


Fall 2022

The Blue Girandole & The Grand Hotel: Reconsiderations of Sodom and Gomorrah in Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*

Emma West Alcorn
Bard College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_f2022

 Part of the [French and Francophone Literature Commons](#), and the [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Alcorn, Emma West, "The Blue Girandole & The Grand Hotel: Reconsiderations of Sodom and Gomorrah in Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*" (2022). *Senior Projects Fall 2022*. 14.

https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_f2022/14

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects at Bard Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Projects Fall 2022 by an authorized administrator of Bard Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@bard.edu.

The Blue Girandole & The Grand Hotel:
Reconsiderations of Sodom and Gomorrah
In Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

By

Emma West Alcorn

Annandale-On-Hudson, NY

December, 2022



Acknowledgements

To my beloved advisor, Odile Chilton, who I have come to call ‘Sainte Odile’ for the abundance of patience, encouragement, and loving sternness that she has bestowed on me during this past year—I thank you for enduring with me right until the very end of this process. I cannot imagine how you were able to make sense of my incoherent babblings and inability to settle on a subject, but I am eternally grateful for it, and you.

To my professor of many years, Éric Trudel, who initiated my love of Proust during my second year at Bard: I feel grateful to have started and ended my journey through Proust’s *Recherche* with your shrewd attention and insights. And to Marina Van Zuylen, without whom this paper could never have come into being: I learned, in your class, that I was capable of having worthy ideas.

To my family, who have heard about this project in all of its iterations: thank you for being the most incredible support network that a person could have. To Ben, Kripa, Lucy, Grandma Jenny, Grandpa David, Uncle Mike, Aunt Lily, Maggie, and especially *to Paul*. You all have been such a source of love and light. To mom, who spent hours on the phone with me as I wrote this project, silently supporting me while I typed and worked through difficult concepts: I hope to never torture you as much as I have over this past year. I love you. Dad, thank you for being my friend, and for transferring your curiosity and wonderful hyperactivity to me, without which I never would have been able to sustain all of countless hours of research.

Thank you to all of the professors who have stayed after class to talk with me about this or that: Gabriella Lindsay, Greg Moynahan, Marina Kostalevsky, Daniella Dooling, and countless others.

Finally, to Tatiana, Christa, my dear Lap Yin, Isabela, Topher, Zahra—I am so glad to have met you. All of you heard me ramble about this, and have reminded me time and time again that the end was in sight.



List of abbreviations

SW: *Swann's Way*

GW: *The Guermantes Way*

BG: *Within a Budding Grove*

SG: *Sodom and Gomorrah*

C: *The Captive*

F: *The Fugitive*

TR: *Time Regained*



Table of Contents

Preface	<u>5</u>
Introduction: Framing Inversion and Its Precepts.	<u>7</u>
I. Uncovering the Invisible ‘Band of Sodomites’.....	<u>13</u>
II. The Solitary	<u>21</u>
III. Situating the “Invert-Vice”.....	<u>25</u>
IV. The First Gomorrhans	<u>34</u>
V. Sign, Meaning, & Essence	<u>42</u>
VI. The Convert	<u>48</u>
VII. A Quasi-Conclusion	<u>54</u>
Bibliography.....	<u>57</u>



The Blue Girandole & The Grand Hotel:
Reconsiderations of Sodom and Gomorrah in
À la recherche du temps perdu



Preface

The importance of lexology must be acknowledged at the outset of this paper. In engaging with theories of love and desire in Marcel Proust's opus, I found myself bound by the conventions of the early twentieth century in my own writing. The labels of 'female' and 'male,' in view of the increasingly diversified nature of gender expression, have become rather antiquated terms. 'Homosexuality,' too, is steeped in clinical misgivings about desire and attraction, having been used historically to describe one's orientation not only as a moral failing, but as a psychological disorder. That the term homosexuality contains 'sex' is another relevant point of contention—ideas around homosexuality, as will be continually addressed in this paper, have frequently been attached to (and sometimes even compounded with) notions of one's gender identity. The latter half of the term implies, moreover, that one must be sexually attracted to those of the same gender in order to be considered as such. The reality of asexuality as a legitimate identity is ignored in the usage of this term. It was for these reasons, however, that I eventually concluded that I must employ the terms 'inversion' and 'homosexuality' as the primary descriptors in relation to Marcel Proust's work. The terms themselves, reflecting the most pertinent models of queerness available to the author at the moment of his writing, cannot be excoriated from his work. Indeed, Proust's etiology of love is irrevocably linked to the precepts of inversion itself. With an eye towards inversion, we may unlock elements of Proust's work previously concealed from us.



*When considering the implications of employing certain terms over others, I labored over the possibilities before me: in using the vocabulary of the twenty-first century to interpret the premises of a twentieth century author, would I not be performing a kind of anachronism? In opting to limit myself to Proust's own vocabulary, would it be tantamount to participating in or perpetuating certain misgivings about romantic and sexual desire? Confronted with these difficulties, I looked to several Proust scholars for some kind of direction. I first encountered Leo Bersani's analysis of Proust in his book *Homos*, in whose writing the variegated terms, 'gay,' 'homosexual[ity],' 'homo-ness,' and 'invert' appear. The broadness of Bersani's lexical approach was, at first, compelling, although the book concerns itself, at least in large part, with the project of presenting a "new reflection on homo-ness" through the individualist approaches to desire of André Gide, Jean Genet, and Marcel Proust. Because I mean to confine myself to the Proustian universe and his collection of inverts, it would have the effect, I think, of confusing more than clarifying if I were to take Bersani's more holistic approach. The critic I have come to rely upon with particular diligence is Elisabeth Ladenson, who in her 1999 book *Proust's Lesbians* opts (without explanation) to make use of Proust's vocabulary as it relates to homosexuality. While I have chosen to follow her lead in this regard, I at once do not deny the possibility that my use of language may leave something to be desired, or else might fail to express the fullness of the queer experience. Yet, I will venture forward into the dizzying domain of Proustian homosexuality, attempting as best I can to construct an image of his work with the openness that it requires.*



Introduction: Framing Inversion and Its Precepts

*Certains livres—ceux de Proust en particulier—ont habitué
le public à s’effaroucher moins et à oser considérer
de sang-froid ce qu’il feignait d’ignorer, ou préférait
ignorer d’abord. Nombre d’esprits se figurent volontiers
qu’ils suppriment ce qu’ils ignorent... Mais ces livres, du même
coup, ont beaucoup contribué, je le crains, à égarer l’opinion.¹
-André Gide, *Oeuvres complètes**

In a correspondence between the author of *À la recherche du temps perdu* and André Gide in June of 1914, Proust takes up the defense of his picture of homosexuality contained within *Sodom and Gomorrah*, that of sexual inversion. “J’essayai de peindre l’homosexuel épris de virilité parce que, sans le savoir, il est une Femme. Je ne prétends nullement que ce soit le seul homosexuel. Mais c’en est un qui est très intéressant et qui, je crois, n’a jamais été décrit.”² André Gide, whether he felt that Proust had “stolen his show,” or because he genuinely disapproved of Proust’s account of homosexuality, was not alone in his decidedly negative estimation of the inversion model.³ Men’s homosexual desires in Proust’s *Recherche* are framed as a kind of affliction which “accompanies him after the same manner of the tutelary spirit.”⁴ In acting upon these desires, however, one does so at the risk of abandoning oneself to (sado)masochism; to cruelty; to the ‘profane.’ Late nineteenth and early twentieth century attitudes towards any iteration of non-heterosexual desire gave rise to the theory, and it would thus be a misuse of time to take up the task of laying bare all of the logical failings implicit in the concept of ‘sexual inversion.’ The broader psychology of sexual inversion,

¹Gide, *Oeuvres complètes*, IX, 178-179

² *Autour de “la recherche:” lettres*, 178

³ Lesage, Laurence. “Proust and Gide, Lifelong Antagonists.”

⁴ *SG*, 18



while undoubtedly a damaging mischaracterization, seems—at least in Proust’s iteration of it—an attempt to enlighten others to the heart-rending plight of the invert, whose sexuality is actually heterosexual in nature, and whose beingness is thus condemned to misunderstanding.

The concept of inversion seems to have found its footing within a Platonic view of desire; in Plato’s model, some individuals possess a duality of gender, such that men who are “made up of a man and a woman” love only women. By the same token, women who are conceived of as possessing a masculine-feminine duality possess only heterosexual desires. Plato’s model of homosexuality is, as historian David Halperin writes, “suffused with a homoerotic ambience.”⁵

they who are a section of the male follow the male, and while they are young, being slices of the original man, they have affection for men and embrace them [the Greek verb implies a sexual sense], and these are the best of boys and youths, because they have the most manly nature.⁶

Inversion presents a reversal of the Platonic construction, such that a twofold gender makeup is responsible for one’s *homosexuality*. Whereas in Plato’s construct, male and female homosexuality arises from a lack of its opposite, inversion describes a kind of sexual dimorphism—such that, within the body of the men-seeking-man is the soul of a woman, and vice versa. Women loving women in Proust, following the inversion model, offer male inverts “an approximation of what they find in a man.” Nineteenth century neurologist George Beard writes in his book *Sexual Neurasthenia* that, regarding those for whom “sex is perverted... men become women and women men, in their tastes, conduct, character, feelings and behavior.”⁷ What remains true both for Plato and for Proust is that homosexual relationships, though the standard relationship model in nineteenth century France, appears to us as substantially less meaningful, or rather less significant, than men’s

⁵ Plato and Same-Sex Sexuality, Halperin

⁶ Crompton, Louis. 58. *Homosexuality and Civilization*

⁷ Beard, *Sexual Neurasthenia*



relationships with one another (platonic or otherwise). Proust deviates again from Plato in his formulation of homosexuality—for Proust, homosexuality is not an unnatural phenomenon. Mediating social constructs and institutionalized homophobia, however, have rendered it as such. If anything, Proust’s usage of the inversion model in his opus seems to be a manner though which homosexuality can be, as Leo Bersani puts it in his book *Homos*, “essentialized and heterosexualized.”⁸

The male invert’s object of desire, in Proust’s account, is not the same kind of man as he, for the invert pursues a masculine romantic ideal. ‘Feminine’ men in Proust, therefore, have the effect of eliciting disgust in their congeners, who hate to see their own ‘condition’ reflected in others.⁹ Perhaps the greatest tragedy faced by the invert in this theory of desire is that those who would ostensibly be capable of satisfying the invert’s desire, so-called “real men,” cannot reciprocate it—for, they are unable to readily identify the “ephebe,” the young boy or interiorized woman, within those are assumed to be other heterosexual men. I must add, here, that Proust seems to refer to *l’inverti* chiefly in the context of the ‘man-woman.’ To be sure, he dedicates considerable effort towards reflections on the realm of lesbianism (particularly as it relates to Albertine, the narrator’s fugitive interest in the latter portion of Proust’s *Recherche*). As will be attended to in a later chapter, there is reason to question whether Proust regards lesbianism in parallel with male inversion, or if there is some rupture amidst the metaphysical kingdoms of Sodom and Gomorrah in *La recherche*. Arising from the biblical story of Lot and the citizenry of the two Cities of the Plain condemned to death by God, Sodom’s inverts and Gomorrah’s lesbians seem to be governed each by their own

⁸ *Homos*, 134

⁹ Bersani, *Homos* (129)



psychologies, rules of social interaction, and methods of concealment. In order to better understand these divergences in homosexual prurience, I intend to ask: does Proust regard lesbianism as an existential orientation, or as something that is learned, cultivated, or performed? Is Gomorrah a distinct identity in Proust, or is it constructed from the very fabric of Sodom?

