

**"Presence and Function of Madness:
The Spider"**

Proust & Signs

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CONCLUSION TO PART II

Presence and Function of Madness: The Spider

The problem of art and madness in Proust's work has not been raised. Perhaps this question has little or no meaning. Still less: was Proust mad? This question certainly has no meaning. Our concern is only with the presence of madness in Proust's work and with the distribution, use, or function of this presence.

For madness at least appears and functions under a different modality in two main characters, Charlus and Albertine. From Charlus's first appearances, his strange gaze and his eyes themselves are characterized as those of a spy, a thief, a salesman, a detective, or a *madman* (I, 751). Ultimately Morel experiences a well-founded terror at the notion that Charlus is animated by a sort of criminal madness against him (III, 804-6). And throughout, people sense in Charlus the presence of a madness that makes him infinitely more terrifying than if he were merely immoral or perverse, sinful or blameworthy. Perversity "alarms because of the madness sensed within it, much more than because of any immorality. Mme de Surgis had not the slightest sense of a conscious moral sentiment, and with regard to her sons she would have accepted anything that mere worldly interest, comprehensible to anyone, might have discounted and explained. But she forbade them to continue seeing M. de Charlus when she learned that, by a sort of clockwork mechanism, he was

somehow fatally impelled, on each visit, to pinch their chins and to make them pinch each others'. She experienced that anxious feeling of physical mystery that makes one wonder if the neighbor with whom one had such good relations may not suffer from cannibalism, and to the Baron's repeated question: won't I be seeing the young men soon? she replied, conscious of the thunderbolts she was drawing down upon her head, that they were very much involved with their studies, preparations for a journey, etc. Irresponsibility aggravates sins and even crimes, whatever we say. If Landru, supposing he actually killed his wives, did so for (resistible) reasons of worldly interest, he might be pardoned, but not if he murdered out of motives of some irresistible sadism" (III, 205). Beyond responsibility for sins, madness is innocence of crime.

That Charlus is mad is a probability from the beginning, a quasi-certainty at the end. In Albertine's case, madness is rather a posthumous likelihood that retrospectively casts over her words and gestures, over her entire life, a new and disturbing light in which Morel too is involved. "In actuality," Andrée says, "Albertine felt it was a kind of criminal madness, and I've often wondered if it wasn't after a thing like that, having led to a suicide in a family, that she killed herself" (III). What is this mixture of madness-crime-irresponsibility-sexuality, which doubtless has something to do with Proust's cherished theme of parricide, but which nonetheless does not come down to the all-too-familiar Oedipal schema? A sort of innocence in crimes of madness, intolerable as such, including suicide?

Take first of all the case of Charlus. Charlus immediately presents himself as a strong personality, an imperial

individuality. But in fact this individuality is an empire, a galaxy that conceals or contains many unknown things: what is Charlus's secret? The entire galaxy is structured around two notable points: the eyes, the voice. The eyes sometimes flashing with overbearing brilliance, sometimes shifting with inquisitive intensity, sometimes feverishly active, sometimes dim with indifference. The voice, which makes the virile content of what is spoken coexist with an effeminate manner of expression. Charlus presents himself as an enormous flashing indicator, a huge optical and vocal vessel: anyone who listens to Charlus or who meets his gaze finds himself confronting a secret, a mystery to be penetrated, to be interpreted, which he presents from the start as likely to proceed to the point of madness. And the necessity of interpreting Charlus is based on the fact that this Charlus himself interprets, unceasingly interprets, as if that were his own madness, as if that were already his delirium, a delirium of interpretation.

From the Charlus-galaxy proceeds a series of utterances punctuated by the vacillating gaze. *Three major speeches* to the narrator, which find their occasion in the signs Charlus interprets, as prophet and soothsayer, but which also find their destination in signs Charlus proposes to the narrator, here reduced to the role of disciple or pupil. Yet the essential of these speeches is elsewhere, in the words deliberately organized, in the phrases sovereignly arranged, in a Logos that calculates and transcends the signs of which it makes use: Charlus, master of the logos. And from this point of view, the three major speeches have a common structure, despite their differences of rhythm and intensity. A first phase of denial, in which

