus's pose having altered, Jupien's, as though in obedience to the laws of an occult art, at once brought itself into harmony with it. The Baron, who now sought to disguise the impression that had been made on him, and yet, in spite of his affectation of indifference, seemed unable to move away without regret, came and went, looked vaguely into the distance in the way which he felt would most enhance the beauty of his eyes, assumed a smug, nonchalant, ridiculous air.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile Jupien, shedding at once the humble, kindly expression which I had always associated with him, had — in perfect symmetry with the Baron — thrown back his head, given a becoming tilt to his body, placed his hand with grotesque effrontery on his hip, stuck out his behind, struck poses with the coquetry that the orchid might have adopted on the providential arrival of the bee. I had not supposed that he could appear so repellent. . . .

This scene was not, however, positively comic; it was stamped with a strangeness, or if you like a naturalness, the beauty of which steadily increased. (*Cities* 626–27)

"More astounding still," "ridiculous air," "becoming," "grotesque effrontery," "so repellent," "not positively comic." The almost epidermal-level

13. Kilmartin translates "ridicule" as "fatuous," which supplements the impact of "fat" = "smug," but doesn't reproduce the particular adjectival effect I want to point to in the French.

zephyrs of responsiveness and stimulation in this passage are wafted along on the confidence — that is to say, the apparent *arbitrariness*, verging on self-contradiction — with which these adjectives are assigned, adjectives each alluding to an assumed audience relation ("astounding," "ridiculous," "becoming," "grotesque," "repellent," "comic," each to someone else) which the spying narrator in turn is airily, astringently prepared to indulge, parlay, or supersede. To the extent that any child's ability to survive in the world can be plotted through her wavering command of a succession of predicate adjectives (important milestones might include the ability to formulate "I must be tired," "X is violent," "Y is dying," "Z must be stupid," "A and B are quarrelling," "C is beautiful," "D is drunk," "E is pregnant"), so that the assignment of adjectives and the creation of reliable adjectival communities become ached-for badges of the worldly, the framing of the homosexual scene by Proust's young-old narrator must both disorient and reassure the reader, disorient almost in proportion as she already finds the scene familiar; the stripping away of the consistencies by which she would normally find her way through it seems also a kind of reassurance of the narrator's high descriptive hand.<sup>14</sup>

But the reader partakes of the narrator's arbitrary descriptive power only by acquiescing and sharing in his self-concealment, his unexplained, unpredictable gusts of desire and contempt toward the tense interrogative staging of the scene of gay recognition. It is from the borrowed shelter of that adjectival closet that the three abstract nouns ("empreinte d'une *étrangeté*, ou si l'on veut d'un *naturel*, dont la *beauté* allait croissant" [Pléiade II: 605]) can then issue with their almost operatic definitiveness. The adjudication of *un naturel* being to all appearances the assigned task of this most "homosexual" chapter of Proust (framed as it is by the Question of the Orchid), the marked intensification, with these nouns, of the narrator's Zenlike highhandedness of attribution discloses at the same time an affection and a contempt for the terms in which the question of homosexual desire can from a distance be so much as posed. To let *l'étrangeté* equal *le naturel*, after all, is not simply to equate opposites but to collapse a domino chain of pairings, each with its different, historical gay involvements: natural/unnatural, natural/artificial, habitual/defamiliarized, common/rare, native/foreign. The *bouleversement* here of

14. Some Proustian assertions and examples of the power of the predicate adjective: "mad" (G 394), "pregnant" (C 636).

the various systematics by which homosexual desire was, in this chapter, supposed to be analyzed and measured has, however, less than no power to interrupt the outpouring of this aria, which is to continue in exactly the same key at the same pitch for another two pages.<sup>15</sup> It would be an understatement to say that the coherence of the analytic categories is subordinated to the continuity of their enunciation; rather, the authoritative positioning of enunciation itself is borne along by just the imperiousness with which the categories are seen to be overridden. "*Dont la beauté allait croissant*": what after all grows and grows, in these sentences, and therefore what one is compelled to consume (and does consume) as *beauty*, is no indwelling quality of Charlus or Jupien or their encounter but the swelling, sustained, inexhaustibly affecting verve and assurance of the narrator's descriptive entitlement at their expense. In fact, every analytic or ethical category applied throughout *A la recherche* to the homosexuality of M. de Charlus can easily be shown to be subverted or directly contradicted elsewhere. What these proliferating categories and especially their indissoluble contradictions do unflinchingly sustain, however, is the establishment of *the spectacle of the homosexual closet* as a presiding guarantor of rhetorical community, of authority—someone else's authority—over world-making discursive terrain that extends vastly beyond the ostensible question of the homosexual.

15. To try to explain what is meant by this key, this pitch: e.g., we are told in the long paragraph that the men are speaking to each other, but we are given none of the language they exchange; instead we receive the narrator's language about *what kind of* thing they would be saying, which makes it increasingly impossible to imagine what they could actually be saying. The real effect is that one is convinced that the men are quite mute (augmenting the sense of magic, beauty, eerie atemporality, but also of theatrical pantomime about the scene), while the whole is suffused by the voice of the hidden narrator. Again, language that is ostensibly about the two men keeps seeming to describe even better the sustained tour de force of the descriptive staging, the uncannily dilated silence itself: "that feeling of the brevity of all things which . . . renders so moving the spectacle of every kind of love":

Thus, every other minute, the same question seemed to be put . . . like those questioning phrases of Beethoven's, indefinitely repeated at regular intervals and intended—with an exaggerated lavishness of preparation—to introduce a new theme, a change of key, a "re-entry." On the other hand, the beauty of the reciprocal glances of M. de Charlus and Jupien arose precisely from the fact that they did not, for the moment at least, seem to be intended to lead to anything further. It was the first time I had seen the manifestation of this beauty in the Baron and Jupien.

The repeated touching of the same string, "beauty," has just the effect described, a suspension between stasis and initiation, organized around the rights of ocular consumption.

The efficacy of M. de Charlus for the novel as a whole depends so much on Proust's presenting *the spectacle of the closet as the truth of the homosexual*, and that is accomplished with such apparent fullness, that it becomes one of the most difficult problems of Proust-reading to find a space in this Charlus-oriented world in which the other homosexual desires in the book can at all be made visible. Especially, to try to pull the eros surrounding the narrator and Albertine into any binocular focus with the novel's presentation of Charlus is a wrenchingly difficult task. There is a simple explanation for this difficulty: it is exactly in their *relation to visibility* that the two erotic loci are so violently incommensurable. Seemingly, Charlus's closet is spectacularized *so that* the erotics around Albertine (which is to say, around the narrator) may continue to resist visualization; it is from the inchoate space that will include Albertine, and to guarantee its privileged exemption from sight, that the narrator stages the presentation of Charlus; it is around the perceptual axis between a closet viewed and a closet inhabited that a discourse of the world takes shape.