Advancements in the realm of queer theory, proceeding from the gay liberation movement of the 1960s and onwards, have brought about the complete repudiation of designations such as ‘invert.’ To clarify my usage of the term queer, here, I will borrow the words of David Halperin again, who describes queerness as “*whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers.* It is an identity without an essence.”¹⁰ Inversion in Proust is nothing if not an essence, a means of classifying ‘same-sex’ desire through the construction of a fixed, collective reality—though expressions of men’s desires for other men evolve particularly towards the end of Proust’s *Recherche*, deviations from inversion constitute an exception, and not a rule.

Labeling Proust as ‘homophobic’ by the standards of today would be a pointless truism, as well as a missed opportunity to probe deeper into the ways in which the philosophy of inversion oriented Proust’s own view of love and relationship. Proust’s stance on his own identity, as well as the identities of others, was not static. It is, moreover, widely acknowledged that Proust tended to respond to his most outspoken critics with what he believed to be what they wanted to hear, and it would thus be unwise to rely too heavily upon his statements made to other writers and thinkers. Though Proust at times essentializes both heterosexuality and homosexuality, it is Proust’s *narrator*

¹⁰Halperin, David. 62. *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*



who constructs the kingdoms of Sodom and Gomorrah in *La recherche*. Despite sharing the first name of the other, the heterosexual Marcel was never conceived of as a pristine reflection of the author himself, and we must not treat him as such. Engaging with the text through a concentration upon the progression and evolution of depictions of the homosexuality in Proust's *Recherche* serves us better in this respect.

Theorizations around inversion and homosexuality produce a considerable sum of contradictions and ambiguities in Proust's *Recherche*. For one, Proust's narrator rejects the category of 'homosexuality' as a descriptor of romantic or sexual exchanges between men. Marcel Proust, who from a young age expressed his homosexual passions, cleverly opts to speak through the voice of a decidedly heterosexual narrator in his opus—thus rendering the task of differentiating between the author's conceptions of homosexuality and those distinct to the narrator impractical at the very least. Proust's narrator describes in *Sodom and Gomorrah*, the fourth volume of *La Recherche*, that relations between those of the same gender have been “most ineptly termed homosexuality.”¹¹ Proust's narrator, from the very first volume to the very last, gives precedence to the modeling of Sodom (even before we are aware of his doing so).

At the inception of Part One, the narrator states directly that he intends to treat the subject with the “prominence” and “fullness” that it demands.¹² As I will examine in later chapters, there is reason to probe the reason for Proust's rather deficient rendering of Gomorrah, of lesbianism. Though Gomorrhans occupy the pages of Proust's opus from the very first volume of *La recherche* to the last, they nonetheless are denied the “fullness” conferred upon Sodom. As Proust's lesbians are

¹¹ SG, 9

¹² SG, 1



not *inverti* but women who possess varying degrees of masculinity and femininity, what can they be termed if not ‘homosexuals?’ Modes of critical theorization have, in response to the ambiguous nature of Proustian sexuality, turned to the biographical details of Proust’s life to shed light upon the more nebulous aspects of Sodom and Gomorrah. One line of critical theory is that of transposition, wherein Albertine, Marcel’s lover, becomes a proxy for *Albert*—in this way, non-inverts become inverters through a process of narrative reconstitution.¹³ If Albertine and the band of Balbec girls are no more than well disguised effigies of actual men, lesbianism becomes no more than a convenient vessel through which men’s desires can be set forth. While I do not intend to ignore the very real possibility of latent meanings inscribed in Proust’s interlocutors, I will concern myself more with the many confirmed and at the very least insinuated homosexuals who are revealed to us in the pages of *La recherche*.

¹³ Particularly, critical theorists such as Julia Kristeva (and innumerable others before her) have drawn a congruence between Albertine and Albert Agostinelli, Marcel Proust’s chauffeur and suspected (though not sufficiently proven) lover of the writer.



I: Uncovering The Invisible 'Band of Sodomites'

*there where each of us carries, inscribed in
those eyes through which he beholds everything in
the universe, a human form engraved on the
surface of the pupil, for them it is not that
of a nymph but that of an ephebe.*

It remains a virtual certainty that in 1921 the mere suggestion of inversion as commensurate with nature would have been staggering, yet Proust is said to have been painfully disappointed that *Sodom and Gomorrah* did not provoke the outrage that he expected of it. That is, apart from other queer authors (André Gide and Colette, to name a few). It was his heterosexual audience that he hoped to scandalize, though his book did not perhaps have the intended effect. Proust overtly calls our attention, in Part One of this fourth volume, to a through line of inverted desire (often insinuated but largely sublimated by the narrator in prior volumes). Thirty pages are devoted to the question of inversion, itself—the first extended treatment of homosexuality in Proust's *Recherche* (apart from the ritualized Sadism of Mlle Vinteuil and her lover described in Proust's first volume), emerges in this Part One. Let us now recall the scene at hand. At quite the opportune moment, Proust's narrator, unbeknownst to his subjects of observation, beholds an encounter between the ex-tailor Jupien and the Baron de Charlus in the Guermantes courtyard. Proust's narrator-flâneur, drawn by some unknown force to the spectacle, bears witness to the moments before, during, and after their tryst. Proust's *mise-en-scène* commences with a revelation regarding the corporeal form of the Baron Palamède de Charlus, whose constitution appears radically at odds with a recognized one. Operating under the misapprehension that he is alone in the courtyard of the Hôtel de



Guermantes, Charlus gives the appearance of a different creature entirely than the man to whom Marcel is acquainted:

I regretted for his sake that he should habitually adulterate with so many violent outbursts, offensive eccentricities, calumnies, with such harshness, touchiness and arrogance, that he should conceal beneath a spurious brutality the amenity, the kindness which... I saw so innocently displayed upon his face.¹⁴

The mere identification of a change in Charlus's expression draws the narrator, with extreme closeness, to the discovery of other contradictory signs. For, the incongruity between the formerly known and present iteration of Charlus presents, already, a total upheaval of the narrator's awareness. In Proust's *Recherche*, epiphanies emerge only after the process of gesticulation; in internalizing the sign, pondering certain discrepancies and abandoning previously held impressions, the path towards truth begins to clear.

Charlus, in previous volumes, appears to us as trapped in a mania of performativity. The Duc de Guermantes's brother, attending the soirée of Mme de Villeparisis, seems to possess "a roving eye, like that of a street hawker who is watching all the time for the "law" to appear... [keeping] almost continuously on show a smile without determinate direction or particular object."¹⁵ His earlier behaviors, in view of the exacting *compte rendu* provided by the narrator in Part One of *Sodom and Gomorrah*, become immediately comprehensible to us: as the narrator writes, the invert is "obliged... to avert their eyes from the direction in which they would wish to stray, to fasten them on what they would naturally turn away from."¹⁶ Take, as a point of comparison, Marcel's first portrait of the Baron in *Within a Budding Grove*:

¹⁴ SG, 5

¹⁵ The Guermantes Way, 365

¹⁶ SG, 24



I had the sensation of being watched by somebody who was not far off. I turned my head and saw a man of about forty, very tall and rather stout, with a very black moustache, who, nervously slapping the leg of his trousers with a switch, was staring at me, his eyes dilated with extreme attentiveness. From time to time these eyes were shot through by a look of restless activity¹⁷

What is absent from this introductory vision of Charlus is the reason for this embodied quality of otherness, though the artificial nature of his gaze has long been established in Proust's narrative.

Marcel's obliviousness to Charlus's overtures in *The Guermantes Way* signal to us that, although the narrator is of course aware of some as yet unidentified idiosyncrasy belonging to the mercurial Baron, he is held captive in his ignorance to the very clear 'signs of Sodom.' Charlus complains to the disoriented Marcel: "do you mean to pretend that you did not receive my message—almost a declaration—that you were to remember me? What was there in the way of decoration round the cover of the book that I sent you?"¹⁸ Had Marcel observed the previous episode at a distance, had his receptivity to those signs not been clouded by his humiliation at being censured by Charlus, the truth might have been known to him sooner (though the phenomenon of inversion would still, regardless, have evaded him). Far from behaving in the familiarly curated, stilted and nervous manner, Charlus is revealed to us in *Sodom and Gomorrah*, for the very first time, uninhibited by gaze of the heterosexual or homosexual other. Marcel reflects, "I found in his face seen thus in repose and as it were in its natural state something so affectionate, so defenceless."¹⁹ Charlus, as he appears in prior volumes, is a fiercely social being who, though an impeccable conversationalist, has a habit of signaling his vice in his speech: walking arm in arm with Marcel, Charlus asks "in that tone which he was so skilful at detaching from what he was saying that he seemed to be thinking of something

¹⁷WBG, 452

¹⁸GW, 760

¹⁹SG, 5



else altogether, and to be speaking mechanically, simply out of politeness... if my friend was young, good-looking and so forth.”²⁰ Though doubtlessly the most antisemitic of Proust’s interlocutors, Charlus persists in his inquiries about Albert Bloch, even asking Marcel to share with him his address.²¹ A liar who has digested or habituated the lie is not aware, himself, of when it manifests—for in speech, there exists at least an illusion of control. Yet if the lie itself is not known by the other, signs of its presence will go entirely unnoticed. The revelation that Marcel experiences here is thus not that homosexuality exists and takes place, but that a member of the exclusive Faubourg Saint-Germain could, himself, actively participate in such relations; could plainly exhibit all of the symptoms of inversion, while still evading Marcel’s understanding. We must acknowledge that, though the detail with which Marcel outlines the inner workings of Sodom is dubious for a supposed heterosexual, Proust does not at any point beyond the narrator’s interest in homosexuality, indicate that Marcel is, himself, part of the “accursed race.” Though it has already been well established that Proust harbored ardent passions for other men over the course of his regrettably short life, his narrator decidedly does not. This is evidenced in the framing of the sounds emitted by Jupien and Charlus during the throes of intercourse:

I heard at first in Jupien’s quarters... only a series of inarticulate sounds... these sounds were so violent that, if they had not always been taken up an octave higher by a parallel plaint, I might have thought that one person was slitting another’s throat within a few feet of me, and that subsequently the murderer and his resuscitated victim were taking a bath to wash away the traces of the crime.²²

In initially supposing Jupien and Charlus’s sexual noises to be violent, the narrator sublimates the eroticism of the moment, perhaps as a means of distancing himself from any assumption of

²⁰*GW* 389-390

²¹ *SG*, 688

²² *SG*, 12



familiarity with it (though the narrator's feigned confusion strains credibility, to say the least). The procedural approach with which Marcel represents the scene, once again, indicates to us the narrator's resistance to the sensuous properties of the spectacle. The narrator apprises us of his intention to take us through the events unfolding between Jupien and Charlus as a botanist might. The narrator's approach, habitually returning to the manner of speaking characteristic of taxonomy, engenders a psychoanalytic distance between himself and the subjects of his observation.²³ Perched behind a shutter on the balcony of his family's flat, the narrator draws a congruence between natural occurrences unfolding in real time in his periphery (a bee transferring pollen between flowers), and the foreplay between Jupien and Charlus, which takes on a similar narrative configuration. "At the same instant as M. de Charlus disappeared through the gate humming like a great bumble-bee, another, a real one this time, flew into the courtyard. For all I knew this might be the one so long awaited by the orchid, coming to bring it that rare pollen without which it must remain a virgin."²⁴ The pair are likened to birds engaged in a mating ritual, simply following the instinctive course of their desires. Cast in the image of the divine, inversion first appears to us in *Sodom and Gomorrah* not as perversion, nor abomination, but rather as a natural anomaly. Marcel imagines Charlus as the male bird "seeking to advance," with his female counterpart, Jupien, "contenting herself with preening her feathers," both engaging in the dance of coquetry. Marcel does make clear, however, that in his usage of natural exemplars he does not mean to make a "scientific claim to establish a relation between

²³ Proust's narrator details, "as curious as those seductive gestures addressed, Darwin tells us, to insects by the flowers called composite which erect the florets of their capitula so as to be seen from a greater distance, like certain heterostyled flowers which turn back their stamens and bend them to open the way for the insect, or which offer him an abluion."

SG, Proust.

²⁴SG, 9



certain botanical laws and . . . homosexuality.”²⁵ Yet, in positioning the invert—even in a providential sense—in congruence with Darwinism and evolutionary biology, the rhetorical denouement is that of legitimizing homosexuality, of linking it to an established and more widely accepted modality of thought. Again invoking the mating behaviors of certain hermaphroditic organisms to make sense of their physical union—the snail, the orchid, the jellyfish, the bee—the narrator subsumes both present and absent facets of the natural world under the purview of inverted desire. The bumblebee bestows the orchid with “the pollen it had so long been waiting to receive,” just as the snail is fertilized not by itself but by “other hermaphrodites.”²⁶ As inverted relations are always sterile, both the impetus and culmination of intercourse is pleasure. Proust’s narrator makes clear his indifference to the moralizing of one’s attempts at sexual gratification: “It is no small matter for a person to be able to encounter the sole pleasure which he is capable of enjoying, and that “every soul here and below” can impart to some other “its music or its fragrance or its flame.”²⁷ If there is some moral quandary presented by Proust’s view of inversion, it is not situated in the varied strains of human desires; of being with others, in whatever sense (physically, socially, or spiritually).

Jupien and Charlus’s dalliance is slightly revised later in Part One, in accordance with Marcel’s epiphany that Charlus resembles a woman “because he was one!”²⁸ Together with this epiphany comes Marcel’s proposition that *both* men are really part of the supposed accursed race of ‘men-women,’ who content themselves with “other inverts as effeminate as themselves” merely because “it is enough that they do not belong to the female sex.”²⁹ The two are aware of the other’s

²⁵ *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 9

²⁶ *SG*, 40

²⁷ *SG*, 38

²⁸ *SG*, 19

²⁹ *SG*, 40



most deeply concealed inclinations, and yet any potential for genuine understanding between them disappears when the two enter into sexual relations. Marcel bears witness to the moment when Charlus's relaxed manner dissolves, as Jupien enters his field of vision. Consequently, the Baron's stance alters, and Jupien's pose, "as though in obedience to the laws of an occult art, at once brought itself into harmony with it." Jupien, momentarily conceiving of the Baron as one of those 'real men' who is typically attracted to women, contorts himself "with grotesque effrontery" into delicate feminine poses, so as to satisfy the imagined preferences of the other.³⁰ Charlus, rounding out the masquerade, puts on a "smug, nonchalant, fatuous air." Herein lies the first inkling of the problem of inversion for Proust. That, insofar as the invert may "content themselves" with other inverts, the problem of disgust will inevitably emerge within the dynamic. Each embodying a binary role in their relations, they are able to satisfy their desires. Yet, after the intercourse between them is completed, Jupien encourages Charlus to modify his physical appearance:

"Why do you have your chin shaved like that," asked the other in a caressing tone. "It's so becoming, a nice beard." "Ugh! It's disgusting," the Baron replied.³¹

Charlus's contrived air of masculinity does not suffice for Jupien. We find that he would prefer it if Charlus resembled one of those men "who is a lover of women (and incapable consequently of loving him)."³² Concealment, as described previously, is as an ineluctable fact of existence for the invert in Proust, who "must live in falsehood and perjury because it knows that its desire... is held to be punishable, shameful, an inadmissible thing." Yet even amongst those who are of the same sort, the invert is not impervious either to punishment or distaste. It is for this reason that Charlus performs masculinity during sex. He does so not because he prefers to, but because it is the final

³⁰ *SG*, 6

³¹ *SG*, 13

³² *SG*, 42



enterprise which ensures the realization of physical pleasure. If Jupien were to view Charlus as he truly is, a woman whose beingness is shrouded in a virilized form, any attraction for him would effectively dissolve.



II: The Solitary

The invert-vice, as elucidated in Proust's *Sodom and Gomorrah*, begins not when the invert has relations with men—for, Proust's interlocutors are above scrutiny in this sense—but from the moment “when he takes pleasure with women.” Within the framework of inversion, the only moral act of pleasure is between two inverts, or an invert and a bisexual or even a heterosexual man. And yet, vice, that ‘strange’ element, seems to arise from the basic premise that any feminine and masculine association is ‘natural,’ and that homosexual relations are consequently ‘unnatural.’ The statement that has just been made demands considerable explanation: in the Proustian milieu, inversion is less a homosexual phenomenon than a heterosexual one, for its formulation is founded upon an attraction which depends on the opposition of masculine and feminine. It is precisely for this reason that inversion presents the impossibility of the true attainment of one's desire, with the desired person being unable to recognize the interiorized femininity of their admirer. As Leo Bersani indicates in his chapter of *Homos* entitled “The Gay Absence,” because all romantic relations are in some shape or form a product of social construction, “the question to be asked is not which ones are the most natural.”³³ Inversion is neither homosexuality or heterosexuality: it is an identity based around the impossibility of consummation, a liminal categorization which supposes that one's heterosexuality cannot be exteriorized, and that the inverted person's desires have been falsely labeled as homosexual. It stands to reason that homosexuality, in the Proustian sense, is not a genuine identity: it is, rather, a farce, a kind of self-deceit, a betrayal of one's true desires. Two inverts having relations with one another are, as such, really two women, as is the invert who marries and

³³ *Homos*, 38



copulates with his wife. As Bersani writes of Proust's usage of inversion, "this heterosexualizing of homosexuality is so powerful that it risks invalidating the very formula it illustrates... The woman imprisoned within the male body—like a disembodied spirit seeking the incarnate form it has been unjustly denied—will at times become "hideously visible".³⁴ Of course, this is not what is commonly meant by the term homosexuality—yet, the narrator's view of homosexuality is contaminated by the lens of inversion, which renders any masculine-masculine or feminine-feminine erotic association untenable, or at least quite unlikely. As the invert is conceived of as a woman who must *masquerade* as a man, homosexuality occurs only the case that the invert betrays their desires, and implicates a woman (to whom they are not attracted) into this deception.

Proust's writing here might be understood as such: he could speak about Sodom in more definite terms, to approach it with greater certainty, because of his own familiarity with the subject. The level of specificity with which the narrator purports to understand all of the complexities of inversion, more prominently seen when comparing the fullness of Sodom to his decidedly vague and enigmatic portrayal of Gomorrah, must not be overlooked. As Eve Sedgwick puts it in her book *The Epistemology of the Closet* "it takes one to know one." In her explanation of the assuredness with which Proust's narrator describes the 'kingdom of Sodom,' Sedgwick recalls 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."³⁵ The two narrative components—that of the narrator's passive homophobia, and this quality of "authoritative worldliness" likely belonging

³⁴ *Homos*, 132

³⁵ 222, *Epistemology of the Closet*



only to a member of that very group—constitute the foundation of Proust’s treatise on the specters of “falsehood and perjury” facing the race of inverts. With the investedness of a Zionist or Bundist in the question of Jewish autonomy, Proust’s narrator speaks of the issues at hand for the homosexual in a manner so precise, so particular, that one wonders if he is not speaking directly about himself. Had Proust read Part One of *Sodom and Gomorrah* aloud, it would surely have signaled his own proficiency with the subject, in similar fashion to Charlus in *The Captive*: “From the moment Brichot had begun to speak of masculine reputations, M. de Charlus had betrayed all over his features that special sort of impatience which one sees on the face of a medical or military expert when society people know nothing about the subject begin to talk nonsense about points of therapeutics or strategy.”³⁶

Gilles Deleuze writes of two sorts of sexuality in his book *Proust and Signs*: firstly, an “*aggregate and specific homosexuality*,” and a “*local and nonspecific homosexuality*.”³⁷ *Sodom and Gomorrah*, respectively, have their own individual characteristics, styles of portrayal, etc. in Proust. There are, to be sure, convergences relating to the ways in which non-heterosexual sexuality is described, which we will address in greater detail later on. This, as Deleuze writes, can be located in the phenomenon of ‘transsexuality,’ in which a man plays “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.”³⁸ By accepting this assertion as fact, Gomorrhans would, accordingly, be regarded as proto-men seeking women, and Sodomites would be rendered proto-women seeking men. Though, for the kind of local

36

³⁷ *Proust and Signs*, 136

³⁸ *SG*, 30



and nonspecific homosexuality to function as a model of desire, is it imperative that both parties are conceived of as inverts? In choosing not to involve others in their inversion, one will become a kind of solitary jellyfish, left to “languish alone” in the prison of one’s own interiority.



