

"Levels of the Search"

Proust & Signs

Gilles Deleuze

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CHAPTER 10

Levels of the Search

In a universe thus fragmented, there is no Logos that gathers up all the pieces, hence no law attaches them to a whole to be regained or even formed. And yet there is a law, but with a changed nature, function, and relation. The Greek world is a world in which the law is always secondary; it is a secondary power in relation to the logos that comprehends the whole and refers it to the Good. The law, or rather the laws, merely control the parts, adapt them, bring them together and unite them, establish in them a relative "better." Thus the laws are valid only to the degree that they cause us to know something of what transcends them and to the degree that they determine an image of the "better," meaning the aspect assumed by the Good in the logos in relation to certain parts, a certain region, a certain moment. It seems that the modern consciousness of the antilogos has made the law undergo a radical revolution. The law becomes a primary power insofar as it controls a world of untotalizable and untotalized fragments. The law no longer says what is good, but good is what the law says; it thereby acquires a formidable unity: there are no longer laws specified in such and such a manner, but there is *the* law, without any other specification. It is true that this formidable unity is absolutely empty, uniquely formal, because it causes us to know no distinct object, no totality, no Good of reference, no referring Logos. Far from conjoining and adapting

parts, it separates and partitions them, sets noncommunication in the contiguous, incommensurability in the container. Not causing us to know anything, the law teaches us what it is only by marking our flesh, by already applying punishment to us, and thus the fantastic paradox: we do not know what the law intended before receiving punishment, hence we can obey the law only by being guilty, we can be answerable to it only by our guilt, because the law is applied to parts only as disjunct, and by disjoining them still further, by dismembering bodies, by tearing their members from them. Strictly speaking unknowable, the law makes itself known only by applying the harshest punishments to our agonized body.

Modern consciousness of the law assumed a particularly acute form with Kafka: it is in *The Great Wall of China* that we find the fundamental link between the fragmentary character of the wall, the fragmentary mode of its construction, and the unknowable character of the law, its determination identical to a punishment of guilt. In Proust, however, the law presents another figure, because guilt is more like the appearance that conceals a more profound fragmentary reality, instead of being itself this more profound reality to which the detached fragments lead us. The depressive consciousness of the law as it appears in Kafka is countered in this sense by the schizoid consciousness of the law according to Proust. At first glance, however, guilt plays a large part in Proust's work, with its essential object: homosexuality. To love supposes the guilt of the beloved, although all love is dispute over evidence; a judgment of innocence rendered upon the being one knows nonetheless to be guilty. Love is therefore a decla-

ration of imaginary innocence extended between two certitudes of guilt, one that conditions love a priori and makes it possible, and one that seals off love, which marks its experimental conclusion. Thus the narrator cannot love Albertine without having grasped this a priori guilt, which he will spin off into all his experience through his conviction that she is innocent in spite of everything (this conviction being quite necessary, functioning as a revealing-agent): "Moreover, even more than their faults while we love them, there are their faults before we knew them, and first among them all: their nature. What makes such loves painful, as a matter of fact, is that they are preexisted by a kind of original sin of women, a sin that makes us love them..." (III, 150-51). "Was it not, in fact, despite all the denials of my reason, to know Albertine in all her hideousness, to choose her, to love her? ... To feel ourselves drawn toward such a being, to begin to love her, however innocent we claimed her to be, is to read already, in a different version, all that being's betrayals and faults" (III, 611). And love ends when the a priori certitude of guilt has itself completed its trajectory, when it has become empirical, driving out the empirical conviction that Albertine was innocent in spite of everything: an idea "gradually forming in the depths of consciousness replaced there the idea that Albertine was innocent: this was the idea that she was guilty," so that the certitude of Albertine's sins appears to the narrator only when they no longer interest him, when he has stopped loving, conquered by fatigue and habit (III, 535).