That is the simple way to formulate the difficulty, and I think the crucial one; but if it were just that simple the difficulty would be easy to master analytically. Instead, the difference of visibility accomplishes itself through all the channels of those major, intractable incoherences of homo/heterosexual definition and gender definition established in the crisis of sexual discourse around the turn of the century.

To begin with: while the spectacle of M. de Charlus is ostentatiously that of a *closet* with a *homosexual* concealed, with riveting inefficiency, in its supposed interior, it is on the other hand notoriously hard to locate a *homosexual* anywhere in the fluctuous privacy surrounding Albertine. With all their plurality of interpretive paths, there is no way to read the Albertine volumes without finding same-sex desire *somewhere*; at the same time, that specificity of desire, in the Albertine plot, notoriously refuses to remain fixed to a single character type, to a single character, or even to a single ontological level of the text. Given a male narrator fixated on the interpretation of a female Albertine who in turn has, or has had, or may have had, sexual connections with numerous other women, one would expect that narrator to mobilize in the service of "explaining" and "understanding" her all the *idées reçues* on the exotic subject of inversion

in general, and Gomorrah in particular, laboriously assembled by him in “La Race maudite.” But it almost never happens. The awful dilation of interpretive pressure on Albertine is overwhelmingly brought to bear on her, not under the category of “the invert,” but under the category of “the beloved object” or, as if this were synonymous, simply of “woman.”<sup>16</sup> And, of course, while “the invert” is defined in Proust as that person over whom everyone else in the world has, potentially, an absolute epistemological privilege, “the beloved object” and “woman” are defined on the contrary by the complete eclipse of the power to know them of the one person, the lover, who most needs to do so. Charlus, *the* “invert,” is scarcely presented as a love object in the Proustian sense—though, as we have noted, he is *loved*, by Jupien, whose anomalously perfect understanding of his beloved may indeed owe something to the very hyperlegibility of Charlus-as-The-Invert. Morel, who *is* Charlus’s object in the Proustian sense, isn’t presented as an invert (and therefore can be genuinely inscrutable). Only for the Princesse de Guermantes is Charlus a classic object, i.e., someone to whom she can be, in the important respects, blind. But it is not to his homosexuality that she is blind; exceptionally, however, she does not treat his relation to his sexuality as a demeaning spectacle, and so she is rendered mortally vulnerable to him. (Note, however, that “mortally vulnerable” just means, in Proust, “in love”; her vulnerability isn’t exceptional except in its choice of object.)

Thus, while the Charlus who loves men is described as typical of “the invert” as a species, the Albertine who loves women seems scarcely to come under a particular taxonomic heading on that account; it is as if the two successive stages of homosexual definition, the premedicalization one of same-sex *acts* and the postmedicalization one of homosexual *types*, coexisted in Albertine and Charlus in an anachronistic mutual blindness. Or, alternatively, Albertine can seem to some readers to embody the utopian fulfillment of a universalizing view of homo/heterosexual definition, even as the incomparable Charlus (incomparable, that is, to Albertine) dystopically embodies the minoritizing view.

But perhaps it is not to Albertine “her”self or to her girlfriends that one should, in the nest of relationships surrounding her, look first for the figure of the homosexual. As J. E. Rivers points out, the flurry of rereadings that surfaced after 1949 based on the supposition that Albertine “was

really” a man—i.e., was based, as Proust had suggested to Gide and others, on a portrait of Proust’s chauffeur, Alfred Agostinelli, or on some other man—however vulgarizing, confused, and homophobic, however illegitimate as literary criticism or inadmissible in their assumptions about writing and loving, did nevertheless respond so strongly to a variety of unmistakable provocations in the text that the possibility of reading Albertine “as,” in some radically to-be-negotiated sense, a man, is by now at least inalienably grafted onto the affordances of the text.<sup>17</sup> To the degree that Albertine is a man, however, the question left unanswered is less why *he* isn’t brought under the taxonomic rubric of “the invert” than why the male narrator who covets him isn’t, as he isn’t. But with this possibility of “transposition” a lot of other contradictions also rise to the surface. For instance, if Albertine and the narrator are of the same gender, should the supposed outside loves of Albertine, which the narrator obsessively imagines as imaginatively inaccessible to himself, then, maintaining the female *gender* of their love object, be transposed in *orientation* into heterosexual desires? Or, maintaining the transgressive same-sex *orientation*, would they have to change the *gender* of their love object and be transposed into male homosexual desires? Or, in a homosexual framework, would the heterosexual orientation after all be more transgressive? Or—as the Valley folk say—what?

Thus, both the range of contradictions around homo/heterosexual definition, and the intersection of that with the range of contradictions around gender definition, are mobilized—to the extent that they fail to be interrogated—in the Albertine plot, and in its incommensurability with the presentation of Charlus. In addition, the gender question itself is tied up in contradiction here. Nothing is of course more insisted upon in the drawing of Charlus than that his desire for men is necessarily the result of sexual *inversion*, of the captivity and occultation of a true female self within his deceptively, even defensively masculine exterior. As we have discussed, this model requires the assignment to each person of a “true” inner gender, and the pairing off of people in heterogendered pairs according to these “true” genders. We have shown how the narrative insistence on this “inversion” reading of homosexual desire overrides even notable instances of dizzying confusion and apparent contravention in the sections that, oriented around Charlus, claim to be definitive presenta-

16. Examples: Cap 74, F 512.

17. Rivers, *Proust*, pp. 2–9, 247–54 (where he insists on a reading of Albertine as fully androgynous).

tions of homosexuality as a phenomenon. So much the odder, then, that in the Albertine volumes, in the swollen meditations on what this woman may have felt about or acted out with other women (or, in a transposed reading, on what this man may have felt about or acted out with the male narrator or with other men), *that* chain of inferences, or of potential clues, is virtually dropped. Is it because, in some ontologically other sense, “Albertine” “is” “deep down” “really” a man that we are so seldom presented with language that tries to explain Albertine’s sexuality by positing that she is, deep down, really a man? But nor are such transsexual explanations broached about the narrator, nor often about Andrée, Esther, Léa, the laundresses or shop girls with whom Albertine has or is thought to have connections. Wherever it is that same-sex sexuality is to be looked for in the involvements around Albertine, assignments of “true” “inner” heterogender are not an important part of that perceptual process. Or perhaps better said, the sweeping blur or erasure of those involvements *as objects of perception* requires as well the eclipse of the “inversion” trope whose maintenance had been all along a matter of careful and rather costly framing. In its place, although incompatible with it, there seems to occur a gender-separatist emphasis on Albertine’s female connections with women as being, not transitive across gender or liminal between genders, not virilizing, but, rather, in their very lesbianism, of the essence of the female—centrally and definingly located within femininity. Indeed, all that the two versions of homosexual desire seem to have in common may be said to be a sort of asymmetrical list toward the feminine: Charlus is feminized by his homosexual desire, but so, to the extent that gender is an active term in her sexuality at all, is Albertine most often feminized by hers.<sup>18</sup>