III: Situating The “Invert-Vice:” Inversion as *Affliction*

It is the homosexuality that survives in spite of obstacles, shameful, 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.³⁹

Though it is not made clear in *Sodom and Gomorrah* that inversion itself is at issue when Proust refers to vice, despite the continual insistence that he uses the term only from a lack of alternatives, Proust’s narrator resists against the moralizing of sexual desire. If desire itself does not inform Proust’s framing of immorality, how can we lay claim to an understanding of the rudiments of vice in Proust’s *Recherche*? What is its provenance? Moreover, is the notion of vice a purely social phenomenon in Proust? Is the ‘invert vice’ the ultimate vice, masked by other vices? What defines vice in relation to inversion is firstly that “it is regarded as vice.” If Proust himself felt some sense of guilt in relation to his identity, he hesitated to project his guilty conscience onto the cast of male inverts appearing in his work (Robert de Saint-Loup, the Prince de Guermantes, and M. de Vaugoubert, to name a few). Over the course of this chapter, we will attempt to distinguish between those vices which are “improperly” named as such (identities or activities deemed vices by external authorities), and the vices which the narrator deems truly worthy of the designation.

Sodomites, members belonging to one of the two Cities of the Plain—cities detailed in Genesis as “legendary for their incorrigible wickedness and for their ultimate annihilation by God in a cataclysm of “brimstone and fire”—are reconstituted in Proust’s introduction.⁴⁰

³⁹C, 270

⁴⁰ *The Oxford Guide to People & Places of the Bible*



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 only to a Sodomite. Such a one would never have been persuaded by such excuses as “A father of six, I’ve got two mistresses,” to lower his flaming sword benevolently and mitigate the punishment. He would have answered: “Yes, and your wife lives in a torment of jealousy. But even when you haven’t chosen these women from Gomorrah, you spend your nights with a watcher of flocks from Hebron.” And he would at once have made him retrace his steps to the city which the rain of fire and brimstone was to destroy. On the contrary, all the shameless Sodomites were allowed to escape, even if, on catching sight of a boy, they turned their heads like Lot’s wife, though without being on that account changed like her into pillars of salt... These descendants of Sodomites, so numerous that we may apply to them that other verse of Genesis: “If a man can number the dust of the earth, then shall thy seed also be numbered,” 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 an 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.⁴¹

Far from presenting the commonly accepted biblical interpretation of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah’s destruction, Proust’s narrator establishes another optic through which one may conceive of homosexuality. In the previous section we cited Eve Sedgwick and her pronouncement that Proust himself has written about Sodomites with the same mendacity that he accuses them of performing. Though inverts still constitute a race of their own, a people whose gaze mirrors the refracted skies of some “oriental city,” creatures with the “power to remain invisible” to all those who are unaware of the pervasiveness of their ‘kind,’ they are prevented from experiencing the multiplicity of their community both in response to social repercussions and as a kind of revulsion towards one another. Proust’s narrator empathizes that the race of inverts “live in falsehood and perjury” because between themselves and the objects of their desire stands an agent of external mediation, which has deemed their proclivities to be immoral, and thus begets shame and

⁴¹ *SG*, 42-43



self-hatred. If the initial identification of vice descends from the authority of a social or religious mediator, the vices associated with inversion—of betraying the trust of close friends and family, of wantonness and pride, of conceiving of oneself as superior merely for belonging to said race, of taking “pleasure with women” as a method of concealment—all proceed from the first designation of their pleasure as perverse and morally reprehensible. While the invert-vice is said to begin when one has relations with women, were it not vilified to behave in congruence with one’s true nature, these vices would lack any incentive whatsoever. Proust’s narrator writes in the sixth volume of *La recherche*, “I found it absolutely immaterial from a moral point of view whether one took one’s pleasure with a man or with a woman, and only too natural and human that one should take it where one could find it.”⁴² The narrator’s view of vice seems to break down when we consider that, though he does not regard homosexual desire itself as a vice, he nonetheless denounces the behaviors that are designed to protect oneself against scrutiny, self-hatred, discovery, and total abstinence. Is it not the case that if the invert vice begins when one takes pleasure with women, the only logical basis for one to ‘commit’ such a vice would be as a protective measure against homophobia?⁴³ In a word, the invert in society is bound to effectuate his vice, no matter the mode of his behavior.

Vice seems, too, to be in some way related with the inclusion of others in the “activity.” By activity we refer not only to sex but to discourse, to conjecture about the sexual lives of others, to jealousy, lying, and even friendship... which are all in some way disfigured in the presence of an invert who has taken his inversion ‘too far.’ In the case of the inverted M. de Vaugoubert, the vice manifests itself in the neglect of his wife, which “dries up everything that is womanly” in her. Of

⁴² The Fugitive, 934

⁴³ SG, 29



course, this line of thinking leads us to the question of culpability: to be sure, one should not be faulted for entering into a loveless marriage in order to conceal their identity, particularly when it would be extremely difficult for one to do otherwise. The central impossibility for Proust's invert is that in some manner, they might inevitably hurt or affect another person through their *beingness* alone, if it is discovered. In concealment, the invert must become something else entirely to those closest to them. The invert, in living authentically, seems to (consciously or otherwise) "spread" his condition, either in an imagined sense or, in the case of Proust's lesbians, quite literally so. Charlus visualizes a divine confraternity of Sodomites, believing that most of his highly esteemed friends, writers, artists etc. are like himself. And of course he is right that there are many Charluses—in fact, most figures in Proust are, at one point or another, outed as Sodomites or as Gommorhans. What is problematized by Proust's narrator, though, is the notion that one should integrate one's desires with one's sense of selfhood. If inverts do come together in *abomosocial* 'community,' Proust's narrator posits that they have done so by way of necessity, much like Jews rallied together in solidarity during L'Affaire Dreyfus.⁴⁴ We must make a note here that, although perhaps it is needless to mention, Proust often places Jewishness and homosexuality in congruence, emerging first in Part One of *Sodom and Gomorrah* and throughout the latter portion of *La recherche*. In coming together, says Proust, the invert has made a concession. Moreover, this 'coming together,' as Bersani relates in *Homos*, is done so purely out of desperation, and not by way of sheer preference (as coming together here undoubtedly holds a double meaning). For, even those who "regard homosexuality as the appurtenance of genius" do not seek out other inverts, but rather those who might be worthy of it.

⁴⁴ "Brought into the company of their own kind by the ostracism to which they are subjected, the opprobrium into which they have fallen, having finally been invested, by a persecution similar to that of Israel" SG, 22



Referring back, for a moment, to the theory of Platonic desire, we see a kind of warning by Proust against the valorization of homosexuality, a supposition of one's identity as "more exceptional than it is." That Charlus is constantly referring to his favorite subject, inversion, is often spoken about with a kind of amused chastisement by Proust's narrator, though he is guilty of the same convoluted digressions around inversion himself. Whilst desire and particularly homosexual desire becomes a principal motif in Proust's *Recherche*, the narrator seems not to approve of the building of a community which relies on inversion or sexuality alone to formulate a shared sense of identity: "I have thought it as well to utter here a provisional warning against the lamentable error of proposing (just as people have encouraged a Zionist movement) to create a Sodomist movement and to rebuild Sodom."⁴⁵ As I will return to later—if one's sexuality is the key to unlocking the truth about a person entirely, why is it that Proust discourages the act of forming a community around one's sexual identity? If it is truly not an important aspect of one's selfhood, as Proust seems to express in the aforementioned passage, why is it such a crucial element of Proust's narrative? And, moreover, why does he denounce homosexual *community* so entirely?

We mentioned previously that the promulgation of one's 'affliction' is, in Proust's *Recherche*, a vice in and of itself. Let us then examine cases in which the invert, as a symptom of his so-called condition, burdens another with this malediction. Marital relations in all of their intricacies and idiosyncrasies inhabit a considerable portion of Proust's narrative, and it is precisely within this arena that we may begin to understand the extent to which inverts are held responsible by Proust's narrator for the discontent they provoke in their spouses. The best husbands, by Charlus's own self-implication, are sometimes inverts—earlier in *La recherche*, the narrator himself declares that "the

⁴⁵ SG, 44



husband who is inclined that way generally makes his wife happy.” The Vicomte de Courvoisier, appearing in the last volume, *Time Regained*, would serve to corroborate this designation:

“one of his cousins taught him that the practice was fairly common, even went to the length of taking him to places where he could satisfy it. M. de Courvoisier only loved his wife the more for this and redoubled his uxorious zeal so that the couple were cited as the best ménage in Paris.”⁴⁶

Apart from concealing these preordained desires from his wife, Courvoisier performs all of the marital charges expected of him: the two have an active sex life and produce several children, regarded in the social milieu as the ideal vision of the mondaine couple. At the heart of the notion of vice is not merely the act of extra-marital activity, so long as one’s inversion is well concealed, and does not extend beyond the realm of sex. The model of inversion presented by the Vicomte is eminently more favorable than that of another of Proust’s interlocutors, the Marquis de Vaugoubert. The Vicomte de Courvoisier’s impartiality to sex with other men, his refusal to follow the thread of inversion beyond a carnal one, to allow his inversion to consume more space in his psyche, clears him of culpability. Within the confines of marriage it seems preferable for one to satisfy their tastes if it would spare the other from attempting to emulate the unfulfilled desires of their partner. If one cannot be cured of the vice, perhaps one might be capable of self-medicating, not through a total relinquishing of their desires but by treating sex as a trivial, yet private enterprise which will keep the outward signs of inversion at bay. Now to return to the dullard, M. de Vaugoubert, who is one of those inverts who determines it best to abstain entirely from sex. An invert who has long been married to a woman simply to ‘pass’ in society, Vaugoubert is described as such:

M. de Vaugoubert, when talking to M. de Charlus, appeared uncertain... The invert believes himself to be the only one of his kind and in the universe; it is only in later years that he imagines—another exaggeration—that the unique exception is the normal man. But,

⁴⁶TR, 13



ambitious and timorous, M. de Vaugoubert had not for many years past surrendered himself to what would to him have meant pleasure... And so, as each of our senses loses some of its strength and keenness, becomes atrophied when it is no longer exercised, M. de Vaugoubert, just as the civilised man is no longer capable of the feats of strength, of the acuteness of hearing of the cave-dweller, had lost that special perspicacity which was rarely lacking in M. de Charlus; and at official banquets, whether in Paris or abroad, the Minister Plenipotentiary was no longer capable of identifying those who, beneath the disguise of their uniform, were at heart his congeners.⁴⁷

Even those who suppress their deepest desires still carry their ‘vice’ with them, and cannot escape detection. Though Vaugoubert has long foregone the physical manifestations of his condition, he comes to embody inversion as a manner of being, as an attitude. Proust’s narrator is capable in this moment of concluding, through an evaluation of the timbre and manner of his voice, that “He is a Charlus.”⁴⁸ If one bears the burden of a vice even without engaging in it—we can make a comparison between the assimilated Jew and the repressed invert here—there is no satisfactory reason offered as to why one should not allow oneself to live authentically in their desires. The “imposing Mme de Vaugoubert, Bourbonesque and morose... in no way attractive,” is the subject of Proust’s discussion on inverted marriages.⁴⁹ Proust presents two hypotheses about her “mannish air:” firstly, Mme de Vaugoubert, in possessing already those qualities which M de Vaugoubert sought in heterosexual men, would have, already attracted him to her—would have allowed him to superficially experience the masculine energy that he so desired. Marcel purports that “Mme de Vaugoubert really was a man. Whether she had always been one, or had grown to be as I now saw her, matters little...”⁵⁰ To the contrary, whether she has grown to be one matters quite a bit in the identification of vice. For, if the provenance of vice is in the spreading of inversion beyond oneself,

⁴⁷ *SG*

⁴⁸ *SG*, 86

⁴⁹ *SG* p. 61.