Charlus says to the narrator: you interest me, don't suppose that you interest me, but. . . . A second phase of distancing, in which Charlus says: between you and me, the distance is infinite, but just for that reason we can complement each other, I am offering you a contract. . . . And a third, unexpected phase, in which it seems that suddenly the logos goes haywire, traversed by something that can no longer be organized. It is charged with a power of another order, rage, insult, provocation, profanation, sadistic fantasy, demential gesture, the eruption of madness. This is already true of the first speech, filled with a noble tenderness but finding its aberrant conclusion the next day on the beach, in M. de Charlus's coarse and prophetic remark: "You don't give a damn about your old grandmother, do you, you little snot. . . ." The second speech is interrupted by a fantasy of Charlus imagining a comical scene in which Bloch engages in fisticuffs with his father and pummels his mother's decaying carcass: "As he spoke these dreadful and almost lunatic words, M. de Charlus squeezed my arm until it hurt." Finally, the third speech is blurted out in the violent ordeal of the trampled hat. It is true that it is not Charlus this time, but the narrator who tramples the hat; yet we shall see that the narrator possesses a madness valid for all the others, communicating with Charlus's as with Albertine's, and capable of replacing them in order to anticipate or develop their effects.¹

If Charlus is the apparent master of the Logos, his speeches are nonetheless disturbed by involuntary signs that resist the sovereign organization of language and cannot be mastered in words and phrases, but rout the logos and involve us in another realm. "From several splendid

utterances that tinged his hatreds, one felt that even if there was an occasion of offended pride or disappointed love, even if there was no more than a certain rancor, some sort of sadism, a teasing disposition, an *idée fixe*, this man was capable of murder. . . ." Signs of violence and madness constituting a certain pathos, counter to and beneath the deliberate signs arranged by "logic and fine language." It is this pathos that will now reveal itself as such, in Charlus's appearances where he speaks less and less from the summit of his sovereign organization and increasingly betrays himself in the course of a long social and physical decomposition. This is no longer the world of speeches and of their vertical communications expressing a hierarchy of rules and positions, but the world of anarchic encounters, of violent accidents, with their aberrant transverse communications. This is the Charlus-Jupien encounter, in which is revealed the long-awaited secret: the homosexuality of Charlus. But is this really Charlus's secret? For what is discovered is less homosexuality, long since foreseeable and suspected, than a general system that makes such homosexuality into a particular case of a deeper universal madness inextricably intermingling innocence and crime. What is discovered is the world in which one no longer speaks, the silent vegetal universe, the madness of the Flowers whose fragmented theme punctuates the encounter with Jupien.

The logos is a huge Animal whose parts unite in a whole and are unified under a principle or a leading idea; but the pathos is a vegetal realm consisting of cellular elements that communicate only indirectly, only marginally, so that no totalization, no unification, can unite this world

of ultimate fragments. It is a schizoid universe of closed vessels, of cellular regions, where contiguity itself is a distance: the world of sex. This is what Charlus himself teaches us beyond his speeches. As individuals possessing both sexes, though "separated by a partition," we must cause the intervention of a galactic structure of eight elements, in which the male part or the female part of a man or woman can enter into relation with the female part or the male part of another woman or man (*ten combinations for the eight elements: an elementary combination will be defined by the encounter of one individual's male or female part with the male or female part of another individual. This produces: male part of a man and female part of a woman, but also male part of a woman and female part of a man, male part of a man and female part of another man, male part of a man and male part of another man . . . etc.*) Aberrant relations between closed vessels; the bumblebee that constitutes the communication between flowers and loses its proper animal value becomes in relation to the latter merely a marginalized fragment, a disparate element in an apparatus of vegetal reproduction.

This may be a composition recognizable everywhere in the Search: starting from a first galaxy that constitutes an apparently circumscribed set, unifiable and totalizable, one or more series are produced, and these series emerge in their turn as a new galaxy, this time decentered or eccentric, consisting of circling closed cells, disparate shifting fragments that follow the transverse vanishing traces. Take the case of Charlus: the first galaxy features his eyes, his voice; then the series of speeches; then the ultimate disturbing world of signs and cells, of closed and commu-