If the homosexuality attached to the figure of Charlus and the homo-

18. This formulation was suggested to me by Steven Shaviro. I don’t, of course, mean by “femininity” here an adherence to stereotypical gender roles (weakness, passivity, prettiness, etc.), but rather *femaleness* figured as a form of power—in particular, however, the power of what is other than the (male-figured) subject itself. This attribution goes back to Proust’s specifically epistemological, and specifically male, definition of *the female* as *that which cannot be known* (through the heterosexist detour of defining the female as, definitionally, *the object of love* and hence of unknowledge). How far “femininity” or “femaleness” in Proust can be seen as a syntactic positioning (notably, the accusative as opposed to the nominative) and how far it reaches out toward an anchoring in the semantic, in particular loci and meanings, remains to be discussed, perhaps in relation, not only to Barthes, but to the fascinating paragraph in Bersani’s essay about “the ontological necessity of homosexuality [in the other sex] in a kind of universal heterosexual relation of all human subjects to their own desires” (416).

sexuality dispersed in the vicinity of Albertine can’t be brought into focus with each other through any consistent reading of either *sexual orientation* or *gender*, there remains the possibility that the practice of the same sexual *acts* could provide a way of describing the two of them in some congruence with each other. After all, it was through *acts*—and acts not defined by either the personality structure or, necessarily, the gender of the persons who performed them—that the category “sodomy” was defined in premodern Europe, and still is in premodern Georgia. Even under the heading of sexual acts, however, Charlus and Albertine seem to persist in remaining mutually incommensurable, although it is perhaps only under this heading that an intelligible *narrative of change* may be legible. We have already noted the “*derrière presque symbolique*” sported by Charlus. Ski, who fantasizes that Charlus’s preoccupations will make the train run backward, and Jupien, who sets out (successfully) to woo him with “various remarks lacking in refinement such as ‘*Vous avez un gros pétard*’” [C 632; *Pléiade* II: 610], seem to agree with the narrator in confidently attributing to Charlus a receptive anal sexuality that makes all too neat a rhyme with the “truth” of his deep-down femininity, and with the later treatment of his sexuality as degenerating into a masochism that had been, in this rendering, from the start its hidden essence. (Let me pause for an instant to bring fellow Anglophones up to date: if you are one of those to whom French is Greek, and if you’ve depended for decades on Scott Moncrieff for your Proust, you may not recognize “*Vous avez un gros pétard*,” oddly translated there as “Aren’t you naughty!” [*Cities*, 9]. Further surprises of the same kind await.)

For Albertine, as usual, the same conceptual gridwork will not suffice to provide a map. If a particular erotic localization is to be associated with her it must be the oral: “As for ices,” she says,

“whenever I eat them, temples, churches, obelisks, rocks, a sort of picturesque geography is what I see at first before converting its raspberry or vanilla monuments into coolness in my gullet. . . . They make raspberry obelisks too, which will rise up here and there in the burning desert of my thirst, and I shall make their pink granite crumble and melt deep down in my throat which they will refresh better than any oasis” (and here the deep laugh broke out, whether from satisfaction at talking so well, or in self-mockery for using such carefully contrived images, or, alas, from physical pleasure at feeling inside herself something so good, so cool, which was tantamount to sexual pleasure). (Cap 125–26)

She is also associated with edibles consumed by the narrator, with

that torrid period of the year when sensuality, evaporating, is more readily inclined to visit the organs of taste, seeking above all things coolness. More than for the kiss of a girl, it thirsts for orangeade, for a bath, or even to gaze at that peeled and juicy moon that was quenching the thirst of heaven. (C 669)

But as even these brief citations suggest, if a grainy blowup of Albertine's sexuality might begin with a vista of tonsils, still that erotic localization has most the effect of voiding — of voiding by so exceeding it — the very possibility of erotic localization. Certainly the neat dichotomy of "active" and "passive" (never mind their respective association with "masculine" and "feminine") seemingly attached to Charlus's anal sexuality is obviated in this muscular cave where the pleasures of sucking, eating, uttering, and chuckling pulse so freely together; but the emphasis on "coolness," for instance, further renders as an organ of this sexuality the whole cutaneous envelope of the body, inside and out, which seems further prolonged by the elastic integument of vision itself, extending to crush against its palate fine the peeled and juicy moon.

I could see Albertine now, seated at her pianola, pink-faced beneath her dark hair; I could feel against my lips, which she would try to part, her tongue, her maternal, incontestible, nutritious, hallowed tongue, whose strange moist warmth, even when she merely ran it over the surface of my neck or my stomach, gave to those caresses of hers, superficial but somehow administered by the inside of her flesh, externalised like a piece of material reversed to show its lining, as it were the mysterious sweetness of a penetration. (F 507-8)

Little wonder that Albertine and the narrator evince some confusion over whether they should be considered lovers "in the full sense of the word" (Cap 91): although it is, at least for the narrator, orgasmic, this sexuality of which French is only the metonym is almost not exclusive enough to figure as sexuality in the same register as Charlus's constricted, "pursy"<sup>19</sup> Greek.

At the same time, it is in this arena of (roughly speaking) sexual acts that it is easiest to construct a value-charged, utopian narrative around the comparison of Charlus to Albertine. Not only can Albertine's sexuality be seen as representing infinity, indeterminacy, contingency, play, etc. etc.