⁵⁰ *SG*



in the rebuilding of Sodom or of Gomorrah, it is of crucial importance to determine whether or not Vaugoubert can be faulted for his wife's air of masculinity.

Perhaps, like those Gomorrhans who have "sealed a pact" with male inverts, Mme de Vaugoubert may simply be one of those women who "offers them at the same time more or less what they find in other men."⁵¹ The other, considerably more devastating possibility presented is that, in becoming the lover of such a person as Vaugoubert, she may have been painfully aware that she was not the type of person who could have satisfied her husband sexually. Thus, through the transfigurative process of mimetic desire, she may have undergone a metamorphosis which resulted in a sort of false inversion. On the process of self-alteration taken up by the wife of the invert, a failed becoming of the husband's concealed desires, the narrator details:

if the woman has not at first these masculine characteristics, she adopts them by degrees, to please her husband, and even unconsciously, by that sort of mimicry which makes certain flowers assume the appearance of the insects which they seek to attract. Her regret at not being loved, at not being a man, makes her mannish... One of the reasons which enhance still further the masculine air of women like Mme de Vaugoubert is that the neglect which they receive from their husbands, and the shame they feel at such neglect, gradually dry up everything that is womanly in them.⁵²

As we well know by now, according to the properties of Proustian desire, the effect of being barred from one's lover only serves to increase the strength of one's feelings for the other. Thus, by desiring another kind of person entirely, the lover has unconsciously distorted both their nature and their desires. I will call this a kind of unsuccessful *conversion*, rather than a genuine inversion. Evoking the zoological account of inversion contained in Proust's introduction in *Sodom and Gomorrah*, women like Mme de Vaugoubert are described in terms analogous to the previously discussed hermaphroditic creature ("the mimicry which makes certain flowers assume the appearance of the

⁵¹ SG, 30-31

⁵² SG, 67



insects which they seek to attract”). In Proust, the act of desiring a man-who-is-really-a-woman corresponds to the becoming of a man; to the becoming of an effigy of what their counterpart in love lacks.

In being neglected, in feeling that the one we love is spiritually or psychologically obstructed from our view, it drives us to extreme measures in the attempt to regain their affections—one detects this in Marcel’s obsession with imprisoning his ostensibly Gomorran lover Albertine. His attraction to her reaches an apogee only when her desires seem most unfamiliar to him. Proust’s narrator writes that “by dint of thinking tenderly of men one becomes a woman, and an imaginary skirt hampers one’s movements. The obsession, as in the other instance it can affect one’s health, may in this instance alter one’s sex.”⁵³ The same holds true in another case: by dint of thinking tenderly of the male *invert*, one is at risk of becoming an invert oneself. But let us first unpack the quotation above, for it presents a considerable deviation from Proust’s narrator’s first portrait of inversion. The quote, appearing quite a bit later than the sexual episode between Charlus and Jupien, locates homosexual desire not in one’s natural state of inversion but in one’s sexual attraction, which *then* inaugurates a change in gender expression. If womanhood is equivalent to an attraction to men, the categorization itself would appear decidedly empty, insipid, arising from the invert’s impression simply of what he believes femininity to be. Womanhood for the Proustian invert is as ephemeral as it is distinct to the individual who embodies it. As a consequence, we must ask here: does the invert desire men because he is, himself, a feminized being? Or is it that in desiring men, he can affect his own transformation into a woman (at least, a refraction, a “pastiche” of one)?⁵⁴

⁵³ *SG*, 418

⁵⁴ *Proust’s Lesbianism*



**Part IV: The First Gomorrhans:
Profanation and Innocence
in Montjouvain**

Neither the Sadean ritual glimpsed through the aperture of Montjouvain, nor the supposed uncovering of Albertine's sexuality through Andrée's disclosure that she is a friend of Mlle Vinteuil, discloses the world of Gomorrah to us in Proust. Recalling Gilles Deleuze's discussions on the two kinds of homosexuality signalled in *La recherche*, we will explore in this part whether Proust's Gomorrah consists of an aggregate and specific homosexuality, or a local and nonspecific one. One would be justified in supposing that, as a corollary to Proust's narrator's pronouncement that "the invert vice begins... when he takes pleasure with other women," for lesbians the inverse is true. Gomorrah never seems to be conceived of by Proust's narrator in this way, however. As Elisabeth Ladenson makes note, some critical responses to Proust's lesbians took issue with the divergences between the illustrations of Sodom and Gomorrah, while others critiqued the perceived aggregation of the two. Elisabeth Ladenson recalls two critical examinations of Proustian Gomorrhans; those written by Colette and Natalie Clifford Barney. Ladenson writes:

both Colette and Barney see Proust's depiction of Gomorrah as inaccurate, and both conclude that its inaccuracy stems from its having been created out of whole cloth in Proust's imagination, based on an extrapolation from his experience of male homosexuality.⁵⁵ In any case, one can only offer conjecture as to why certain propositions that are made in relation to male inversion do not so easily align with the portrayal of Proust's lesbians.

Gomorrah in Proust is ephemeral; it is not, despite being known from the first volume, explicitly disclosed to us. The narrative approach must be examined further, for the detachment

⁵⁵ Ladenson, *Gomorrah and Sodom*, 29



implicit in Proust's episode at the Hôtel de Guermantes is in stark opposition with the prurient language of Montjouvain. In its first construction, the world of Gomorrah is one steeped both in gentleness and sadism. Vinteuil's daughter, in the salon of the late pianist, has amorous relations with a more experienced friend, who goes unnamed in *Swann's Way*. The narrator feigns innocence as he introduces the scene, claiming to have awoken at the window of the rumored lesbian after a day of unsupervised wandering. Marcel insists that, had he moved from the spot, he would have been noticed: "she would have heard me, and might have thought that I had been hiding there in order to spy upon her." Following this absurd explanation of his presence there, Marcel stays and bears witness to a scene which, as he professes, will come to inform his "idea of that cruel side of human passion called 'sadism.'"⁵⁶ Marcel inserts himself into their sexual intercourse by envisioning the spectacle as a performance both for Vinteuil's father, and moreover for himself.

Though Mlle Vinteuil begins her interaction with her friend with all of the "abrupt scruples and restraints which had characterised her father," she is drawn in by the flirtations of her friend, and ventures to speak with the language of a "vicious young woman."⁵⁷ Mlle Vinteuil is conceived of as a double natured sort of person, so that a "shy and suppliant maiden" wrestles with "another element, the old campaigner" who is related to us with the pronoun 'he.' Following the unnamed friend's exhortation of Mlle Vinteuil to spit on the portrait of her father—which was intentionally placed by Vinteuil's daughter, herself, in the room where the two of them would spend time—the curtains are closed by Mlle Vinteuil, whose face appears to Marcel "weary, awkward, preoccupied, sincere, and rather sad."⁵⁸ The passage indicates a number of things to us: firstly, that Proust's

⁵⁶ *Swann's Way*,

⁵⁷ *Swann's Way*, 215-216

⁵⁸ *SW*, 219



narrator, despite having seen for himself this clandestine panorama of lesbianism, opts not to make sense of the scene apropos of homosexuality, but rather in relation to sadism.

It is possible that, without being in the least inclined towards 'sadism,' a girl might have shewn the same outrageous cruelty as Mlle. Vinteuil in desecrating the memory and defying the wishes of her dead father, but she would not have given them deliberate expression in an act so crude in its symbolism, so lacking in subtlety; the criminal element in her behaviour would have been less evident to other people, and even to herself, since she would not have admitted to herself that she was doing wrong.⁵⁹

The analysis made by Marcel in the aftermath of the Montjouvain episode is not taken as an occasion to disseminate the realities of lesbianism, an activity which he surely undertook in the wake of Charlus's and Jupien's sexual encounter. There is, surely, one reference to nature (the fowl) in Marcel's narration of the scene at Montjouvain. However, when placed in contrast with the introduction to *Sodom and Gomorrah* the usage of one natural model is not appreciable to the episode between Jupien and Charlus. Returning for a moment to the aforementioned definition of inversion which links Gomorrah with masculinity and Sodom with femininity, one finds that Proust does not entirely (openly) accept that women are converted into men if they have relations with other women. Moreover, while homosexuality for men becomes the most essential facets of identity, for women it is never known whether they are having sex with women due to a preordained orientation, or merely because they can. This is by no means a value judgment as to Proust's choice to deny us a portrait of Gomorrah in its imagined entirety. If anything, his inability to do so (while reflecting the invalidation of lesbianism as a genuine identity) grants Gomorrhans with the facility to self determine. For, at no point does the narrator attempt to affix lesbianism with sadism... Instead, Mlle Vinteuil's lesbianism becomes a part of her performance of cruelty, because her idea of pleasure is informed by a sense of

⁵⁹ SW, 219



wickedness. Perhaps, though one can only speculate, Mlle Vinteuil's sense of pleasure might have been lessened had she taken up with a man, rather than a woman. Marcel writes of persons such as Vinteuil, "It was not evil that gave her the idea of pleasure, that seemed to her attractive; it was pleasure, rather, that seemed evil."⁶⁰ If Mlle Vinteuil can be marked as a Gomorrhan, it is because she believes lesbianism to be inherently wicked, and, as such, deliciously perverse. Her particular brand of lesbianism, though the narrator writes of Vinteuil and other "sadists of her sort," is not an essentialized one—in other words, though lesbianism may at first emerge in the *Recherche* as sadistic, it is not presented as the only possible iteration of lesbianism.

