From Julia Kristeva's *Time and Sense: Proust and the Experience of Literature,* p. 83-99.

Charlus: All Sex and Beyond Sex

The Sex of Plants and the Bumblebee

When the cold, static metaphor of plant life is used to describe sexuality, it disregards what I consider to be the most interesting element of eroticism: the risk of desiring another person. Yet even though Proust's floral imagery fails to depict sexual motion and emotion, it does make for an elegant, perceptible, and detailed portrait of sexual hermaphroditism.

Proust is not referring here to animal hermaphroditism, which rarely occurs today since it has been almost completely eradicated by nature. Aristophanes gives this phenomenon a comic touch, while Plato's *Symposium* continues to consider it nostalgically. No, the hermaphroditism of plants is both eternal and actual. The comparison Proust makes between plant hermaphroditism and sexuality offers an objective yet implacable commentary on the human condition. Proust is essentially saying that whether we are Medusas, orchids, men, or women, we are all bisexual hermaphrodites: "like the plant which would produce vanilla but, because in its structure the male organ is *separated* by a *partition* from the female, remains *sterile* unless the hummingbirds or certain tiny bees *convey* the pollen from one to the other, or man *fertilizes* them *by artificial means*, M. de Charlus (and here the word fertilize must be understood in a moral sense . . .)."[409] And so forth.

The metaphor he uses is complex, tightly woven, and potentially obscure. Each of the two seemingly unified sexes contains both a male component and a female component. In the manner of the pistil and of pollen, each component has an "imperious need to localize {its} physical pleasure"[410] inside us. The division between men and women is thus mirrored by another division, one that operates within us and forms a partition inside us. "The two sexes shall die, each in a place apart,"[411] yet not before trying to go beyond this double separation by engaging in "conjunctions"[412] that are diverse, daring, and implausible, yet feasible and intrinsically sensual. Thus the primarily male sex could make its female "localization" come into contact not only with another primarily female sex, but with the female "localization" of another primarily male sex. Similarly, it could unite its male localization with the male

localization of another primarily female sex or, of course, with the male localization of another primarily male sex. Since each primarily male or female sex has at least two components, there are at least four players in the game, and the possibilities are endless. In one of those intricate sentences of which he is a master, Proust offers a particularly enticing permutation: "For, in [the inverts'] relations with women, they play, for the woman who loves her own sex, the part of another woman, and she offers them at the same time more or less what they find in other men, so that the jealous friend suffers from the feeling that the man he loves is riveted to the woman who is to him almost a man, and at the same time feels his beloved almost escape him because, to these women, he is something which the lover himself cannot conceive, a sort of woman."[413]

Gilles Deleuze looks at Proust's conception of homosexuality from the perspective of a philosopher who has internalized Freud's revelation. Deleuze distinguishes between an "*aggregate and specific homosexuality*" and a homosexuality that is "*local and non-specific.*" The second type stems from the "coexistence of the two sexes, *part-objects* that do not communicate" and from the "contiguous partitioning of the sexes-as-organs." Taken as a whole, these elements suggest that "transsexuality {is} the ultimate level of the Proustian theory of homosexuality."[414]

From partition to partition, from part-object to part-object, and from contiguity to contiguity that increase the distance and emphasize the lack of communication between these "conjunctions," Proust's notion of gender can only be fully understood only if we consider the *bumblebee.* Charlus the bumblebee seeks Jupien the orchid.

The bumblebee is a motor—drive and thought. It toys with the dual nature of flowers that it secretly knows well; it flies over them and unites them. Plant imagery thus requires the bumblebee, an incongruous, foreign element that empowers plant sexuality. In other words, "fertilization," whether of the moral or genital variety, depends on the bumblebee.

Never has there been a more explicit depiction of the fundamental split that not only *constitutes* eroticism but in some cases *dominates* it to oblivion. Charlus is not satisfied with simply being the bumblebee. He can be the bumblebee only because he is *also* the hermaphrodite plant. In order to learn more about his own placid and very personal partitioning and about the frigidity of his own part-objects, which remain hidden inside him as well as inside those around him, the bumblebee sets out in flight. He plays both roles: the flower *and* the insect, the

bisexual localization *and* the uniting force, the inexpressible coldness of our feminine or masculine "localizations" *and* the maddening buzzing sound that seeks to undo all dualisms.

Charlus is at once the transsexual sex-plant and the sex-plant that he will never be. He is its agent or catalyst, but because of his irrelevance, he is also its "madman," its "spy," or its "crook,"[415] ready to betray the sex-plant in order to seek sex all around him. Charlus sexualizes *his own name* (so steeped is he in the aristocratic way of life that he inflicts "feudal tortures"[416] upon himself by means of sophisticated chains), *books* (he speaks like La Bruyère, Mme de Sévigné, Saint-Simon, or at least Bergotte in order to seduce others more efficiently or after he has already seduced them). He also sexualizes *bodies* (a soldier, an Odette, a dress of Albertine's), and especially *details* (the minute details of an article of clothing, a piece of music, relationships, and nations—as when his desire to find an executioner makes him into a Germanophile). . . . Yet perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he *sensualizes* these objects.