nicating vessels that compose Charlus and can be opened or interpreted according to the vanishing trace of an aging star and its satellites ("M. de Charlus navigating by means of his whole enormous body, involuntarily dragging behind him one of those hooligans or beggars that his mere passage now infallibly produced from even the most apparently deserted nooks and crannies..." [III, 204]). Yet the same composition governs Albertine's story: the galaxy of girls from which Albertine slowly extracts herself; the major series of her two successive jealousies; finally the coexistence of all the cells in which Albertine imprisons herself in her lies, but also is imprisoned by the narrator, a new galaxy that recomposes the first in its own fashion, because the end of love is like a return to the initial indivisibility of the *jeunes filles*. And Albertine's vanishing trace compared to that of Charlus. Further, in the exemplary passage of kissing Albertine, the vigilant narrator starts with Albertine's face, a mobile set in which the beauty spot stands out as a singular feature, then as the narrator's lips approach Albertine's cheek, the desired face passes through a series of successive planes to which correspond so many Albertines, beauty spot leaping from one to the next; ending with the final blur in which Albertine's face is released and undone, and in which the narrator, losing the use of her lips, her eyes, her nose, recognizes "from these hateful signs" that he is in the process of kissing the beloved being.

If this great law of composition and decomposition is as valid for Albertine as for Charlus, it is because it is the law of loves and of sexuality. Intersexual loves, notably the narrator's for Albertine, are in no way a mask for

Proust's own homosexuality. On the contrary, these loves form the initial set, from which will be derived the two homosexual series represented by Albertine and by Charlus ("the two sexes will die each apart from the other"). But these series open in their turn into a transexual universe where the partitioned, sealed sexes regroup within each one in order to communicate with those of the other along aberrant transverse lines. Now if it is true that a sort of surface normality characterizes the first level or the first set, the series that proceed from it on the second level are marked by all the sufferings, anguishes, and culpabilities of what is called neurosis: the curse of Oedipus and the prophecy of Samson. But the third level restores a vegetal innocence within decomposition, assigning to madness its absolving function in a world where the vessels explode or close up again, crimes and sequestrations that constitute "the human comedy" in Proust's manner, through which develops a new and final power that overwhelms all the others, a mad power indeed, that of the Search itself insofar as it unites the policeman and the madman, the spy and the salesman, the interpreter and the claimant.

If Albertine's story and that of Charlus obey the same general law, madness has nonetheless a very different form and function in each case, and is not distributed in the same way. We see three main differences between the Charlus-madness and the Albertine-madness. The first is that Charlus possesses a superior individuation as an imperial individuality. Charlus' problem henceforth concerns communication. The questions "what is Charlus hiding?" and "what are the secret cells his individuality conceals?"

refer to communications that must be discovered, to their aberrancy, so that the Charlus-madness can be manifested, interpreted, and can interpret itself, only by means of violent accidental encounters, in relation to the new milieus in which Charlus is plunged that will act as so many developers, inductors, communicators (encounters with the narrator, encounter with Jupien, encounter with the Verdurins, encounter at the brothel). Albertine's case is different, because her problem concerns individuation itself: which of the girls is she? How to extract and select her from the undifferentiated group of *jeunes filles*? Here, it seems that her communications are initially given, but what is specifically hidden is the mystery of her individuation, and this mystery can be fathomed only insofar as the communications are interrupted, forcefully brought to a halt, Albertine made a captive, immured, sequestered. A second difference proceeds from this one. Charlus is the master of discourse, with him everything happens by means of words, but on the other hand nothing happens in words. Charlus's investments are above all verbal, so that things or objects present themselves as involuntary signs turned against discourse, sometimes making speech go haywire, sometimes forming a counterlanguage that develops in the silence of encounters. Albertine's relation to language, on the contrary, consists of humble lies and not of royal deviance. This is because, in her, investment remains an investment in the thing or the object that will be expressed in language itself, provided it fragments language's deliberate signs and subjects them to the laws of lying that here insert the involuntary: then everything can

happen in language (including silence) precisely because nothing happens by means of language.

There is a third great difference. At the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth, psychiatry established a very interesting distinction between two kinds of sign-deliriums: deliriums of a paranoiac type of interpretation and deliriums of an erotomaniacal or jealous type of demand. The former have an insidious beginning, a gradual development that depends essentially on endogenous forces, spreading in a general network that mobilizes the series of verbal investments. The latter begin much more abruptly and are linked to real or imagined external occasions; they depend on a sort of "postulate" concerning a specific object, and enter into limited constellations; they are not so much a delirium of ideas passing through an extended system of verbal investments as a delirium of action animated by an intensive investment in the object (erotomania, for instance, presents itself as a delirious pursuit of the beloved, rather than as a delirious illusion of being loved). *These second deliriums form a succession of finite linear processes, while the first form radiating circular sets.* We are not saying, of course, that Proust applies to his characters a psychiatric distinction that was being elaborated in his era. But Charlus and Albertine, respectively, trace paths within the Search that correspond to this distinction, in a very specific fashion. We have tried to show this for Charlus, an extreme paranoiac: his first appearances are insidious, the development and precipitation of his delirium testifies to redoubtable endogenous forces, and all his verbal interpre-