In reference to the figure of the invert, introduced to us later in *Sodom and Gomorrah*, Mlle Vinteuil is not a man imprisoned in the feminine form, but rather, it would seem, the inverse. If the inversion model can be applied to Mlle Vinteuil, it is because she is a Charlus, physically mannish, but possessing a veiled femininity which is first recognized by the narrator's grandmother, and thereafter by the narrator himself. Mlle Vinteuil is seen, earlier, to be engaged in attempts to suppress not her masculinity, but rather her femininity. One might even say that Mlle Vinteuil is Proust's *first* invert, but not the sort of invert that we have come to be familiar with. Attending religious services at the Combray church, M. Vinteuil and his daughter sit down behind the narrator and his family. Occasionally gracing Mlle Vinteuil's "mannish face" is, as Marcel's grandmother calls to our attention, her "gentle, delicate, almost timid expression." She appears as a 'good sort' of person to Marcel, a designation which will become relevant in considering that, in later volumes, Marcel sometimes refers to suspected lesbians as the 'bad sort,' or *mauvais genre*. What should be brought to one's attention here is a pertinent repetition: in the section of Elisabeth Ladenson's book

⁶⁰ SW, 220



titled “Mothers and Daughters: The Origins of Gomorrah,” she details that Marcel’s grandmother “instinctively likes Mlle Vinteuil, Jupien, Saint-Loup, and Charlus, and her encomium always precedes the unveiling of each character’s “true nature”... although she is seen to have an excellent eye for what the narrator unfailingly misses in his dull-witted putative heterosexuality, she escapes implication in what her preferences reveal.”⁶¹ Part of inversion, at least for the men described in Part one of *Sodom and Gomorrah*, is in the immediate recognition of those who share their tendencies. Indeed, the pronouncement that “even members who do not wish to know one another recognize one another immediately by natural or conventional, involuntary or deliberate signs” absolves the narrator of an direct association with homosexuality, for if he were perceptive of Robert de Saint-Loup’s, or even Legrandin’s, initial manifestations of those signs of inversion, his own preferences would surely be called into question.

Mlle Vinteuil does indeed wrestle with an interiorized masculinity or wickedness (which seem to be in some way related for Proust’s narrator), but in a fundamental sense, for Marcel she seems to transcend it in her possession of a “mentality not designed for vice.”⁶² The profanation of Mlle Vinteuil’s father here is of particular note; she, facing the impotent gaze of the deceased’s portrait, embraces her friend. Mlle Vinteuil may not be *predisposed* to vice—but is she predisposed to lesbianism? Here the vice is not attraction to other women, but her cruelty; particularly, the profanation of her doting, deceased father. Mlle Vinteuil emerges here as a kind of Baudelairian *Fleur du mal*, an “artist in evil,” engulfed in the act which so utterly contradicts her “gentle and scrupulous nature” (for, only those who are capable of cruelty in Proust are those who are not ordinarily hateful

⁶¹ Ladenson, Elisabeth. *Proust’s Lesbianism*. “Mothers and Daughters: The Origins of Gomorrah” pg 119

⁶² Swann’s Way, 203



or vindictive). Sex seems to afford one with the ability to utterly contradict their everyday comportment, which, as we have seen, is certainly the case for Charlus. Thus, if one is naturally kind and good natured, their sexual proclivities in Proust's opus might manifest as entirely distinct from a typical, understood selfhood. Mlle Vinteuil, during sex, is enabled to revel in cruelty by acting out some kind of poetical ascendance, eschewing the identity of daughter; "when they allow themselves for a moment to enjoy it they endeavour to impersonate, to assume all the outward appearance of wicked people... so as to gain the momentary illusion of having escaped... into the inhuman world of pleasure."⁶³

Yet even the baseness of this act, though "the appearance of evil was so strong," is lessened by the pleasure she takes in it. For, were she truly evil, if she despised her father completely, violating his portrait would hold no great novelty for her. Moreover, the portrait of Vinteuil, if it were not regarded as sacred by his daughter, would not give rise to the "impious delight" it produces in its defilement. Defying, even profaning one's own parents, can turn a painful reality into a pleasurable one, reconstituting pain and shame through an association with pleasure. A question one might ask is whether Mlle Vinteuil is a Gommorhan at all, or if she is nothing more than a 'good sort,' putting on lesbianism in a gesture of filial defiance. Even so, this episode offers a crucial departure from inversion: that, in this portrait of lesbianism, the narrator does not go beyond Mlle Vinteuil's kind of lesbianism, making sweeping declarations about a community of lesbianisms and their distinct psychologies or behaviors. The reason for her attraction to her friend is irrelevant, so long as the attraction exists in the first place. If we might attempt to engage with the question posed earlier regarding Deleuze's two theories of Proustian homosexuality, we would be justified in suggesting

⁶³ Swann's Way, 202



that, at least in view of the Montjouvain episode, lesbianism or Gomorrah appears to us as better suited to the local and nonspecific conception of it than the aggregate one. Is it this lack of specificity which enables Gomorrhans to more successfully enjoy and engage in lesbian community? Proust's narrator writes in the latter portion of *Sodom and Gomorrah* that "Gomorrah, dispersed, tends in every town, in every village, to reunite its separated members, to rebuild the biblical city while everywhere the same efforts are being made, if only in view of an intermittent reconstruction, by the nostalgic, the hypocritical, sometimes the courageous exiles of Sodom."⁶⁴

Though surely we must account for Montcrieff's translation of Proust's original French, the definitive pronouncements as seen in the narrator's descriptions of the activities of 'Sodomites' are not frequently found in later sections detailing the elusive Gomorrah. Inversion is framed as "an incurable disease," with its members sharing in some universal features—"even members who do not wish to know one another recognize one another immediately by natural or conventional, involuntary or deliberate signs which indicate one of his kind." Some of the elements of Sodom appear to us in descriptions of Gomorrah: Gomorrhans, like Sodomites, are assumed to be able to recognize one another as 'denizens' of the same debauched kingdom. Proust's lesbians manifest the vice not in relations with men but only with other women. It would be apt to say that Sodom is a great deal more well defined, more highly specialized in *La recherche* than is the elusive kingdom of Gomorrah. Thus we can say that Sodom adheres better to Deleuze's first kind of sexuality and Gomorrah to his second. Yet even within the kingdom of Sodom there are certain cases wherein 'men who take pleasure with other men' are not inverts, but are rather *converts* to homosexuality. Thus, even within the context of Proust's Sodomites, there are both highly specialized sorts of

⁶⁴ SG, 339



homosexuality, and variegated, more ambiguous sorts. We already know it to be the case that Proust (or at the very least, Proust's narrator) assumes inverts to be men-women, but what of lesbians? Do they sometimes incarnate this textual hermaphroditism? Of course, the statement made was not that it was a virtual certainty that Gomorrhans would seek out Sodomites, or vice-versa, but nonetheless, it assumes a prevailing masculinity for women-loving-women. Even so, one does not find with such frequency the inherent 'masculinity' of Gomorrhans in Proust, as one does the signs of 'femininity' in his Sodomites.



V: Sign, Meaning, & Essence

*The characters of Sodom, the characters of Gomorrah
compensate by the intensity of the sign for the secret to which they are bound.*

*Of a woman looking at Albertine, Proust writes:
“One would have said that she was making signs to her
as though with a beacon”⁶⁵*

-Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*

To explore the domain of earthly signs, of which Charlus is perhaps “the most prodigious emitter,” let us begin with the first instance of the narrator’s total inability to decipher the invocations of Sodom. Marcel is previously held captive by signs which he readily apprehends as signaling *something*, though, until he diagnoses the root element of the sign, it holds him hostage. When a sign is not understood in relation to the object of Proust’s narrator’s desire, it manifests as jealousy, and when recognized in a person who is not of romantic interest to Proust’s narrator, it manifests as revulsion. He feels himself subordinated by the sign which cannot yet be designated. Proust’s narrator is, in a literal sense, subordinated by signs when he fails to interpret the meaning of the present given him by the Baron de Charlus (as described in the first part). Gilles Deleuze writes that “truth is never the product of a prior disposition but the result of a violence in thought.” The violence in thought which comes about in the deciphering of signs does not affirm one’s beliefs about something or *someone* in Proust’s *Recherche*, but instead produces a violent effect because the uncovering of truth relies upon the involuntary conditions that enclose it. Deleuze specifies the elements which constitute the uncovering of truth:

Proust sets the double idea of “constraint” and of “chance.” Truth depends on an encounter with something that forces us to think and to seek the truth. The accident of encounters and

⁶⁵ *Proust and signs*, pg 10



the pressure of constraints are Proust's two fundamental themes. Precisely, it is the sign that constitutes the object of an encounter and works this violence upon us. It is the accident of the encounter that guarantees the necessity of what is thought... What is it that the man who says "I want the truth" wants? He wants the truth only when it is constrained and forced. He wants it only under the rule of an encounter, in relation to such and such a sign. What he wants is to interpret, to decipher, to translate, to find the meaning of the sign.⁶⁶ These two conditions, which must be fulfilled in order for the signs of homosexuality to be soundly deciphered, are not met by Proust's narrator in his appraisal of the simultaneously fugitive and captive "bird," Albertine. Were one to ask why Marcel, despite keeping his supposedly Gomorrhian lover under figurative lock and key, still fails to learn of Albertine's true sexual nature, we might offer in response that it is *because* of Marcel's fervor, because of his obsession with seeing possible manifestations of Gomorrhah, that it continues to resist him. Looking for a moment at Marcel's and Albertine's relationship, perhaps the only thing that enhances Marcel's love (for, love finds its apogee in jealousy for Proust) is the looming possibility of Albertine's lesbianism. An accidental encounter with the sign is rather difficult when the one under scrutiny is painfully aware that they are being watched.

"Mlle Bloch and her friend, who for some days had imagined themselves to have been excluded from the Casino and the Grand Hotel, seeing that all was well, were delighted to show these respectable family men who held aloof from them that they might with impunity take the utmost liberties. No doubt they did not go so far as to repeat the public exhibition which had revolted everybody. But gradually they returned to their old ways. And one evening as I came out of the Casino, which was half in darkness, with Albertine and Bloch whom we had met there, they came by, linked together, kissing each other incessantly, and, as they passed us, crowed and chortled and uttered indecent cries... I was tortured by the thought that this private and horrifying language was addressed perhaps to Albertine."⁶⁷ The feeling of being excommunicated from the world of Albertine, this domain which fluctuates between brilliance and dullness, is that of torture, although the fact of being in love seems to be validated by the pain which his lover provokes in her inscrutability.