Sensuality comes to replace his sexual identity. Beyond Charlus's polymorphism and his part-objects, beyond the sexual thrill he gets from a military uniform, a violin, a crude utterance, or a lovely dress, all of his being delights in Being. For him, the entire universe breaks down into pieces much smaller than part-objects. These fragments enable him to experience gradations of pleasure, distinct, exquisite perceptions, and convulsive bursts of ecstasy. From ravishment to pain, sensuality is unbearably intense, for it is a permanent vibration of the entire body. It is a vibration not only of our sex organs, but of all our organs, regardless of their morphology, a vibration that ceases only when one becomes mindlessly passive or appeased by kindness. This extreme form of sensitivity sets the process of signification into motion. When a sensitive person is as sophisticated as Charlus, he becomes a paragon of wit and irony. Everything gives him pleasure, yet everything is subject to his derisive attacks. His sensual virulence seems boundless, and his laughter is transformed into a grimace. By dint of being so incommensurable, the sensual being ultimately brings about disdain. Since Proust himself was quite vigilant, he perceived this impending threat and tried to counteract it with the discipline of his work, where the absurd qualities of the sensory world fade into the vices of his characters. In the end, the narrator is merely a stylist.

Our sexual identity includes sexual ambiguity as well as polymorphism and its part-objects, which we try to make into a unity. Questions

of identity (am I a man or a woman?) are subsumed by means of a preferential common denominator (*even so*, I am a man [or] a woman). Just as syntax is the ultimate guarantor of psychic identity, sexual identity guarantees our psychic unity. Even so, psychic unity is always threatened from within. When someone brings his sexual identity into play, he is not simply acting as a pansexual or as a transsexual; he is also undermining his *psychic* identity. Some people tackle this problem by relying on a conventional linguistic style, assuming that scrupulous attention to syntax can compensate for sexual deviance. On the other hand, sexual atomization is sometimes accompanied by a perturbation of syntax, of the final guarantee of logical identity. We discover this second alternative in the "madness" that threatens Charlus. As for Proust, he takes up an impossible challenge by inscribing deviant identities in a syntax that is both strained and grammatical, unorthodox and orderly.[417]

Charlus continues to waver between the intensity of his perceptions and the hyperbole of his defenses.

We first encounter a Charlus who is remarkably responsive to every perception that reaches his sensory detectors and yet who seems stiff and completely indifferent. His gray hair, his monocle, and the red flowers in his buttonhole form "the three mobile apexes of a convulsive and striking triangle." With his knee slid under the "sumptuous, pansy-colored cloak" of Mme Swann and with his "roving eyes like that of a street hawker," he had "certainly explored every corner of the room and taken note of all the people who were in it." His sensory acuity is masked by a vapid, meaningless smile. His smile "preceded" the guests' arrival and was "devoid of any amiable implication toward them." Beneath this smile, the baron inundates space and floods the narrator.[418]

We then see Charlus at the Doncières train station. Is he aroused because of Morel, or is his entire flesh being pulled apart by all the folds in space, as excited by the young soldier's presence as by the baron's autoeroticism? Charlus waddles over alone, displaying a swaying paunch and an "almost symbolic behind." He is magnetized, and he need only see the "lyres embroidered on {Morel's} collar" before he accosts the narrator and pretends he has just seen a relative on the other side of the train track. He wants Marcel to take him there immediately without even saying hello to his friend, and he offers him five hundred francs, supposedly for one of his friends, because he suddenly hungers to go to a concert that evening. Charlus is no longer thinking about taking the train. The time has come for him to offer a generous twenty francs to an employee of the railway, to fork over forty cents to the

flower seller, and to lose himself in ecstasy when he is faced with a "brutal" motion, a "graceful" hand, a remnant of "young David" in Morel that already proves "capable of challenging Goliath."[419] All this sensory information serves to disorient the baron. All sex and beyond sex, the bumblebee fidgets.

For the baron, what seems to be pansexuality is actually a suspension of sexuality in favor of delirium or indifference. By focusing our drives and desires on a fetish, on an organ, or on a person, sexuality limits our potential for madness—restrains it, naturalizes it, sometimes makes it commonplace, and most often internalizes it. This is certainly not true for Charlus, however. At once a space (a bisexual plant) and a force (an ephemeral insect) and pulled between two incongruous and asymmetrical states, Charlus reveals the latent psychosis of homosexuality. And since homosexuality transverses Proust's entire work, the baron depicts the potential for madness inherent in *all forms of sexuality*.