19. Scott Moncrieff's translation of the adjective "bedonnant" so frequently applied to Charlus; e.g., *Cities*, 4.

etc., in contrast to that of Charlus, whose circumscription can then be made to look like work, but there is even an evolutionary narrative to which these attributions may be attachable: it is beginning to look as though historians of sexuality will have to learn to think about something like a world-historical popularization of oral sex, sometime in the later nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup> This would suggest, in turn, that the relatively fixed equation by which anal sex had been the main publicly signifying act of male-male intercourse was supplemented around the turn of the century by an increased signifying visibility of oral sex between men. (The Wilde trials, in which publicity was given to insinuations concerning acts of anal sex that in the event turned out not to characterize Wilde's sexuality at all, would offer a convenient milestone in this transformation.)<sup>21</sup> The relative difficulty with which oral sex, as opposed to anal, can be schematized in the bipolar terms of active/passive or analogically male/female, would also seem congruent with the process by which the trope of gender inversion was giving way to the *homo*-trope of gender sameness. And from this point of view the backward-looking sexuality of the Baron de Charlus could be seen to have as emblematic and discrediting a link to his reactionary politics as it ostentatiously has to his demeaned femininity; Albertine, correspondingly, could be seen to embody a modern, less mutilating and hierarchical sexuality even as she (or he) represented the more empowered "New Woman."<sup>22</sup>

This utopian reading of Albertine is attractive, not only because it seems to offer a certain relatively consistent footing for a visionary politics, but because it seems to suggest a conceptual frequency band (the range of Hz between "constricted" and "expansive," between "backward" and "modern") at which the apparently incommensurable wavelengths of Charlus and Albertine could be, as it were, received on the same radio. Under this view the radio must be acknowledged, however, to have periods of going on the fritz, the frequencies to drift and interfere. Albertine, for instance: gifted as she obviously is in the use of her native tongue, there are disruptive suggestions that, at bottom, French is Greek to her too. At a climactic moment in the tensions and pretenses between

20. This was suggested to me by two historians of sexuality, Henry Abelove and Kent Gerard.

21. Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Random House/Vintage, 1988), pp. 460-61.

22. Mme Verdurin finally relegates Charlus to the damning category "pre-war" (T 787).

her and the narrator, he offers to make a grand dinner-party for her: "Thank you for nothing!" she responds, "with an air of disgust":

"I'd a great deal rather you left me free for once in a way to go and get myself (*me faire casser*). . ."

At once her face flushed crimson, she looked appalled, and she put her hand over her mouth as though she could have thrust back the words which she had just uttered and which I had quite failed to catch. (Cap 343)

Obsessive paragraphs later, the narrator figures out what was truncated from Albertine's sentence: the phrase had been *me faire casser le pot*, glossed by Kilmartin as "an obscene slang expression meaning to have anal intercourse (passive)" (Cap 1110). The point here isn't just that Albertine's sexuality includes an anal component; there is no obvious reason why such a component could not figure under the protean and polymorphous sign of the raspberry obelisk: as just another, densely populated nerve center in the expansive inside-and-out glove of an epidermal responsiveness still best symbolized as oral. (Scott Moncrieff, for instance, recuperates this moment for the culinary by offering the un-glossed translation "break my pot";<sup>23</sup> and Albertine herself keeps trying to insist, afterwards, that what she had been asking for really was to be allowed to give a dinner-party [Cap 343].) But neither Albertine nor the narrator finds this subsumption under the contingent, the metonymic, a plausible or stable one. Albertine's desperation to eat her words—"crimson with shame," as the narrator repeats, "pushing back into her mouth what she was about to say, desperately ashamed" (Cap 346)—registers not the pleasure of browsing on edibles but the need to undo the evidence of another kind of accident. It is the mouth here that is conscripted into the service of the anal—and the anal *not* as just another site of desire but as a defining breakage in the continuity of desire, under whose excitement and demand any more protean or diffuse sensuality turns back into an architecture of icy vanilla.

"Demand": the one way in which the narrator, in his broodings over it, does *not* (explicitly) interpret Albertine's remark is as a requisition of a specific sexual act, something they could actually do together. Instead, it occasions in him only "horror!" "despair," "rage," "tears" (Cap 345–46);

23. Marcel Proust, *The Captive*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff (New York: Random House/Vintage, 1970), 238–39.

his level of paranoid charade and anticipatory rejection is catapulted to a critical, indeed terminal, height by Albertine's seemingly far from cryptic ejaculation. This is rather unaccountable. He remarkably manages to interpret her expressed desire to get buggered as a sign of her essential *lesbianism*, hence of her inaccessibility to himself:

Twofold horror! For even the vilest of prostitutes, who consents to such a thing, or even desires it, does not use that hideous expression to the man who indulges in it. She would feel it too degrading. To a woman alone, if she loves women, she might say it, to excuse herself for giving herself to another man. Albertine had not been lying when she told me that she was half dreaming. Her mind elsewhere, forgetting that she was with me, impulsively she had shrugged her shoulders and begun to speak as she would have spoken to one of those women, perhaps to one of my budding girls. (Cap 345–46)

What these farfetched dependencies seem to suggest is that the narrator may really hear Albertine's desire as terrifying, not because it isn't directed toward him, but because it is, her desire registering on him as demand for a performance he fears he cannot give.<sup>24</sup> As so often in the Albertine-associated plot of *A la recherche*, however, the crossing of an axis of sexual desire by an axis of gender definition has most the effect of guaranteeing, in the incoherence of the conceptual space thereby articulated, the infinite availability of hidden bolt-holes for the coverture of meaning, intention, regard. If one cannot say with the utopian readers that either within or around Albertine there are erotic possibilities that mark a potentially regenerative *difference from* the spectacularized Charlus plot, neither, in this fearful, shadowy blur of desiring too much, desiring too little, desiring the always wrong thing from the always wrong kind of person, can an intelligible *similarity to* Charlus be allowed to become visible. The chalky rag of gender pulled across the blackboard of sexuality, the chalky rag of sexuality across the blackboard of gender: these most create a cloudy space from which a hidden voice can be heard to insist, in the

24. At the same time, this signal of Albertine's extreme impatience with the diffuse sexuality they had so far practiced makes audible in retrospect how fully the narrator's demand, and her own captivity, had shaped her articulation of that lambent orality. By that articulation at the time, indeed, he had said:

I was, in spite of everything, deeply touched, for I thought to myself: True, I myself wouldn't speak like that, and yet, all the same, but for me *she* wouldn't be speaking like that. She has been profoundly influenced by me, and cannot therefore help but love me, since she is my creation. (Cap 125)

words of a contemporaneous manifesto of male homosexual panic,<sup>25</sup> “That is not what I meant at all. That is not it, at all.”

I wonder if other novel-critics who set out to write about Proust feel that if the task is more irresistible than others it is also, not more difficult in degree, but almost prohibitively distinctive in kind: the problem being, not that *Remembrance of Things Past* is so hard and so good, but that “it’s all true.” I can only report here on my own reading life, but with Proust and my word processor in front of me what I most feel are Talmudic desires, to reproduce or unfold the text and to giggle. Who hasn’t dreamt that *A la recherche* remained untranslated, simply so that one could (at least if one knew French) by undertaking the job justify spending one’s own productive life afloat within that blissful and hilarious atmosphere of truth-telling.