⁶⁶*Proust And Signs*, 16

⁶⁷ *SG*, 339



Suddenly this pain is reduced to nothing when we think of the unknown evil element in her life, of the places, impossible to identify, where she has been, where she still goes perhaps during the hours when we are not with her, if indeed she is not planning to live there altogether, those places in which she is separated from us, does not belong to us, is happier than when she is with us. Such are the revolving searchlights of jealousy. Jealousy is moreover a demon that cannot be exorcised, but constantly reappears in new incarnations. Even if we could succeed in exterminating them all, in keeping the beloved for ever, the Spirit of Evil would then adopt another form, more pathetic still, despair at having obtained fidelity only by force, despair at not being loved.⁶⁸

In *The Captive*, Albertine goes to Versailles alone, and Marcel speculates to her chauffeur, “people must have stared at her, such a dazzling young lady all by herself.” “Why, of course they stared at her, but she knew practically nothing about it; she went round all the time with her eyes glued to her guide-book, or gazing up at the pictures.”⁶⁹ Later in the same passage, Marcel relates that “What is certain is that this version of the chauffeur’s story, by ridding me of any fear that Albertine might have deceived me, quite naturally cooled my ardour towards my mistress and made me take less interest in the day that she had spent at Versailles... the chauffeur’s explanations, by absolving Albertine, made her seem even more boring to me than before.” Two pimples appearing on Albertine’s face also have the effect of muddying his impression of her, and his attention is diverted by news of Gilberte (who is interested in another man). There are several important aspects of desire, and its absence, which are elucidated in this passage. Firstly, for Marcel the competition with other people for Albertine’s attention can be exciting even when he is not there to observe it himself.

If Albertine should not have been living with me, if she had been free, I should have imagined, and with reason, every one of these women as a possible or indeed a probable object of her desire, of her pleasure.

⁶⁸ C, 129

⁶⁹ C, 171



When put in contrast with Robert de Saint-Loup's The unintended consequence of Marcel's impulse to imprison Albertine however, is that, as her daily activities are now known, the imagined world in which Albertine's adulation by other women renders her a prize to be won can no longer exist. That is, until even the slightest gesture exchanged between her and one of her putatively lesbian friends conjures in Marcel a flash which restores his first impression of her, making her attractive once more.⁷⁰ Yet as Proust writes, those most well hidden from us are those that we love, and it follows from this that perhaps *because* the narrator himself is in love with Albertine, he cannot fully make sense of the intricacies of Gomorrah as he can Sodom. Moreover, if Marcel were to frequently identify something innately masculine in women (those he is purportedly attracted to), it might indicate to us that he is seeking this out in them.⁷¹ This is to say that, in Proust, one identifies in others the qualities one hopes to find. Charlus identifies Cottard as a homosexual, merely because he "was only too inclined to see people of his sort everywhere," mistaking the professor's friendliness and winks as flirtation—it is a projection though; he regards Cottard as one of the confraternity not by an identification of some predisposition on his part (as it is the case that Proust's inverts are able to detect one another), but through an imagined rivalry of sorts:

"The invert brought face to face with an invert sees not merely an unpleasing image of himself which, being purely inanimate, could at the worst only injure his self-esteem, but a second self, living, active in the same field, capable therefore of injuring him in his loves."⁷²

⁷⁰ "It required excursions like this, in which I imagined her, but for my presence, accosted by some woman or by some young man, to make me see her again amid the splendour of the beach" *The Captive*, 225

⁷¹ To this point, Elisabeth Ladenson writes: "Many of Proust's critics had already begun to conclude that an interest in lesbianism on the part of a homosexual male author could only have been a displaced way of dealing with male homosexuality. In contrast, Proust decides that an interest in lesbianism on the part of an apparently heterosexual male author could only have been a displaced expression of his otherwise hidden homosexuality." 22

⁷² *SG*, 432



We must consider the fact of Marcel's gender as a barrier to proximity with Gomorrhans, who seem to band together in groups that entirely exclude men; undoubtedly owing to the social mores of the time. Signs of one's inversion appear to the 'other race of men' (non-inverts) as curious even before they are registered as indicators of inversion itself.

We should now return to Charlus, who incarnates the violent signs of his inversion in every possible configuration: "by his worldly power, his pride, his sense of theater, his face, and his voice."⁷³ In a similar manner to which Bloch's Jewishness is orientalized—his presence in the environs of the *mondain* salon enjoyed because he has not assimilated his 'vice'—Charlus's so-called friends regard him as more intelligent, better company, because of his inversion. "In a french drawing-room... a Jew making his entry as though he were emerging from the desert, his body crouching like a hyena's, his neck thrust forward, offering profound "salaams," completely satisfies a certain taste for the oriental."⁷⁴ The signs exhibited by Bloch of a kind of un-acculturation render him an aestheticized figure, rather than a merely social being. Charlus, by the same token, evinces the "charm of unfamiliarity with which a psychology analogous to that which our own dramatic literature has offered us from time immemorial is clothed in a Russian or Japanese play performed by native actors."⁷⁵ Though Charlus sometimes successfully conceals his femininity and his desire for men (and I relate the two only because Proust's narrator does so), his otherness always manifests in some form or another. This otherness has the effect though, of furnishing his circle with an aesthetic purview otherwise unknown to them. The qualities of absurdity, then, seem to be encouraged, and thus heightened, by their aesthetic fetishization of him. One sign of his inversion,

⁷³ *Proust and Signs*, 6

⁷⁴ *GW*, 253

⁷⁵ *SG*, 599



of the “feminine delicacy of sensibility and mind” is his intolerance “especially of young men, a hatred so violent as to suggest that of certain extreme misogynists for women.”⁷⁶ This hatred of men appears for Charlus substantially more sincere than his ostensible hatred of Jews. Proustian love, which at its heart is localized in the hatred of the objects of one’s desire, directs the Baron’s contempt as such. Moreover, it is not only the desired person that we hate, but the one that we wish to *become*. For, in modeling ourselves after the person that we wish to become, we find that we hate them both because we can never truly become them, and, as a means of keeping intact our sense of oneness, we must destroy them so that we can effectuate our transformation.

⁷⁶ *WBG*, 606-607



VI: The Convert, Robert de Saint-Loup

We have saved Robert de Saint Loup for last—as we began our discussion with inversion, it would be apt to close with another sort of homosexuality. Robert de Saint-Loup’s narrative apotheosis is in Marcel’s discovery of his homosexuality, which marks a reversal of the familiar inversion model seen in earlier volumes; a reconstitution of the previously feminized, *‘transsexual’* homosexuality. There is a clear before, during, and after within Robert’s ‘descent’ into sexual otherness, which is not the result of an intransigent *beingness* but rather a process of conversion by way of an inherited sexuality that coalesces later in life. Marcel, in his reflections about moments during their friendship wherein Robert exhibited certain signs of homosexual desire, concludes that “Saint-Loup’s physiological evolution had not begun at that period... he had then been still exclusively a lover of women.” The narrator’s evaluation of Saint-Loup relies upon their friendship as the metric by which his former friend’s homosexuality can be measured—for, as he tells us later, the fact of Saint-Loup’s newfound interest in men precludes him from legitimate friendships with them. In regarding men as objects of desire, the sole determinant of Saint-Loup’s friendliness towards them is assumed by the narrator to be predicated upon his physical attraction to them.⁷⁷ If anything, his presence in *La recherche* contradicts the essentializing of homosexuality that André Gide accused him of years earlier: his beingness alone substantiates that Proust does is not of the mindset that *all* homosexuals are inverts in nature.

⁷⁷ “it was only when he still loved women that he was really capable of friendship. Afterwards... to the men who did not attract him physically he displayed an indifference which was to some extent, I believe, sincere—for he had become very curt—but which he exaggerated as well in order to make people think that he was interested only in women.” *F*, 928



Robert de Saint-Loup, following the formula in which sexual proclivities are passed down to another (I refer here to the Swann-Marcel and to the Rachel-Gilberte models of sexual recapitulation), incarnates a transformation into Baron through a kind of heredity. Yet, their first appearances in Proust's *Recherche*, the uncle and nephew could not have been more different—the two are, at least politically, in diametric opposition: Charlus, an avid anti-semite, and Robert, a valiant bourgeois defender of Jews. This seeming incongruence between the two breaks down at the moment when Robert abandons his political contentions in entering his marriage. At the same time, Palamède de Charlus's flagrant antisemitism is less an expression of genuine hatred than an extension of his facetious perversity and flair for the melodramatic. Charlus, at the end of *Sodom and Gomorrah*, performs one of his many "abominable little speeches" wherein he suggests that Bloch should move to the Jewish ghetto, to the Rue des Blancs-Manteaux, on which "there lived a strange Jew who boiled the Host, after which I think they boiled him, which is stranger still since it seems to suggest that the body of a Jew can be equivalent to the Body of Our Lord."⁷⁸⁷⁹ His jocular, the lightheartedness with which he makes such a speech, both signals to us the fact of his having normalized the unrestrained vulgarity of antisemitism, and that he does not take the subject as seriously as he purports to. This lack of restraint seems a reflection of his pleasure at displaying "his insolent wit" to others whom he hopes to impress.⁸⁰

Returning now to the convert model, the newly married Robert undergoes a total transfiguration into the familiar model of the aristocratic *mondaine*, Palamède de Charlus. Yet in becoming an effigy of Charlus, Robert's contempt for his uncle only seems to increase. Like the

⁷⁸ "Abominable little speech" *SG*, 137

⁷⁹ *SG*, 690

⁸⁰ *SG*, 137



Swann-Marcel model of desire, Robert takes on the familiar desires of his predecessor; both despising him and venerating him in equal measure.

“If the war did not modify the character of Saint-Loup, his intelligence, developed through an evolution in which heredity played a great part, had reached a degree of brilliancy which I had never seen in him before. How far away was the young golden-haired man formerly courted or who aspired to be, by fashionable ladies and the dialectician, the doctrinaire who was always playing with words. To another generation of another branch of his family, much as an actor taking a part formerly played by Bressant or Delaunay, he, blonde, pink and golden was like a successor to M. de Charlus, once dark, now completely white.”