Of course, the homosexual is a product of his peers' rejection, and his guilt would not exist were it not for the ostracism and blacklisting that result from his being subject to the social contract. Proust does not fail to stress the degree to which homosexuality is a social artifact. He also compares the homosexual to the Jew, both of whom are victims of an intolerance that has become acceptable. To this protestation, the narrator adds a riveting portrayal of the psychotic potential of universal transsexuality. We are all hermaphrodite plants *as well as* bumblebees, but some of us carry this duality so far that it makes us mad, as with Palamède de Guermantes, the baron de Charlus, the prince de Carency, the prince des Dunes, the damoiseau de Montargis, the prince d'Agrigente, and so forth. Mme de Guermantes does not hesitate to pronounce the word "madness" when speaking of Charlus. The narrator is so intimately familiar with this madness that he has dreams about it: "Now I had been dreaming that M. de Charlus was a hundred and ten years old, and had just boxed the ears of his own mother, Mme de Verdurin, because she had paid five billion francs for a bunch of violets."[420] Could anyone be more delirious? According to Freud, a character in a dream always includes some part of the dreamer. So what can we say about Charlus, who assaults his mother? The narrator laughs and cries.

The baron clearly displays some bizarre "symptoms." First, his eyes: "dilated with extreme attentiveness," darting a "glance . . . at once bold, prudent, rapid and profound" and of "an exaggeration so aggressive."[421] He has eyes "like two crevices, two loopholes which alone he had failed to stop."[422] His eyes exhibit the dissolute behavior of an imprisoned

bumblebee, if not that of a "hidden weapon . . . in a state of precarious equilibrium and always on the verge of explosion."[423] This unstable man usually finds an appropriate role to adopt—witness his "conversational verve."[424] Yet at times a display of crude and hurtful verbal incontinence will suddenly reveal his malfunctioning "machine." To conceal his penchant for effeminate young men, the baron feigns an impassioned hatred expressed in hotheaded terms. He speaks of "young scum"[425] while directing a crude burst of laughter toward the narrator, whose attachment to his grandmother he has just praised: "But he doesn't care a fig for his old grandmother, does he, eh? Little rascal!"[426] Charlus's incongruous gestures are similarly incoherent. Mme de Surgis and the narrator, who are hardly puritanical, are quick to see his behavior as a defect or a disorder. Indeed, what is he doing when he pinches the Surgis sons' chins![427] People draw away from him as if faced with an "attack of madness";[428] they think of Landru. . . .

These shocking displays are accompanied by grotesque signs. Whether he is "Teaser Augustus,"[429] as Oriane calls him, pretentious, or excessively mannered, Mémé the Clown displays all the signs of a disturbing strangeness. Palamède is exceptionally feminine, which is reflected not only in his "delicate literary sensibilities,"[430] but in his obsessive desire to be in the company of women. "Scornful of men," he always seats himself near women, his favorite being Odette.[431] A link between Charlus and Odette (described in Notebooks 6 and 7 of *Contre Sainte-Beuve*)[432] is suggested when the narrator describes a certain M. de Guercy, who seems to be an early version of Charlus and who curiously recalls the name of Odette's first husband (she was Odette de Crécy before becoming Mme Swann). In the final version of *In Search of Lost Time*, moreover, Charlus flaunts himself with her in public. "All Combray knows," and he is believed to be her lover[433] although he lets them down in the end. The underground and extremely "crude" bond between Charlus and Odette tightens after the reader learns that this "tart," as Robert de Saint-Loup calls her, is a first cousin to Jupien, who is linked of course to Charlus. What is more, Morel's father was the manservant of the narrator's uncle, who enjoyed receiving the "lady in pink." He had a portrait of her (under the name of Miss Sacripant) that was painted by Elstir.[434] Indeed, it is the same portrait of which Swann had a photograph, the picture of Odette he preferred to all others, as well as, of course, to Odette herself. . . . The clan of the marginalized may be clearly perceived beneath the mask of aristocratic or bourgeois worldliness. Proust painted an "underground" before the term even

existed, an underground that branches out and attains a unity through the complicity of transsexuals.