Nor, for that matter, is the truth-effect of Proust confined to an ethereal space of privacy. To the contrary: fully competitive, in the genre of wisdom literature, with modern embodiments that offer less good advice on interiors, “success” haberdashery, or “power” entertainments, *The Sixty-Year Manager* puts its sociological acuity humbly at the reader’s service in the most inglorious, the least customarily acknowledged of our projects. I was reading Proust for the first time during just the short stretch of years during which it occurred to me to have ambitions that were not exclusively under the aspect of eternity: to want to publish visibly, know people, make a go of it, get a run for my money.<sup>26</sup> Oddly, of course, it was reading Proust that made me want these adventures and think I could find them. The interminable meditation on the vanity of human wishes was a galvanizing failure for at least one reader: it was, if anything, the very sense of the transparency and predictability of worldly ambitions that gave me the nerve and skill to have worldly ambitions of my own. Like, I

25. T. S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” in *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1952), p. 6. I am using the phrase “male homosexual panic” in the sense explained in Chapter 4: to denote the panicky response to a blackmailability over homo/heterosexual definition that affects all but homosexual-identified men.

26. The cheering equestrian devil-may-care of the very word *career*, which I could only associate with *careen*, let me imagine mine as one of those long-stemmed precarious carriages whose speed over bad roads reliably culminates, in the eighteenth-century novel, in a splintering upset out of whose wreckage only the romantic lead is, in attractive dilapidation, picked.

believe, most young women, I never had a shred of identification with Julien Sorel or the nineteenth-century French male plot of conquering the capital—until after the years of Proust-reading; then both the hero’s airy ambition and his concomitant uncritical adoption of a master text became intelligible and engaging traits. I am now able to prescribe “Proust” to my friends in erotic or professional crisis or in, for that matter, personal grief with the same bland confidence as I do a teaspoon of sugar (must be swallowed quickly) to those suffering from hiccups.

But it is harder to say in what this truth-effect of Proust consists. All the paradoxes of a more traditionally conceived *vraisemblance* are especially active here: molecularly, there are relatively few individual propositions in or arising from the book that it would make sense to consider true; and even at the molar level, propositions or “values” or “attitudes” (erotic or political pessimism, for instance) that could be extracted from Proust do not necessarily seem true to me, to whom, nonetheless, “Proust” seems so “true.” Plainly, classically, it can be said that the coherence and credibility of the work, its *vraisemblance* in the usual senses, depend on an internal structuration of materials and codes that can only *as* relation, *as* structure, be interdigitated with or tested against the relational structures of a “reality” that surrounds and interleaves and thus mutually constitutes it. The truth-effect I am describing goes beyond questions of the work’s coherence and credibility, however. It has to do with the *use* of the literary work, its (to sound censorious) expropriability by its readers, its (to sound, in a different vocabulary, celebratory) potential for empowering them.

For, unmistakably, the autobiographical parable I have just encapsulated as “the years of Proust-reading” represents both a prolonged instance of textual abuse and a story of empowerment.<sup>27</sup> The value, to return to this example, of the book’s practical wisdom in the conduct of affairs of the heart ought seemingly to depend on some subscription to its unswerving erotic pessimism. That sensible “ought” concealed from me for years the simplest fact about myself: the most buoyant temperamental, cognitive, all but theoretical erotic optimism. Yet neither before nor after this optimism was finally acknowledged has it seemed, as it “ought”

27. Specifically in this case, of course, female empowerment—i.e., of someone who can choose, in her twenties, *whether or not* an investment of vital energies will be made in a career. And empowerment more specifically of a professional-class female: i.e., of someone for whom the cathexis that is there to be chosen *is*, not trade or job, but career.



to have done, to go at all against the grain of the Proustianizing adoptions. Instead, what have become visible are a variety of techniques of “bad faith” or creative mislabeling by which pessimistic heuristics of desire are tacitly yoked into the service of sanguine manipulative projects, or discouraging erotic formulas are powerfully reproduced with only the tiny modification of a single, secret exemption, always in the first person. (The reader, by the way, who does not have a native endowment of these techniques can go for lessons in them to the infinitely discreditable main character in *Remembrance of Things Past*.) If its textual abusiveness and ethical equivocalness do not prevent this relation to Proust from being, at the same time, an authentic instance of empowerment, still less does the admitted double meaning by which the “empowerment” of an individual within a social system necessarily also involves her subjection to a circulatory symbolic economy of power; to be shot into this circulation with the force of some extra quanta of borrowed energy (“Proust”) and with a disposition to travel always offers the chance, for long enough, of feeling like mastery. And there is no certainty that the effects of this illusion, or of its decomposition, will not be persistent or corrosive enough to alter in fact, however unpredictably, the itineraries of flow and distribution.

I don’t think I am the only reader on whom Proust has an almost coarsely energizing effect that is difficult to account for on any grounds of the purely kosher. I am constrained to wonder what is happening when we, as Proust readers, frame for our own use an account of the world (signalized by this novelistic world) structured around the theatricization of a closet-figured-as-spectacle to preserve the privacy of someone else’s closet-occluded-as-viewpoint. We have already seen how great a sense of creativity and mastery are involved in the readerly identification with the narrator’s hidden, accusative framing of the closet of the other. But can our own empowering effort to reconfront the two closets with each other as symmetrical objects of our own analysis have less the force of accusation? How far, in adopting such an account, are we drawing our own surplus value of interpretive energies from the homophobic commonplace that attributes the enforcement of heterosexist norms to, precisely and double-damningly, the closeted homosexual himself?

It is, after all, as we have mentioned, entirely within the experience of gay people to find that a homophobic figure in power has, if anything, a disproportionate likelihood of being gay and closeted. This fact, if fact it be, or this appearance, is too important and too easily misused to be discussed briefly. Both the strength of the appearance and its aptitude for

complicated misuse were evident in the poisonous coverage of the recent death of the poisonous Roy Cohn.<sup>28</sup> Cohn’s death caused to resurface recurrent speculation that many of the main figures behind the homophobic depredations of 1950s McCarthyite red-baiting (Cohn, McCarthy, G. David Schine, J. Edgar Hoover) may have been actively homosexual. The *New York Times* remarked in Cohn’s long obituary:

As they plowed through investigations of the State Department and the Voice of America, relentlessly trying to sniff out Communists or their sympathizers, Mr. Cohn, Mr. Schine and Senator McCarthy, all bachelors at the time, were themselves the targets of what some called “reverse McCarthyism.” There were sniggering suggestions that the three men were homosexuals, and attacks such as that by the playwright Lillian Hellman who called them “Bonnie, Bonnie and Clyde.”<sup>29</sup>