He has, during his affair with *Rachel-quand-du-seigneur*, learned all that a good husband should know. It is from Rachel that Saint-Loup practices being a lover of women; he transposes the same mannerisms learned in his dealings with Rachel with Gilberte, kissing her gloves and calling the waiter as he once did. Not only is the period of time spent with Rachel simply an avenue for learning, but it furnishes Saint-Loup with the opportunity, under the guise of fending off rivals, to observe handsome men. Marcel expresses little doubt that Robert was formerly a lover of women, and I will not take up the position that Robert did not love Rachel; that, all along, it was really men that he desired. Saint-Loup’s homosexuality, if we were to identify its first manifestation, might be situated, in fact, in his relationship with his former mistress, Rachel. Marcel’s observation of Saint-Loup during a meal with *Rachel-quand-du-seigneur* uncovers a partial truth about the nature of their relationship. The scene, taking place in the third volume of *La recherche*, *The Guermantes Way*, describes Saint-Loup’s fixation upon other men in the restaurant. Marcel represents his friend’s nervous gaze as the consequence of a suspicion-fuelled desire for Rachel, “quickened by jealousy,” orienting Robert’s attention towards romantic rivals. Here, Marcel notices that Robert seems to identify the presence of attractive men even before his mistress Rachel’s ‘wandering eye’ is diverted.



Marcel, observing Robert, notes that his friend has already determined which of the waitstaff in the little restaurant is most physically desirable.

[Robert] had at once observed—what had escaped our notice at Balec—that among his coarser colleagues Aimé exuded not only a modest distinction but, quite unconsciously of course, that air of romance which emanates for a certain number of years from fine hair and a grecian nose, features thanks to which he stood out among the crowd of other waiters.⁸¹ Marcel designates Saint Loup's behavior as nothing more than a protective reflex—however, given the later revelation that Robert belongs to the kingdom of Sodom, the supposition here should be examined further. If we take Proust at his word that Marcel is a veritable heterosexual, his explanation of Robert's behavior is one which does not interrogate the source of his friend's desires *because* he assumes his friend's heterosexuality. I do not, by any stretch of the imagination, mean to suggest that the episode is written in such a way that Saint-Loup's attraction to other men is plainly apparent. Robert exhibits all of the qualities which one would expect to find in the archetypal jealous lover, spurred on by a promiscuous other.

Aimé must have been conscious of the insistence with which the eyes of the young actress were fastened upon him now... it did not escape Robert, beneath whose skin I saw a flush begin to gather, not vivid like that which burned his cheeks when he felt sudden emotion, but faint and diffused."⁸²

The redness of his face seems to us a genuine testament to Saint-Loup's anger. It is also the case that, of all the men who are known to us as inverts or as *inverti*, Robert seems not to fit that mold so easily. As we stated previously, in Saint-Loup's newfound affectation, which flows from a borrowed behavioral model (that of his uncle) he has become a wholly different person. For the narrator, vice seems to be the reversal of one's nature... This putting on airs, the dramatic alteration of one's

⁸¹ *GW*, 218

⁸² *GW*, 220



manner of being, is the locus of a certain immorality in Proust—the distinctive characteristics of Palamède which Saint-Loup pantomimes, constitute a betrayal. Having not seen the signs of his sexuality before Jupien’s disclosure of Morel as having “taken up with the nephew” of Charlus, nor before the subsequent admission by Aimé that “M. le Marquis shut himself up with my lift-boy,” Proust’s narrator experiences the revelation as one might upon learning of the death of a close family member. All of the stages of grief are demonstrable here, at the end of Proust’s sixth volume. First manifested as total repudiation, “either the lift-boy had lied, or it was Aimé who was lying,” the narrator’s reflection begins to crystallize—such that previous signs which would support the words of Jupien and Aimé float to the surface. Marcel remembers the words of Saint-Loup at Doncières: “Curious, that fellow reminds me in some ways of Rachel. Doesn’t it strike you? They seem identical in some ways.”⁸³ Marcel, having previously recognized signs of Robert behaving strangely, is still wholly unprepared for the massive upheaval that his discussion with Jupien inaugurates. Like those who are too close to a person to believe that there are aspects of their lives wholly unknown to them, Marcel (like Françoise, who continually misinterprets the signs of Charlus’s proclivities) is utterly startled by this news. Unlike Charlus, Saint-Loup’s inversion does not soften him, but makes him rather “cold and evasive.” It is, however, a manner which he has “adopted.”⁸⁴

It might be apt to compare the Charlus-Robert model to that of Rachel and Gilberte. Gilberte de Saint-Loup (formerly Swann), conscious of her husband’s non-attraction to her, emulates the appearance, behaviors, and dress of Rachel so as to become nearer to the image of her husband’s ex-lover. Like Mme. de Vaugoubert, the plight of the invert seems to have been passed to

⁸³ *F*, 929

⁸⁴ *F*, 934



her. She finds in her husband that, though she may come close to her husband's ideal, she can never satisfy it, as the invert can never fully realize the love of a 'real man.'



VII: A Quasi Conclusion

When I followed my instinct only, the jellyfish used to revolt me at Balbec; but if I had the eyes to regard them, like Michelet, from the standpoint of natural history and aesthetics, I saw an exquisite blue girandole. Are they not, with the transparent velvet of their petals, as it were the mauve orchids of the sea? (SG)

Having reflected upon many of the fragmentary signs which constitute Proust's worlds of Sodom and Gomorrah, we might now move to a consideration of these fragments as a mosaic portrait of sexual alterity. What remains clear in the piecing together of all of these disparate parts is that love, hatred, jealousy, and subordination, are all part and parcel of the same universal spirit of Proustian desire. Proust spoke truthfully when he professed that inversion was not the only sort of homosexuality... While other sorts of homosexuality are less well considered in his oeuvre, it is the case that for a writer one concept might hold their attention more forcefully than another. Such is the case in my own writing—without having intended to do so, it is more than likely that there are parts of my analysis which appear considerably less well attended to than others.

To recapitulate some things that we have learned over the course of this paper, inversion seems a kind of “aggregate and specific” identity in Proust, and lesbianism or Gomorrah a “local and non-specific one.” Sexuality can be inherited, can be hereditarily or mimetically transposed, can be feigned and can be sublimated, and is, moreover, more intelligible to those who share the desires of another and less-so for those who do not. For the invert there is an original essence of his character; in the sense that he is *really* a woman. But lesbianism in Proust, at least in the case of Vinteuil, is treated as an unknown, perhaps unknowable sphere, in which understanding can only



occur in direct relation to the individual Gomorrhans, so that one can encounter a ‘truth’ about Gomorrah but never the ‘Truth.’ To take up the pronoun “I” at the conclusion of my writing, I would even venture to say that while Albertine tortures Marcel with her real or imagined lesbianism, his masculinity is never at risk of being superseded by Albertine’s. This is in contrast to Mme de Vaugoubert’s femininity, which is rather enfeebled, and can be overtaken by her husband’s somehow *more legitimate* femininity. It follows then, that though women can be masculinized in Proust, men are never emasculated unless by other men. Masculinity can be produced, can overcome one’s femininity, but the masculine can never be overwhelmed by the feminine—the misogynistic implications of this are not lost on us. The invert has been this way for his entire life, and cannot become it through artificial means, but the woman who was previously not *that way* can become so through the authority of her (outwardly male) lover. This signals to us either that lesbians in Proust’s are not inverts at all, that lesbian sexuality has no basis in an interiorized sense of masculinity whatsoever, or that if Gomorrhans are really female inverts, their masculinity is less tangible, less genuine than that of male inverts.

If Gomorrah is not an established kingdom but one that is gaining members through conversion, is its foundation in Proust predicated on a kind of falsehood? That Proust’s Gomorrhans are not subjected to attempts by the narrator to pathologize and classify their homosexuality has the effect of delegitimizing their relations with one another, thus rendering Gomorrhans as figures less worthy of the understanding bestowed upon Sodomites. As a parting thought, sex between a woman and a male invert constitutes a more legitimate manifestation of lesbianism than sex simply between two women. Proust’s positionality in this regard, is, however,



patently clear: in creating a linkage between the masculine and feminine, the rules of attraction are conceived of through a sort of universalizing binary, and as such all are drawn to *alack*. This lack is at the heart of men's sexual desire in Proust, except in the singular case of Proust's Gomorrhans, who, as Elisabeth Ladenson submits, are the only figures whose attraction does not spring from a vacuousness which must be filled by another, but from an indeterminate origin. Those closest to us, perhaps, are the ones who *cannot* be designated.



Bibliography

Beard, George Miller. *Sexual Neurasthenia*. 1886.

Bersani, Leo. *Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and of Art* Oxford Univ. Press, 2013.

Bersani, Leo. *Homos*. Harvard University Press, 1996.

Coogan, Michael David, and Bruce Manning Metzger. *The Oxford Guide to People & Places of the Bible* Oxford Univ. Press, 2004.

Crompton, Louis. *Homosexuality & Civilization*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2006.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Richard Howard. *Proust and Signs the Complete Text*. University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

Ellison, David R. *A Reader's Guide to Proust's in Search of Lost Time* Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Gide, André, and Louis Martin-Chauffier. *Oeuvres Complètes*. N.R.F., 1939.

Halperin, David M. *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*. Oxford University Press, 1997.

Kristeva, Julia, et al. *Time and Sense: Proust and the Experience of Literature* Columbia University Press, 1998.

Proust, Marcel, et al. *Autour De "La Recherche": Lettres*. Editions Complexe, 1988.



Proust, Marcel, and C. K. Scott-Moncrieff. *The Guermantes Way*. Modern Library, 1952.

Proust, Marcel, et al. *Sodom and Gomorrah*. Yale University Press, 2021.

Proust, Marcel, and C. K. Scott-Moncrieff. *Within a Budding Grove*. Chatto & Windus, 1976.

Proust, Marcel, et al. *The Captive & The Fugitive*. Modern Library, 2003.

Proust, Marcel, and C. K. Scott-Moncrieff. *Time Regained*. 2015.

Ladenson, Elisabeth. *Proust's Lesbianism*. Cornell University Press, 2018.

LeSage, Laurence. "Proust and Gide, Lifelong Antagonists." *The Modern Language Journal*, vol. 36, no. 4, 1952.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. University of California Press, 2008.

Sonnenfeld, Albert. "Marcel Proust: Antisemite? I." *The French Review*, vol. 62, no. 1, 1988, pp. 25–40.

Shattuck, Roger. *Marcel Proust*. Princeton University Press, 1982.

Weber, Caroline. *Proust's Duchess: How Three Celebrated Women Captured the Imagination of Fin-De-Siècle Paris*. Vintage Books, 2019.

Yoshikawa, Kazuyoshi. "DE CORYDON À SODOME ET GOMORRHE: AFFINITÉS OU DIVERGENCES ?" *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de La France*, vol. 119, no. 2, 2019, pp. 385–96.