Mémé's voice contains an "alternating duet between a young man and a woman," a "bevy of young girls" and the "shrill, fresh laughter of school-girls or coquettes."[435] Pulled between two extremes, this voice is able to "scream" and to "roar,"[436] and it can also do a perfect imitation of Swann's (his alter ego's) accent.[437] Aware of his femininity, Charlus either hides it or displays it to excess. As soon as people notice the colored border of his handkerchief, he rushes to hide it as would "a prudish but far from innocent lady,"[438] a denial that indicates even more clearly the femininity he thought he had left behind. Yet he is only fooling himself: when he speaks to the narrator, he employs strident vocal accents and "raises his voice to the highest register." He also displays an effeminate charm when he speaks to Mme Verdurin: "No, I preferred its neighbor, the strawberry-juice."[439]

Combining a male ideal and a female temperament, Palamède is a composite creature, a "centaur." In the person of M. de Charlus, "another creature was coupled" with his body; the baron undergoes a perpetual "transformation." "M. de Charlus looked like a woman: he was one!"[440] He resembles those members of the "accursed race" in whom women are "*hideously visible*, convulsed as they are by a *hysterical spasm*, by a shrill laugh which sets their knees and hands trembling . . . those *apes with melancholy ringed eyes* and prehensile feet."[441] Lacking internal unity and "*ladylike*" in manner,[442] Charlus guards "the spirit of a relative of the female sex, attendant like a goddess, or incarnate as a double."[443] "One might have thought that it was Mme de Marsantes who was entering the room, so salient at that moment was the woman whom a mistake on the part of Nature had enshrined in the body of M. de Charlus."[444] Nourished by this irrepressible split, which is reflected in a femininity that is hysterical because it is not unified with the masculinity that dominates the man, Charlus's derangement takes on an animal quality. The insect is transformed into a prehistoric beast, an ape, a deadly melancholia.

Nevertheless, this strangely disturbing man, whose movements and voice stage a solitary scene of sexual intercourse, is capable of both jubilation and humiliation. He knows how to partition himself and how to mock himself for it. No one is more generous than Charlus toward Julien or Morel, although his generosity stems from an indifference that takes on the grace of impartiality. Blind to the baron's perversity,

siders offering her daughter to Charlus. Since he treats Jupien and his niece so benevolently, Charlus would most likely do her no harm: "There's another of them that would make a woman happy."[445] That would probably be true, at least some of the time.

Paranoia or Melancholia? An "irresistible sadism"

Transsexuality reaches its heights when it goes beyond sex, and the transsexual who is beyond sex fears only one thing: the end of sexual pleasure, as manifested in impotence. To preserve the privilege of sexual pleasure, he must come up with new and artificial dualities, conflicts, desires, and terrors. Delusions of persecution and the temptation of killing threaten the innocence of the flighty bumblebee or the melancholic ape.

The narrator comes to know Charlus after he falls victim to the baron's hypersensitivity, which borders on paranoia. Charlus, who is attracted to the young man, invites him to the marquise de Villeparisis's home and then pretends he does not know him throughout the entire evening. At the end of the night, he offers him his "middle finger and ring finger," "hiding his little finger, index finger, and thumb" and concealing his ring beneath a Swedish glove, before he speaks to him in a patronizing tone,[446] offers him one of Bergotte's books, and then snatches it away. The aristocrat accuses the narrator of "calumnious fabrications,"[447] raises his voice, and expresses his horror that the young man would dare think himself "connected" with the baron, since he is "of a good bourgeois family." Charlus threatens to break off relations with him: "I shall not retain your name," "do you suppose that it is within your power to offend me?"[448] Faced with the baron's psychotic fit, the narrator displays his fine-tuned intuition when he tramples the baron's tall hat on the ground: if you wish to play down someone's insanity, nothing can be better than to stage a mirror image of his madness. The baron calms down a bit and then, in a "melancholic" tone, says, "I no longer love you."[449] He finally does what he should have done all along!

When a partner participates in sadistic games or even intensifies them, the insanity is only heightened by the amorous relationship. Morel, for instance, wants to rape a young virgin in order to abandon her to her fate. He thus provides the baron with an irresistible source of sexual excitement,[450] especially since Morel targets Jupien's daughter (or perhaps it is his niece, since Proust interchanges the two of them at

whim). For Charlus, whose motor operates at two distinct speeds, sexual excitation is followed by courteousness, brutality by appeasement. The bumblebee is indeed binary: "From that moment his sensual appetites were satisfied for a time and the *sadist* (a true medium, he) who had for a few moments taken the place of M. de Charlus had fled, handing over to the real M. de Charlus, full of artistic *refinement*, sensibility and *kindness*."[451]

Once the partner's bisexuality becomes apparent, the transformation from a "sadist" to "the real one" occurs less easily, if at all. Charlus, who is caught in "conjunctions" with four partitioned parts, each more obscene than the next, winds up being literally beside himself. Léa speaks to Morel as if he were a woman and writes him crude letters in which the expression "to be one of them" ambiguously connotes a man who would be a lesbian.[452] Suddenly, the baron's jealousy is not only incited by men. It extends to women, or, rather, to she-men who are he-women. The situation could not be more confusing, combining mental confusion and excitement caused by "this double mystery where there was both an increase in jealousy and *the sudden lack of definition*."[453]

Jealousy is an endless interpretation of the part-objects that dominate the other person's life,[454] but because the jealous person identifies with these objects, it primarily destroys his ego. Jealousy leads to a breaking-up of subjective identity because it is "insufficiently defined." Jealousy, then, entails the inadequacy of judgment and the irretrievable deletion of an element from a grammatical series.[455] In other words, it entails a waning of pleasure.