It is a nice question where the sniggering is located in an obituary whose subject is “Fiery Lawyer” in the front-page headline and then “Flamboyant Lawyer” in the inside one — why not say “flaming” and be done with it? —; whose prose explains that “his parents, particularly his mother, doted on their only child” and that “his office contained an extensive collection of stuffed animals”; whose pace makes a leisurely meal of his repeated denials that he had AIDS and of the lovingly pieced together revelation that he died of it, without any mention of the issues of government confidentiality, crucial to tens of thousands of gay people and others, raised by the semiofficial leakage of such reports during his lifetime; and whose homophobic punchline is allowed to be delivered, not in the voice of the *Times* which chooses to reproduce it, but in that of a leftist and female victim of McCarthyism with whom Cohn can then be presented by the magisterial *Times* as engaged in a symmetrically (“reverse McCarthyism”) bitchy hair-pulling squabble. Just as Black anti-Semitism and Jewish racism are favored objects of media highlighting and exacerbation because they contribute to the obscurity from which white, Prot-

28. Andy Rooney in his nationally syndicated column of August 9, 1986, for instance, gave the list of the “detestable” things that Cohn had denied doing but nonetheless been guilty of: Cohn “denied he participated in [the] witch hunt that unfairly damaged the careers of hundreds [!] of good Americans”; he “denied he owed millions of dollars in back taxes”; he “denied he conned an elderly multimillionaire on his deathbed”; and, of course climactically, he “denied he was a homosexual suffering from AIDS. Death was an effective rebuttal to that last denial.”

29. Albin Krebs, “Roy Cohn, Aide to McCarthy and Fiery Lawyer, Dies at 59,” *New York Times*, August 3, 1986, pp. 1, 33.

estant privilege is allowed to operate as usual, so revelation of the homophobic enforcement performed by closeted gay people yields an astonishingly sweet taste to the mouths of the presumed straight public.

It is not only straight-identified or certifiably homophobic people whom such revelation can invigorate, however. What Magnus Hirschfeld's Scientific-Humanitarian Committee referred to in 1903 as "the frequently suggested 'path over corpses'" — "denunciations of homosexuals of high standing," James Steakley explains — is a tactic whose potential, and sometimes execution, have fascinated the gay movement from its inception.<sup>30</sup> From Hirschfeld's and Adolf Brand's willingness to testify that a prince and a chancellor were persons of "homosexual orientation," in the 1907–9 Eulenburg affair that so galvanized Proust,<sup>31</sup> through Hirschfeld's appearance as an expert witness at the 1924 trial of the police informer and mass murderer Fritz Haarmann,<sup>32</sup> to the traditional gay epithet "Alice Blue Gown" for cops and especially vice cops, to the recent relish for information about the cause of death of New Right wunderkind Terry Dolan, to the restorative animus with which, for instance, gay journalist Boyd McDonald sets out after the sexuality of vicious men like William F. Buckley, Jr.,<sup>33</sup> it has at various times and for various reasons

30. Discussed in Steakley, *The Homosexual Emancipation Movement in Germany*, pp. 32–40; quotation is from p. 33.

31. On the discursive complications of this case see James Steakley, "Iconography of a Scandal: Political Cartoons and the Eulenburg Affair," *Studies in Visual Communication* 9, no. 2 (Spring 1983): 20–49; on the motives and consequences of Hirschfeld's participation, see esp. pp. 30, 32, 42–44; on *Brand v. Bulow*, pp. 30–32. Charlus follows the case closely and, while admiring the discretion of Eulenburg and the other accused noblemen in not implicating the emperor (C 979), is obviously not interested in reproducing it.

32. On this see Richard Plant, *The Pink Triangle: The Nazi War against Homosexuals* (New York: Henry Holt, 1986), pp. 45–49.

33. A characteristic paragraph from McDonald, who has written regular columns for *Christopher Street* and the *Native*, as well as movie books and invigorating collections of sex anecdotes:

#### *Those Lips, Those Hips*

Homosexuals demonstrating against Justice Burger's August 11 visit looked good on the Channel 5 news. The only outrageous gay stereotype in the segment was, as sometimes happens, a putative heterosexual, and an anti-homosexual one to boot: Justice Burger himself. He didn't go near the demonstrators, but he was shown mincing along a corridor in a limp-wristed, swivel-hipped waddle. He looked like an arrogant old queen. He was surrounded by four bodyguards. I recommend that he always be, as protection against fag-bashers who may not know who he is. (*New York Native*, no. 175 [August 25, 1986]: 17)

McDonald's explanation, in an earlier column, of his preferred assignment of epithets:

The word "bitch" is so radioactive and contagious that it boomerangs and

seemed to gay people that there was some liberatory potential in articulating the supposed homosexual secrets of men in power, often homophobic men. This selective utterance of the open secrets whose tacitness structures hierarchical enforcement can be a tragically wrong move for gay politics, as it was in the Eulenburg and Haarmann interventions. It is always an intensely volatile move, depending as it does for its special surge of polemical force on the culture's (though not on the speaker's) underlying phobic valuation of homosexual choice (and acquiescence in heterosexual exemption). And yet, where that ambient homophobia seems, as it can rightly seem, the very warp and woof of meaning itself at the most important nexuses of the culture, the composing of any intervention whose force would *not* depend on it may seem an impossible or an impossibly isolating task; while the energy and community that seem to be available from the knitting of those homophobia-rinsed threads into one's own discursive fabric are almost impossible to choose to forego, if their use can even at all be said to be optional.

Charlus gets an addictive charge out of the naming of names:

"I knew Constantine of Greece very well indeed when he was Diadoch, he is a really splendid man. I have always thought that the Emperor Nicholas had a great affection for him. Of course I mean to imply nothing dishonourable. Princess Christian used to talk openly about it, but she is a terrible scandalmonger. As for the Tsar of the Bulgars, he is an out-and-out nancy and a monstrous liar, but very intelligent, a remarkable man. He likes me very much."

M. de Charlus, who could be so delightful, became horrid when he

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contaminates all who use it. . . . In extreme cases, I would call someone a name associated with the opposite sex; such fag-baiters as Eddy Murphy, Cardinal O'Connor, and William F. Buckley, Jr., who have no masculinity to spare, might actually enjoy being called pricks, but I doubt that they want to be called bitches. That, therefore, is what I'd call *them*.

If there is such a thing as an authentic fag-baiter, I don't think I'd mind it; but all of the fag-baiters I read about seem to have personal reasons for their attacks — reasons which are secret, debasing, and litigious, having to do with their real attitudes toward, and in some cases experiences with, men.