With all the more reason, guilt appears in the two homosexual series. And we recall the power with which

Proust characterizes male homosexuality as accursed, "a race anathematized, and which must live in deception . . . whose honor is always precarious, whose freedom is always provisional, whose situation is always unstable": homosexuality-as-sign as opposed to the Greek version, homosexuality-as-logos.¹ *Yet the reader has the impression that this guilt is more apparent than real*; and if Proust himself speaks of the originality of his project, if he declares that he himself has tested several "theories," this is because he is not content to isolate specifically an accursed homosexuality. The entire theme of the accursed or guilty race is intertwined, moreover, with a theme of innocence, the theme of the sexuality of plants. The Proustian theory is extremely complex because it functions on several levels. *On a first level* is the entity of heterosexual loves in their contrasts and repetitions. *On a second level*, this entity splits into two series or directions, that of Gomorrah, which conceals the (invariably revealed) secret of the loved woman, and that of Sodom, which carries the still more deeply buried secret of the lover. It is on this level that the idea of sin or guilt prevails. But this second level is not the most profound, because it is no less statistical than the entity it decomposes: in this sense, guilt is experienced socially rather than morally or internally. It will be noticed as a general rule in Proust that not only does a given entity have no more than a statistical value, but also that this is true of the two dissymmetrical aspects or directions into which that entity is divided. For example, the "army" or "throng" of all the narrator's selves that love Albertine forms an entity on the first level, but the two subgroups of "trust" and of "jealous suspicion" are, on a

second level, directions that are still statistical, which mask impulses from a third level, the agitations of singular particles, of each of the selves that constitute the throng or army.² In the same way, the *Méséglise Way* and the *Guermantes Way* are to be taken only as statistical, themselves composed of a host of elementary figures. And in the same way, finally, the *Gomorrah* and *Sodom* series, and their corresponding guilts, are doubtless more subtle than the crude appearance of heterosexual loves, but still conceal an ultimate level, constituted by the behavior of organs and of elementary particles.

Even here what interests Proust in the two homosexual series, and what makes them strictly complementary, is the prophecy of separation that they fulfill: "The two sexes shall die, each in a place apart" (III, 616). But the metaphor of the open boxes or the sealed vessels will assume its entire meaning only if we consider that the two sexes are both present and separate in the same individual: contiguous but partitioned and not communicating, in the mystery of an initial hermaphroditism. Here the vegetal theme takes on its full significance, in opposition to a Logos-as-Organism: hermaphroditism is not the property of a now-lost animal totality, but the actual partitioning of the two sexes in one and the same plant: "The male organ is separated by a partition from the female organ" (II, 626, 701). And it is here that *the third level* will be situated: an individual of a given sex (but no sex is given except in the aggregate or statistically) bears within itself the other sex with which it cannot communicate directly. How many young girls lodge within Charlus, and how many who will also become grandmothers! (II, 907, 967).

"In some . . . the woman is not only inwardly united with the man, but hideously visible, agitated as by a spasm of hysteria, by a shrill laugh that convulses knees and hands" (II, 620). The first level was defined by the statistical entity of heterosexual loves. The second, by the two homosexual (and still statistical) series, according to which an individual considered within the preceding entity was referred to other individuals of the same sex—participating in the Sodom series if a man, in the Gomorrah series if a woman (hence Odette, Albertine). But the third level is transexual ("which is very wrongly called homosexuality"), and transcends the individual as well as the entity: it designates in the individual the coexistence of fragments of both sexes, *partial objects* that do not communicate. And it will be with them as with plants: the hermaphrodite requires a third party (the insect) so that the female part may be fertilized or the male part may fertilize (II, 602, 626). An aberrant communication occurs in a transversal dimension between partitioned sexes. Or rather, it is even more complicated, for we shall rediscover, on this third level, the distinction of the second and the third levels. It may in fact happen that an individual statistically determined as male will seek, in order to fertilize his female part with which he cannot himself communicate, an individual statistically of the same sex as himself (the same is true for the woman and the male part). But in a more profound instance, the individual statistically determined as male will cause his own female part to be fertilized by objects (themselves partial) that are just as likely to be found in a woman as in a man. And this is the basis of transexuality, according to Proust: no longer an *aggregate and*

specific homosexuality, in which men relate to men and women to women in a separation of the two series, but a *local and nonspecific homosexuality*, in which a man also seeks what is masculine in a woman and a woman what is feminine in a man, and this in the partitioned contiguity of the two sexes as partial objects.³