In this structure, letting oneself be beaten to death and, inversely, premeditating someone else's death are merely the actings-out linking the failure of discourse to the insect's buzzing drive or the ape's disorderly incitement. The dilettantism displayed by Charlus, who does nothing, does not write, does not paint, "{does} not even read anything in a serious and thorough manner," who was satisfied simply to "bring out the deceptive charm of society people and to play the role of reindeer who 'pluck . . . lichens and mosses . . . for Eskimos,"[456] and, as Proust says more than once, "never {writes} anything," implies that his insanity was acted out. Even so, these two dramas may be the most outlandish scenes in Proust's novel. Indeed, there are two occasions in which Charlus experiences the failure of a discourse destroyed by acting out.

First, he frightens Morel by threatening to kill him, which he confesses in the letter he writes to the narrator. Written at least ten years before Charlus's death, the confession is given to the narrator seven years

afterward,[457] which serves to heighten the secrecy and likelihood of the alleged premeditation. Knowing how disloyal Morel can be, the reader is surprised to learn that Morel told the narrator that he "was afraid" of the baron.[458] Charlus's letter, which had arrived unexpectedly and had been placed in a safe for many years, confirms the existence of his murderous intention. "*Inculcabis super leonem et aspidem*": the baron's "heraldic supporters" weave a bizarre set of associations between lion and serpent, as if he were trying to emphasize a genetic difference, an indelible heteronym, and a split in his character. As musical as he is perfidious, the reptilian manages to conquer "the lion proper that I am." Yet the happy ending is a matter of pure chance: "I had decided to kill him. God counseled him prudence to preserve me from crime."[459] The prudence of a serpent? Is Morel as much of a reptile as Charlus? All the guilty lover did was miss a meeting!

Palamède's violence is abrupt and extreme; it is an animalistic, lion-like passion. It suspends the subtleties of vice and hunts down death, the absolute. He need only rely on the Archangel Michael, his "patron saint" who was a defender of Israel (once again, Proust links the fate of the homosexual with that of the Jew) and who for Christians is a brave knight who slaughters a dragon before weighing souls. Is the punishment embodied in Michael, a supreme judge and a paragon of goodness fighting evil, the vice that the baron finds to be the most desirable? Is it his perversion {*père-version*}?

Morel is another story. Jealous and duplicitous, he will try to "have his revenge," but at the wrong time and for the wrong reasons: he believes that Charlus is the one who had him arrested for being a deserter. He exposes Charlus's vices and even has him arrested in return.[460] The two of them depict the seesaw movement of a sado-masochistic couple, the eternal interchangeability of master and slave.

In the flagellation scene, which represents the baron's second failure in discourse, the addiction to crime and punishment is inscribed in the *body*, an addiction that we also find in Charlus's *moral* sadomasochism. The bumblebee no longer takes pleasure in the conjunction of the partitioned sexes, although he would probably not scoff at its erotic potential. Indeed, if we think of Morel and Léa, we marvel at their accumulated differences and muddled extravagances! Yet this carnival seems overdone. He would be better off as a total reptile submitting to the lion-gripped whipping of another reptile and to the pain he deserves.

Charlus, who is less governed by his superego than is the narrator, does not seem to punish himself for his shameful vice. What is more, his

martyrdom does not stem from conscious guilt. The fantasy of punishment, which is already suggested by the sainthood of the Archangel Michael, the exterminator of evil, is not unfamiliar to Charlus. Even so, Charlus's jouissance is a matter of "pagan genealogy,"[461] closer to the Mysteries of Pompeii than to the Last Judgment.

The scene with Jupien shows the violent and abject side of the baron's sadistic eroticism: "I concluded from this later on that there is another thing as vociferous as pain, namely pleasure, especially when there is added to it . . . an immediate concern about cleanliness."[462] Does Charlus's unsatisfied and impossible desire for young Adonises like Morel push him beyond desire? In any case, the bumblebee leaves behind the flower with its conjunctions in order to seek a desireless jouissance. Thus the pure, convulsive spasm of the flower becomes a monstrous bumblebee. This makes us think of the frantic buzzing of the innocent corolla, which could have been a sex but is no longer because the insect went inside and destroyed it. It is a self-consuming desire, consuming the skin, the flesh—"Love drives us not only to the greatest sacrifices on behalf of the person we love, but sometimes even to the *sacrifice of our desire itself.*"[463] Charlus is a sadist as much as a masochist. He kills Morel inside his own lacerated body, incorporating the one he can no longer possess or desire. And then, to highlight his implicit shift from victim to executioner, he speaks to the gigolos in their own language "because he got a sadistic pleasure from contact with a life of depravity."[464]