I don't always live up to my high ideal of not using feminine names for women. I have called Babs Bush an old bag, when that name would be more appropriate for Bob Hope, and Nancy Reagan an old hag, when that would be more suitable for Dick Cavett. (*New York Native*, no. 163 [June 2, 1986]: 18)

Not surprisingly, McDonald picked up early and gleefully on the medical leaks about Roy Cohn ("Fag-Baiter Has AIDS," his story in the *Native* was headed [*New York Native*, no. 173 (August 11, 1986): 16]), echoing the *Times's* unconcern about confidentiality of AIDS records, though with the difference made by publication in a gay-affirmative paper with a gay audience.

touched on these subjects. He brought to them that same sort of complacency which we find so exasperating in the invalid who keeps drawing attention to his good health. I have often thought that in the "twister" of Balbec the faithful who so longed to hear the admission which he was too secretive to make, would in fact have been unable to endure any real display of his mania; ill at ease, breathing with difficulty as one does in a sick-room or in the presence of a morphine addict who takes out his syringe in public, they would themselves have put a stop to the confidences which they imagined they desired. . . . Thus it was that this dignified and noble man put on the most imbecile smile to complete the following little speech: "As there are strong presumptions of the same kind as for Ferdinand of Coburg in the case of the Emperor William, this may well be the reason why Tsar Ferdinand has joined the side of the "Empires of Prey." After all, it is very understandable, one is indulgent to a *sister*, one refuses her nothing." (T 813-14)

But it is not only Charlus who names names. Nothing can be more obvious than that the narrator, compulsively diagnosing this addiction and others in him, has access to an inexhaustible, indeed an increasing, plenitude of energy and artistic motive in naming Charlus's name along with those of many, many others. Finally, openly and, decade after decade, less openly gay readers have formed a loose, conflictual, phenomenally buoyant community with straight and with openly homophobic readers to partake in both the several levels of homophobic blackmail-cum-homosexual identification in the novel, and the even more potent homophobic blackmail-cum-homosexual identification of the novel. We must know by now, in the wracking jointure of minoritizing and universalizing tropes of male sexual definition, better than to assume that there is a *homosexual man* waiting to be uncovered in each of the closets constituting and constituted by the modern regime of the closet; yet it is by *the homosexual question*, which has never so far been emptied of its homophobic impulses, that the energy of their construction and exploitation continues to be marked.

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If an extension outward in concentric ripples of what is, after all, essentially Charlus's understanding of a world constituted by homophobic homosexual recognition were the only enactment of *A la recherche*, it would be a powerful book but not the one it is. So many other, in some ways even more electrified filaments of meaning are knotted around that signalizing thread of the sexual subject. In particular, the pattern of

*exception and exemption*, the projective poetics by which the viewer's mastery is constituted through a highly volatile categorization of what are unstably framed as objects of view, structures the book's performance of class and of artistic vocation (as it more obviously does of Jewish definition). Let me tell you why I have waited until so late to broach this pluralizing of the novel's subject, and even now barely mention it, and only with serious misgivings. I know from some experience of interacting with people about this and related material how well lubricated, in contemporary critical practice and especially that of heterosexual readers, is the one-way chute from a certain specificity of discourse around gay issues and homophobia, by way of a momentarily specific pluralizing of those issues, to—with a whoosh of relief—the terminus of a magnetic, almost religiously numinous insistence on a notional "undecidability" or "infinite plurality" of "difference" into whose vast and shadowy spaces the machinery of heterosexist presumption and homophobic projection will already, undetected, have had ample time to creep. A nominally pluralistic reading will often be a quiet way of performing for Proust the ritual of hiding the copies of *Gay Community News* and sending the lover off to the library before Mom arrives for brunch: it can de-gay the novel. So I need to emphasize that, for instance, even the extreme privileging in *A la recherche* of a certain version of authorial vocation, which is surely one of the things that let the novel's thrilling poetics of exemption work its way so deeply into the consciousness system of a young female writer for whom male homosexual panic was not in any obvious sense an item on the agenda of self-constitution—even that version of authorial vocation (rich as it is in the vibrativeness of modern instabilities of secrecy/disclosure, private/public, masculine/feminine, majority/minority, innocence/initiation, natural/artificial, growth/decadence, urbane/provincial, health/illness, same/different, cognition/paranoia, sincerity/sentimentality, voluntariness/addiction) has its terms and structure so intimately marked by the specificity of turn-of-the-century sexual crisis that to imagine a floating-free of those terms, or an infinity of non-homosexual-marked alternatives to them, is already a phobic form of understanding.

Perhaps I can, though, gesture at the outline of one different, though not an alternative, angle of reading to bring to the novel.<sup>34</sup> That would have to do with bringing the specificity of the male homo/heterosexual

34. I was indebted, in working on this train of thought, to a valuable discussion with Jack Cameron.

crisis that so animates the book into some more direct relation to the specificity of, not a male or male-identified reader who may consume it through a direct, mimetic chain of quasi-phobic self-constitution, but a female or female-identified reader whose status as a consumer of it must be marked by a particular difference. I would want to argue that, in some ways, a woman reader is precisely the intended consumer of *A la recherche*: not just any woman reader, but specifically someone in the position of a mother, that of the narrator or of the author. If *A la recherche* is a charter text in that most intriguing of all genres, the coming-out story that doesn't come out, what is preserved by that obdurate transparency, or transparent obduracy, are after all two different effects. The first, as we have seen, is the unexhausted freshness of the highly contagious energies of a male paranoid theatricalization of the male closet. The second thing preserved, however, through the incomplete address to the figure of the mother, is the attribution of an extreme or even ultimate power to an auditor who is defined, at the same time, as the person who *can't know*.

Is it not the mother to whom both the coming-out testament and its continued refusal to come out are addressed? And isn't some scene like that behind the persistent force of the novel's trope, "the profanation of the mother"? That that woman who lovingly and fearfully scrutinizes narrator and narrative *can't know* is both an analytic inference (she never acts as if she knows, and anyway how could she know?) and a blank imperative: she *mustn't* know. Imaginably, as two of Proust's earlier stories suggest, either a homosexual confession would kill the person making it (as in "Avant la Nuit") or discovery of the hidden sexuality would kill the mother herself (as in "La Confession d'une jeune fille").<sup>35</sup> The hint of a contradictory analysis or imperative—"She *must* know"—seemingly lends a narrative momentum to the *mustn't* of *A la recherche*; but the most striking counterweight, if it is a counterweight, to the absolute ignorance continually ascribed to (or prescribed for) the mother is the ascriptive absoluteness of her power over the putatively inscrutable son. The result is that the mother has a *power* over whose uses she has, however, no cognitive *control*.