Whence the apparently obscure text in which Proust counters an aggregate and specific homosexuality by this local and nonspecific homosexuality: "For some, doubtless those whose childhoods were timid, the material kind of pleasure they take does not matter, so long as they can relate it to a male countenance. While others, whose sensuality is doubtless more violent, give their material pleasure certain imperious localizations. The second group would shock most people by their avowals. They live perhaps less exclusively under Saturn's satellite, for in their case women are not entirely excluded. . . . But those in the second group seek out women who prefer women, women who suggest young men . . . indeed, they can take, with such women, the same pleasure as with a man. Hence those who love members of the first group suffer jealousy only at the thought of pleasure taken with a man—the only kind of pleasure that seems to them a betrayal, because they do not feel love for women and indeed *make love* to them only as a necessity, to preserve the possibility of marriage, being so unconcerned with the pleasure it might afford that they are indifferent if those they love experience it; while those in the second group often inspire jealousy by their love for women. For in their relations with women, they play—for the woman who prefers women—the role of another woman, and at the same time a woman

offers them approximately what they find in a man..." (II, 622). If we take this transexuality as the ultimate level of the Proustian theory and its relation with the practice of partitioning, not only is the vegetal metaphor illuminated but it becomes quite grotesque to wonder about the degree of "transposition" that Proust had to effect, supposedly, to change an Albert into Albertine, and even more grotesque to present as a revelation the discovery that Proust must have had some erotic relationships with women. One may indeed say that life brings nothing to the work or theory, for the work or the theory are linked to the secret life by a link more profound than that of any biography. It suffices to follow what Proust explains in his great discussion of Sodom and Gomorrah: transexuality, that is, local and nonspecific homosexuality, based on the contiguous partitioning of the sexes-as-organs or of partial objects, which we discover at a deeper level than aggregate and specific homosexuality, based on the independence of the sexes-as-persons or of entire series.

Jealousy is the very delirium of signs. And, in Proust, we shall find the confirmation of a fundamental link between jealousy and homosexuality, though it affords an entirely new interpretation of the latter. Insofar as the beloved contains possible worlds, it is a matter of explicating, of unfolding all these worlds. But precisely because these worlds are made valid only by the beloved's viewpoint of them, which is what determines the way in which they are implicated within the beloved, the lover can never be sufficiently *involved* in these worlds without being thereby excluded from them as well, because he belongs to them only as a thing seen, hence also as a thing

scarcely seen, not remarked, excluded from the superior viewpoint from which the choice is made. The gaze of the beloved integrates me within the landscape and the environs only by driving me out of the impenetrable viewpoint according to which the landscape and the environs are organized within the beloved: "If she had seen me, what could I have meant to her? Within what universe did she distinguish me? It would have been as difficult for me to say as, when our telescope shows us certain features of a neighboring planet, it is difficult to conclude from them that human beings inhabit it, that they see us as well, and what ideas their vision might awaken in them" (I, 794). Similarly, the preferences or the caresses the beloved gives me affect me only by suggesting the image of possible worlds in which others have been or are or will be preferred (I, 276). This is why, in the second place, jealousy is no longer simply the explication of *possible worlds* enveloped in the beloved (where others, like myself, can be seen and chosen), but the discovery of the *unknowable world* that represents the beloved's own viewpoint and develops within the beloved's homosexual series. Here the beloved is no longer in relation to anything except beings of the same kind but different from me, sources of pleasures that remain unknown to me and unavailable: "It was a terrible terra incognita in which I had just landed, a new phase of unsuspected sufferings that was beginning" (II, 1115). Lastly, in the third place, jealousy discovers the transexuality of the beloved, everything hidden by the apparent and statistically determined sex of the beloved, the other contiguous and noncommunicating sexes, and the strange insects whose task it is, nonetheless,

to bring these aspects into communication—in short, the discovery of partial objects, even more cruel than the discovery of rival persons.

There is a logic of jealousy that is that of the open boxes and sealed vessels. The logic of jealousy comes down to this: to sequester, to immure the beloved. Such is the law Swann divines at the end of his love for Odette, which the narrator already apprehends in his love for his mother, though without yet having the strength to apply it, and which he ultimately applies in his love for Albertine (I, 563; III, 434). The shadowy captives constitute the entire secret filiation of the Search. To sequester is first of all to empty the beloved of all the possible worlds she contains, to decipher and explicate these worlds; but it is also to relate them to the enveloping impulse, to the implication that marks their relation to the beloved (III, 172–74). Next, it is to break off the homosexual series that constitutes the beloved's unknown world and also to discover homosexuality as the beloved's original sin, for which the beloved is punished by being sequestered. Lastly, to sequester is to prevent the contiguous aspects, the sexes, and the partial objects from communicating within the transversal dimension haunted by the insect (the third object); it is to enclose each by itself, thereby interrupting the accursed exchanges, but it is also to set them beside each other and to let them invent their system of communication, which always exceeds our expectations, which creates amazing accidents and outwits our suspicions (the secret of the signs). There is an astonishing relation between the sequestration born of jealousy, the passion to