Finally, his sex is dislocated. It is everywhere and nowhere. By acting out his sadomasochism, Charlus escapes from the partitioning of plant sexuality that the narrator believes to be the secret of human sexuality. He achieves a piecemeal totality: those angelic ways, that basic goodness that gives perverts an air of innocence and eternity, an air of "living forever." "For a man given to sadistic pleasures may believe that he is talking to a murderer but this will not alter his own purity of heart."[465] He sublimates his sexual and mental confusion while sanctifying idiocy. This becomes even clearer in Charlus's twin, the prince d'Agrigente, a "hoary clown," a "General Dourakine in his second childhood."[466]

This suspension of desire in the name of a jouissance that is fundamentally autoerotic (sadistic or masochistic), a jouissance in which the object doesn't matter and the "motor," "bumblebee," or "ape" explodes or causes itself to explode, is accompanied by melancholia. Although Albertine is the one who commits suicide, the narrator describes Charlus as "melancholic" on more than one occasion. Palamède's final

downfall is described as a "mental depression."[467] When Proust uses this term, he is referring to a nineteenth-century psychiatric conception of senility rather than to a true case of depression or melancholy ("wandering," "he used to proclaim aloud").[468] The baron's stroke confirms this interpretation of neurological or symbolic disrepair as opposed to clinical depression. Even so, the suspension of desire, which is the defining feature of depression, often appears through the manic extravagances of "Teaser Augustus." Proust calls this "melancholia."

Represent and Judge: Homosexual Diversities

As Proust goes from "The race of men-women" to *Sodom and Gomorrah* to the final volumes of *In Search of Lost Time*, his theory of homosexuality becomes more cohesive and complex. It is continually refined as his work develops, although it becomes blurred by the characters of his novel. Were we to attempt to outline Proust's theory of homosexuality, however, we would uncover two basic systems of classification.

A first typology, which is organized according to the object of homosexual desire, distinguishes among *monovalent* homosexuals ("provided that they can associate {their pleasure} with a masculine face"), the *ambivalent* or *fetishist* homosexuals "who feel an imperious need to localize their physical pleasure" and for whom "women are not entirely excluded," *transvestites*, who "go out of their way to choose clothes that resemble women's dresses," and *solitary* types.[469]

The solitary type is treated to a long development that considers the vice as "exceptional" or as a "different type of colony," like that of the Jews. Solitaries dislike education and domestication, are extremely immature, and are "plunged in a constant melancholy" because they are always in search of "a pleasure too singular, too hard to place," and of "the confrère with whom our specialist could converse in the strange tongue."[470] In the beginning of *Sodom and Gomorrah*, the solitary's singular quality, which makes him an exceptional being and an artist who closely resembles the narrator, is associated with the baron de Charlus. Charlus also displays characteristics of the other forms of homosexuality according to the needs of the plot and the fluctuations of his moods. At one point, he plays the virile monovalent who castigates young effeminate gigolos, and at another, he shows his bisexual side by laying bare the hysterical woman within him. He never engages in transvestitism, yet he enjoys the many vicissitudes of liaisons between men-women and women-men.

Still, it may be more accurate simply to call him a solitary. When Charlus prepares to kill Morel or has himself beaten, and of course when Mme Verdurin, at the end of *Time Regained*, even denies that he belong to the French community (" 'What is his nationality exactly, isn't he an Austrian?' . . . 'No, he is Prussian,' the Mistress would say' "[471]), he is almost a caricature of a "solitary being" in his sexual and political essence. Let's listen to his own words: "Mutual love, apart from the difficulties, so great as to be almost insurmountable, which it encounters in the ordinary run of mortals, entails others so exceptional that what is always extremely rare for everyone becomes in their case well-nigh impossible, and, if they should chance to have an encounter which is really fortunate, or which nature makes appear so to them, their happiness is somehow far more extraordinary, selective, profoundly necessary than that of the normal lover."[472] Who is this "select" being who subsists on a happiness that is as intense as it is rare? We are inclined to believe it is the narrator. Yet it is Charlus, thanks to his invasive eroticism that can never be satisfied, an eroticism that remains isolated, beyond sex, and at the very heart of transsexuality. If he had been less of a dilettante, he would have been Proust. In the meantime, despite everything, "the world of poets and musicians, so firmly barred against the Duc de Guermantes, opens its portals to M. de Charlus."[473]

Proust also classifies the inhabitants of Sodom according to moral and historical criteria. The age of ephebes, when homosexuality was "conventional" (a tradition ranging from Plato to Virgil's shepherds), is long past. Charlus, who is enamored of Morel's "neo-Hellenic grace," is far from ready to repudiate this "pagan genealogy."[474] He never stops singing the violinist's praises, staging a drama worthy of Plato's *erastes* and *eromenos*, as represented by the sadomasochistic scene between the coachman and his horses.[475]