This topos of the omnipotent, unknowing mother is profoundly

35. "Before Nightfall," translated as an appendix to Rivers, *Proust*, pp. 267–71; "A Young Girl's Confession," *Pleasures and Regrets*, trans. Louise Varèse (New York: Ecco Press, 1984), pp. 31–47. Although the latter of these stories concerns a young woman's relationship with a man, it is most often and most plausibly read as an account of Proust's fear that his mother would discover his early homosexual affairs.

rooted in twentieth-century gay male high culture, along the whole spectrum from Pasolini to David Leavitt, by way of, for instance, James Merrill, whose mother figures in *Divine Comedies* as the all-powerful blank space in the Ouija-board alphabet, "the breath drawn after every line, / Essential to its making as to mine."<sup>36</sup> In E. M. Forster's story, "The Other Boat," similarly, the homosexual panic of the main character is inflamed literally to madness by the vision of "his mother, blind-eyed in the midst of the enormous web she had spun—filaments drifting everywhere, strands catching. There was no reasoning with her or about her, she understood nothing and controlled everything."<sup>37</sup> If this topos hasn't been a feature of gay male criticism and theory, as it richly has of literary production, that is for an all too persuasive reason: the reinforcement it might seem to offer to unthinking linkages between (homo)sexuality and (feminine) gender, and its apparent high congruence with the homophobic insistence, popularized from Freudian sources with astonishing effect by Irving Bieber and others in the fifties and sixties, that mothers are to be "blamed" for—always unknowingly—causing their sons' homosexuality.

Only one more, spectacular example in a chain of examples of the homophobic construction, by men, of the figure of *the woman who can't know*, as the supposed ultimate consumer for presentations of male sexuality, was a flagrantly inflammatory front-page article from the *Times* of April 3, 1987: "AIDS Specter for Women: The Bisexual Man." Writing at a moment when AIDS discourse was shifting with a startling rapidity from its previous exclusive and complacent (minoritizing) focus on dangers to distinct "risk groups" to a much broader, less confident (universalizing) focus on dangers to "the general public," the *Times* journalist, Jon Nordheimer, responded to the implicit crisis of definition by attempting to interpolate the rather amorphous category of bisexual men as a new minority risk group—one that had, however, the potential of providing the deadly "bridge" by which the disease could cross over from affecting minorities to affecting the so-called general public.

This male-authored article mobilizes and ferments the anxiety and uncertainty, as it appropriates the actual voices, of women who sup-

36. James Merrill, "The Book of Ephraim," *Divine Comedies* (New York: Atheneum, 1976), p. 128.

37. E. M. Forster, *The Life to Come and Other Short Stories* (New York: Avon/Bard, 1976), p. 206.

posedly *have to know* all the secrets of men's sexuality—so that, apparently, they can avoid having any sex with bisexual men and have unprotected sex with certifiably heterosexual men. This *having to know* is artificially constructed in the article, which is carefully framed to omit the obvious, epistemologically relaxing option that these women might choose to use care and condoms in all their sexual contacts at this point. But the hyped-up imperative to know is only a foil or pretext: *must know* inevitably generates *can't know*, and *can't know* just as surely generates, in the article's main performative act, its intended object: The Shadowy Bisexual himself. For an imagined middle-class woman, the article says, "experts say"

the figure of the male bisexual, cloaked in myth and his own secretiveness, has become the boggy-man of the late 1980's, casting a chill on past sexual encounters and prospective ones.

She might also be distressed to learn that bisexuals are often secretive and complex men who, experts say, probably would not acknowledge homosexual activity even if questioned about it. Indeed, some cannot even admit such behavior to themselves.

In the unknowing, unconsenting name of the woman who can't know, and under the picture of a woman expert who says she *doesn't* know, the whole discursive machinery by which new sexual identities get constructed is trundled, for our edification, out onto the field. We learn what to say to a bisexual man ("You're not a man!" a woman tells her husband when she discovers "the truth"—or so we are informed by "one therapist"). We learn that their attentions impart to women "a deep sense of humiliation." We learn that bisexuals (such as "Stuart"), unlike the experts on them (such as "Dr. Alfred C. Kinsey," "Dr. Bruce Voeller," "Dr. Theresa Crenshaw"), don't have last names. We learn that there is a history of their study. We learn most crucially that bisexuals fit into five categories: "married men . . . who lead clandestine homosexual lives and rarely if ever have sexual relations with women other than their wives"; "openly bisexual men who are promiscuous only in their homosexual orientation and interact with women in a sporadic, serial manner, returning to the company of men when a relationship with a woman ends"; "those men, unsettled by identity confusion who, in the words of one expert, 'jump here and there and back again'"; "a fourth group, young men who experiment with homosexuality in college or some other environment where it is tolerated or easy to hide"; and finally, "'ambisexuals,' a small

but 'dangerous' group of men who have very frequent sexual contact with both men and women." Each of these categories is more sociopathic-sounding than the last, although they seem very difficult to tell apart. No matter, however: it is the mere existence of multiple categories that guarantees the legitimacy of the classifying process. By this certifying process we, as women, learn yet another way in which we are powerless, unless we can finally master the unmasterable map of male sexuality.

And we, as historically alert readers, note that this confident proffer of "new" expertise doesn't signal any movement at all on two analytic blockages as old as the century: the transitive/separatist question about gender identity, and the minoritizing/universalizing question about sexual definition. Are these men characterized by "their little effeminate ways," or are they, to the contrary, "very masculine"? Further, are they a tiny self-contained minority, as Dr. Richard A. Isay of Cornell Medical Center suggests? Or do they, rather, represent, as Dr. Fritz Klein, "a California authority on bisexuality," asserts, a vast potential among the "many men" "out there" to be "very active with both men and women"?

"The numbers on bisexuals," Dr. June Reinisch is twice quoted as saying, "have always been a problem." The problem of "the numbers on bisexuals" is only barely not the problem of the number of bisexuals. This article works at converting Dr. Reinisch's acknowledgment of a conceptual deadlock into a rationale for a final solution, projecting its own intractable unknowing onto women with the same gesture as it projects the entirety of male mendacity and threat onto a newly framable and themselves very endangered group of men.

In short, I would want to say, the way figures of women seem to preside, dumbly or pseudo-dumbly, over both gay and homophobic constructions of male gender identity and secrecy is among the fateful relations dramatized in and around *A la recherche*. I don't assume (and I want to emphasize this) that for women to reach in and try to occupy with more of our own cognitive and desiring animation this cynosural space which we already occupy passively, fantasmically, but none the less oppressively (all around), would be a more innocuous process, either on the part of the female reader or on that of the Proustian text, than the dangerously energizing male-directed reading relations we have been discussing so far. Willy-nilly, however, I have of course been enacting that occupation as well, all along; the wrestling into motion *that* way of this propulsive textual world cannot perhaps in the present text be my subject, as it has been my project.