see, and the action of profaning: sequestration, voyeurism, and profanation—the Proustian trinity. For to imprison is, precisely, to put oneself in a position to see without being seen, that is, without the risk of being carried away by the beloved's viewpoint that excluded us from the world as much as it included us within it. Thus, seeing Albertine asleep. To see is indeed to reduce the beloved to the contiguous, noncommunicating aspects that constitute her and to await the transversal mode of communication that these partitioned halves will find the means of instituting. Seeing therefore transcends the temptation of letting others see, even symbolically. To make another person see is to impose on him the contiguity of a strange, abominable, hideous spectacle. It not only imposes on him the vision of the sealed and contiguous vessels, partial objects between which a coupling *contra naturam* is suggested, but treats that person as if he were one of these objects, one of these contiguous aspects that must communicate transversally.

Whence the theme of profanation so dear to Proust. Mlle Vinteuil associates her father's photograph with her sexual revels. The narrator puts family furniture in a brothel. By making Albertine embrace him next to his mother's room, he can reduce his mother to the state of a partial object (tongue) contiguous to Albertine's body. Or else, in a dream, he cages his parents like wounded mice at the mercy of the transversal movements that penetrate them and make them jump. Everywhere, to profane is to make the mother (or the father) function as a partial object, that is, to partition her, to make her see a contigu-

ous spectacle, and even to participate in this spectacle she can no longer interrupt and no longer leave—to make her contiguous to the spectacle.⁴

Freud assigned two fundamental anxieties in relation to the law: aggression against the beloved involves, on the one hand, a threat of the loss of love, and on the other, a guilt caused by turning that aggression against the self. The second figure gives the law a depressive consciousness, but the first one represents a schizoid consciousness of the law. Now, in Proust the theme of guilt remains superficial, social rather than moral, projected upon others rather than internalized in the narrator, distributed within the various statistical series. On the other hand, the loss of love truly defines destiny or the law: *to love without being loved*, because love implicates the seizure of these possible worlds in the beloved, worlds that expel me as much as they draw me in and that culminate in the unknowable homosexual world—but also *to stop loving*, because the emptying of the worlds, the explication of the beloved, lead the self that loves to its death.⁵ “To be harsh and deceptive to what one loves,” because it is a matter of sequestering the beloved, of seeing the beloved when she can no longer see you, then of making her see the partitioned scenes of which she is the shameful theater or simply the horrified spectator. To sequester, to see, to profane—summarizes the entire law of love.

This is to say that law in general, in a world devoid of the logos, controls the parts without a whole whose open or sealed nature we have examined. And far from uniting or gathering them together in the same world, the law measures their discrepancy, their remoteness, their

distance, and their partitioning, establishing only aberrant communications between the noncommunicating vessels, transversal unities between the boxes that resist any totalization, inserting by force into one world the fragment of another world, propelling the diverse worlds and viewpoints into the infinite void of distances. This is why, on its simplest level, the law as social or natural law appears in terms of the telescope, not the microscope. Of course Proust borrows the vocabulary of the infinitely small: Albertine's various faces differ by “a deviation of infinitesimal lines” (II, 366; I, 945–46). But even here, the tiny deviations of lines are significant only as bearers of colors that separate and diverge from each other, modifying the dimensions of the faces. The instrument of the Search is the telescope, not the microscope, because infinite distances always subtend infinitesimal attractions and because the theme of telescoping unites the three Proustian figures of what is seen from a distance, the collision between worlds, and the folding-up of parts one within another. “Soon I was able to show some sketches. No one could make anything out of them. Even those who favored my perception of the truths I later tried to engrave in time congratulated me on having discovered them by ‘microscope,’ when I had, on the contrary, made use of a telescope in order to perceive things—tiny, indeed, but tiny because they were situated at a great distance, and each of which constituted a world. Though I was in search of great laws, I was labeled a hair-splitter, a rummager among details” (III, 1041). The restaurant dining room includes as many planets as there are tables around which the waiters revolve; the group of girls executes apparently irregu-

lar movements whose laws can be discerned only by patient observation, "impassioned astronomy"; the world enveloped within Albertine has the particularities of what appears to us in a planet, "thanks to the telescope" (I, 794, 810, 831). And if suffering is a sun, it is because its rays immediately traverse distances without annulling them. This is precisely what we have observed in the case of the partitioning of contiguous things: contiguity does not reduce distance to the infinitesimal but affirms and even extends a distance without interval, according to an ever astronomical, ever telescopic law that governs the fragments of disparate universes.