The narrator subscribes to a different theory of homosexuality. His conception is ahistorical ("it does not abide by temporal modes") and oriented toward guilt ("race upon which a curse is laid . . . because it knows that its desire is held to be *punishable, shameful*, an inadmissible thing . . . which must *deny its God . . . even Christians . . . sons without a mother*, to whom they are obliged to lie all her life long and even in the hour when they close her dying eyes").[476] "It is homosexuality that survives in spite of obstacles, shameful, and execrated, that is the only true form, the only form that corresponds in one and the same person to an intensification of the intellectual qualities."[477] The God of the Bible allowed the inhabitants of Sodom to escape and to disperse themselves all over the earth. Later, Jewish mysticism emphasized the feminine part of a person.[478] Even so, this second version of homosexuality, which is founded on guilt and is therefore "true," stems from the severity of biblical law. As a moralist, Proust defends this notion against Charlus's shameless paganism. The narrator, who creates characters as well as theories, vacillates between the two moral codes: Charlus's and the theoretician's, the Greek code and the Jewish code. By combining the two codes with the four types of behavior he so poignantly described,[479] the narrator has access to at least six (if we add two and four), if not eight (if we multiply), pieces for a new kaleidoscope, a kaleidoscope of a generalized transsexuality that is both innocent and stigmatized. Innocence must precede representation, just as intransigence (at least temporarily) must precede meaning and judgment.

Certain critics, including some who admire the writer a great deal, take their cue from the narrator's parents, who accuse him of lacking willpower, and find that Proust lacks a moral sense[480] or even that he is "spineless."[481] Even so, the Judeo-Greek notion of an inevitable surrender of principles is always at work in Proust's writings. Proust was way ahead of the modern writers destroyed by the First World War, for he knew that one cannot write without acting in collusion with evil—seeing it as it is, but from the inside.

Montesquiou or Krafft-Ebing

M. de Guercy resembles the baron Doazan. While exorcising Proust's own sadomasochistic tendencies, the flagellation scene makes us think of the tastes of Jean Lorrain, with whom Proust had a duel in 1897. Furthermore, both the fin de siècle European scandal of Oscar Wilde and the extravagant ways of Count Aimery de La Rochefoucauld are outlined in the baron's shadow. Still, everyone agrees that Count Robert de Montesquiou is the model for Charlus. A good deal of biographical information supports this hypothesis. First, there is Montesquiou's pronounced affectation and his escapades with Yturri (which recall those of Charlus and Morel, as well as those of Proust himself when he considers having Agostinelli followed). Then there are Proust's "frustrated feelings"[482] about Montesquiou, whom he constantly compliments not only as an aristocrat and a dandy, but also as a writer. Finally, there are the precautions Proust took when he discovered that everyone believed this decadent count lay behind the character of Charlus—something Proust denied, admitted, and denied once again, defensively asking

Montesquiou to contribute to the *Opinion* in the *Revue de la semaine*. I shall offer two other reasons that point to the connection between the count and the baron.

Like Montesquiou, Charlus greatly admires Balzac, flowers (recall the orchid-metonymy in the erotic scene between Charlus and Jupien),[483] and women's clothing. When he comments on Albertine's dress during the evening at the Verdurins', he refers to Balzac: " 'About Balzac,' the Baron hastily replied, 'and you are wearing this evening the very same costume as the Princesse de Cadignan, not the first, which she wears at the dinner-party, but the second.' " And then he admires her skirt of gray crêpe de chine as well as her jacket of gray cheviot with its "sleeves . . . of a Scottish plaid in soft colors, pink, pale blue, dull green, pigeon's breast."[484] In the narrator's hands and in Charlus's mouth, both Balzac and Mme de Cadignan's grayness take on the allure of an affected, Parnassian, or decadent sophistication worthy of a Montesquiou and filtered through Proust's literary tastes.

As if responding to those readers who too quickly perceive a similarity between Charlus and Montesquiou because of their common interest in Balzac, the narrator readily admits there is a resemblance, although he distances and protects himself from it. Thus, one of Mme de Surgis's sons knows Balzac's name and knows that his first name of Victurnien comes from one of Balzac's novels. He elicits the following remarks from Charlus: "Now, here is the first person I've come across in our world who has ever heard of Victurnien d'Esgrignon. No, I'm wrong in saying the first. There is also a Polignac and a Montesquiou."[485]

In reality, affectation and a basically Greek vice are the only things that link Charlus with Montesquiou, whom Proust flattered in deadpan fashion. The baron's complex sexuality bears only a slight resemblance to that of the antiquated dandy, but it is reinforced by real brutalities (Lorrain?) or imaginary one (Proust's fantasies and voyeuristic experiences?) brutalities and by the sweetness of a displaced detachment, a pulverized sensuality.