tative madness masks the more mysterious signs of the nonlanguage working within him; in short, the enormous Charlus network. But on the other hand, Albertine: herself an object, or in pursuit of objects on her own account; launching postulates with which she is familiar, or else imprisoned by the narrator in a dead-end postulate of which she is the victim (*Albertine necessarily and a priori guilty, to love without being loved, to be harsh, cruel, and deceptive with what one loves*). Erotomaniac and jealous, though it is also and above all the narrator who shows himself to be these things with her. And the series of the two jealousies with regard to Albertine, inseparable in each case from the external occasion, constituting successive processes. And the signs of language and of nonlanguage insert themselves here one within the other, forming the limited constellations of lying. A whole delirium of action and of demand, quite different from Charlus's delirium of ideas and interpretation.

But why must we confuse in one and the same case Albertine and the narrator's behavior with regard to Albertine? Everything tells us, it is true, that the narrator's jealousy concerns an Albertine profoundly jealous with regard to her own "objects." And the narrator's erotomania with regard to Albertine (the delirious pursuit of the beloved with no illusion of being loved) is interrupted by Albertine's own erotomania, long suspected, then confirmed as the secret that provoked the narrator's jealousy. And the narrator's demand, to imprison and immure Albertine, masks Albertine's demands realized too late. It is also true that Charlus's case is analogous: there is no way of distinguishing the labor of Charlus's interpretative delir-

ium from the narrator's long labor of interpretative delirium concerning Charlus. But we ask exactly whence comes the necessity of these partial identifications and what is their function in the Search?

Jealous of Albertine, interpreter of Charlus—what is the narrator, ultimately, in himself? To accept the necessity of distinguishing the narrator and the hero as two subjects (subject of *énonciation* and subject of *énoncé*) would be to refer the Search to a system of subjectivity (a doubled, split subject) that is alien to it. There is less a narrator than a machine of the Search, and less a hero than the arrangements by which the machine functions under one or another configuration, according to one or another articulation, for one or another purpose, for one or another production. It is only in this sense that we can ask what the narrator-hero is, who does not function as a subject. The reader at least is struck by the insistence with which Proust presents the narrator as incapable of seeing, of perceiving, of remembering, of understanding . . . , etc. This is the great opposition to the Goncourt or Sainte-Beuve method. A constant theme of the Search, which culminates in the Verdurins' country house ("I see that you like drafts of fresh air. . . [II, 944]). Actually the narrator has no organs or never has those he needs, those he wants. He notices this himself in the scene of the first kiss he gives Albertine, when he complains that we have no adequate organ to perform such an action that fills our lips, stuffs our nose, and closes our eyes. Indeed the narrator is an enormous Body without organs.

But what is a body without organs? The spider too sees nothing, perceives nothing, remembers nothing. She

receives only the slightest vibration at the edge of her web, which propagates itself in her body as an intensive wave and sends her leaping to the necessary place. Without eyes, without nose, without mouth, she answers only to signs, the merest sign surging through her body and causing her to spring upon her prey. The Search is not constructed like a cathedral or like a gown, but like a web. The spider-Narrator, whose web is the Search being spun, being woven by each thread stirred by one sign or another: the web and the spider, the web and the body are one and the same machine. Though endowed with an extreme sensibility and a prodigious memory, the narrator has no organs insofar as he is deprived of any voluntary and organized use of such faculties. On the other hand, a faculty functions within him when constrained and obliged to do so; and the corresponding organ wakens within him, but as an *intensive outline* roused by the waves that provoke its involuntary use. Involuntary sensibility, involuntary memory, involuntary thought that are, each time, like the intense totalizing reactions of the organless body to signs of one nature or another. It is this body, this spider's web, that opens or seals each of the tiny cells that a sticky thread of the Search happens to touch. Strange plasticity of the narrator: it is this spider-body of the narrator, the spy, the policeman, the jealous lover, the interpreter—the madman—the universal schizophrenic who will send out a thread toward Charlus the paranoiac, another thread toward Albertine the erotomaniac, in order to make them so many marionettes of his own delirium, so many intensive powers of his organless body, so many profiles of his own madness.