Today's reader will thus have trouble understanding why Gide said in his *Journal* that he was disappointed that Proust "camouflaged" or "dissimulated" his homosexuality. Proust wanted to please the famous writer of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, so he stated that "beauty has little to do with desire," that he did not find Jupien and Charlus to be so "repugnant," and that young men lend themselves to transposition as in Gide, but that Charlus, a mature adult, could not be made to "look like

a Sicilian shepherd boy."[486] Many homosexuals were distressed by the image of homosexuality presented by Charlus and the narrator, for Proust explored not only the homosexual identity, but a dynamic underlying everyone's sexuality and including sexless, criminal, and untenable sensual makeups. It seems that Proust gleaned this notion from Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia sexualis* as much as from his own introspection. We therefore understand the rueful irony of the remark Proust made to Paul Morand about the famous psychiatrist: "It seems that even vice has now become one of the exact sciences."[487] It is awful, but Proust's science is a pure science of vice. To which he adds a touch of beauty.

Individual-Nation, Body France, and Actor-France

Charlus is not only a sexual hermaphrodite but a national hermaphrodite. Since he cannot be of a single sex, he cannot be of a single nation. Since he belongs no more to the "body France" than to the "body Germany," the state of the "individual-nation" does not suit him, perhaps because his mother is the duchess of Bavaria, although we may wonder if this in itself warrants his dual position. Proust enjoys breaking the nation down after having transsexualized sex. He acknowledges a personal attachment not to the "body France" but to the "actor-France." The nuance is important. The narrator says that he cannot arrive at "detachment," whereas M. Charlus's detachment is "complex." Even so, the narrator, who contrasts himself with Charlus on this matter, attributes to the baron the sort of reasoning he himself adopted during the Dreyfus case. You must leave your passions behind if you wish to be logical in politics and avoid the absurdity of dogmatically partisan views. "The logic of passion, even if it happens to be in the service of the best possible cause, is never irrefutable for the man who is not himself passionate. Inevitably M. de Charlus with his critical intelligence seized on every weak point in the reasoning of the patriots. And then the complacency that an imbecile derives from the excellence of his cause, and the certainty of victory, are particularly irritating phenomena."[488] Neither one sex, nor one national identity, nor the success of a liaison or a patriotic view can satisfy the polymorphous individual, the "scattered array of atoms"[489] that Charlus incarnates by being at the apogee of sexual unselfconsciousness.

Yet after the narrator shows his fascination with, if not approval of, Charlus's political beliefs, he returns to his need to take a side. If you are an artist, you are either Manet or Delacroix: they are not "the same

thing." The sharp blade of the law falls once again, a law that is essentially aesthetic.

And what about the patriotic law? The moralist law? The sexist law? No one evades the curse because no one eludes the law. Charlus protects himself from his own political and sexual indifference by cultivating short-lived yet violent bursts of hatred concerning the War. His outbursts allow him to counterbalance his "merciful nature" with a new sensual pleasure, one that is "fired with passion for seductive evil and helping to crush virtuous ugliness."[490] He rediscovers his sexual-political passion for torture, which has a "Dostoevskian" side and seems to be incompatible with the "universal enthusiasm" dear to a Norpois.[491]

Between the universal and the sordid, and all the while showing his sympathy for Charlus's "detachment," Proust chooses passion. He favors a differential, disciplined passion, the passion of a Manet or a Delacroix. The narrator, who is neither Brichot the patriot nor Charlus the polymorph, seeks a third approach, an approach inspired by paintings, cathedrals, and Venice.

A Stumbling Block: Venice's Sensual Qualities

When a human being engraves language with traces of his sensual memory, he creates a literary character, a story etched in the space of language: Swann, Oriane, Albertine, Charlus, Mme Verdurin, Bloch, and the others.

When the name of a place—a locale, a landscape, or a city—imprints the narrator's involuntary memory with its sensual history, it takes on the real presence of a human being. Venice functions in this way: "*Venice would awaken the desire* for sunshine, for lilies, for the Palace of the Doges and for Santa Maria del Fiore . . . certain places on the surface of the globe. . . . How much more individual still was the character they assumed from being designated by names . . . such as *people* have."[492]

In the maze of *In Search of Lost Time*, Venice enjoys a double distinction. Like the Saint-Hilaire Church in Combray and the Martinville and Hudimesnil steeples, Venice is the result and apotheosis of the exaltation of Christian art that mobilized the young Proust. What is more, Venice serves as the privileged model of Proust's aesthetic until the final lines of *Time Regained*.[493] In the polymorphous dynamic of the novel and as if to correspond to the very fate of this city that has risen and fallen throughout European history (while never ceasing to founder in