

The Lesbian and the Room: Proust's Invention of Difference

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Upon his first arrival to Balbec, the narrator of *A la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*) enters his hotel room and confronts private domestic space as an animate but hostile figure, resentful at a stranger's intrusion: "De la place, il n'y en avait pas pour moi dans ma chambre de Balbec (mienne de nom seulement), elle était pleine de choses qui ne me connaissaient pas, me rendirent le coup d'œil méfiant que je leur jetai et sans tenir aucun compte de mon existence, témoignèrent que je dérangeais le train-train de la leur" (RTP 529) 'In that room of mine at Balbec, "mine" in name only, there was no space for me: it was crammed with things which did not know me, which glared my distrust of them back at me, noting my existence only to the extent of letting me know they resented me for disturbing theirs' (SF 245).¹ In a new environment, stripped of the deadening but calming apparel of "Habit," the narrator, Marcel, experiences his room as a space traumatically different from him, an oppositional figure that has not yet been domesticated by routine or custom. Some months later, this room would no longer be a stranger to him for it "avait fini par devenir si réellement mienne que revoir les grands rideaux violets et le bibliothèques basses, c'était me retrouver seul avec moi-même dont les choses, comme les gens, m'offraient l'image" (RTP 572-73) 'had so genuinely become mine that to stand among its long violet curtains and low bookcases was to be alone with the self that saw its own image in furnishings, as in people' (SF 303). Once in his possession, the room no longer intimidates but becomes a place where he can peacefully be alone among objects that reflect his own image. The threat of the room is contained once difference becomes reassuringly familiar.

Throughout Proust's writing, the space of the room is suffused with animate and animating powers that fascinate the young narrator as much as they terrify him, that comfort him as often as they unsettle him. The hotel room in Balbec, entered as a threat and exited as a second self, could be read as the mirror image of his childhood bedroom in Combray upon whose walls a magic lantern projects the enchanting story of Geneviève de Brabante while simultaneously transforming his comfortable bedroom into an alien dreamscape. These spaces provoke deeply ambivalent emotions in the narrator, who struggles against a host of overwhelming forces, both spatial and psychic, intent on unseating his authority.

As both Paul de Man and Richard Terdiman have argued, Proust's narratives enact an anxiety of contingency, of external forces of difference that appear as threats to a fantasy of stable autonomous individuality. This anxiety

chases Proust's heroes indoors to seek refuge from the unknown. De Man, in his meticulous close reading of the childhood bedroom episode in the first volume of the *Recherche*, traces Proust's rhetorical devices to show how the narrator strives to metaphorically enclose the outside world into the space of his bedroom. In order to obey his grandmother, who urges outdoor activity, without having to give up his own pleasure of indoor seclusion, Marcel creates a figurative universe in which the outdoors are absorbed into interior space:

The narrator is able to assert, without seeming to be preposterous, that by staying and reading in his room, Marcel's imagination finds access to "the total spectacle of Summer," including the attractions of direct physical action, and that he possesses it much more effectively than if he had been actually present in an outside world that he then could only have known by bits and pieces. (60)

Terdiman links this writerly investment in interior spaces to the romanticism of Théophile Gautier in a "common intent to evade domination by outside forces beyond one's choosing or beneath one's dignity: to slip free of external determination by resolutely barricading oneself" (*Present Past* 160). But, as both Terdiman and de Man insist, Proust's supposed security indoors is always undercut by an ambiguity that resists full apprehension and absorption into sameness. The text suffers from a will to mastery that will always be subverted by a difference or non-unity imagined as originating from outside.

While de Man and Terdiman approach with wariness Proust's resistance to the difference of externality and corresponding seclusion, queer and feminist critics have celebrated Proust's focus on sameness and interiors. Leo Bersani argues that "new reflections on homo-ness could lead us to a salutary devalorizing of difference—or, more exactly, to a notion of difference not as a trauma to be overcome . . . but rather as a nonthreatening supplement to sameness" (7).² In *The Sense of an Interior*, Diana Fuss takes issue with critical preconceptions of and insinuations upon the "worldliness" and cosmopolitanism of male modernists in general, and of Proust in particular, that work to suppress or belittle his apparent dependence upon domestic interiors: "For Proust's critics and biographers, it is specifically the image of the sunless cork-lined bedroom, with its placenta-like inner lining or skin, that summons up all the connotations of effeminacy, passivity, narcissism, and infantilism" (152). For Fuss, Proust's narrative and personal interest in interior spaces belong to a historically specific reaction to the "Hausmannization" of Paris and its traumatic restructuring of space: "As if in compensation for everything that has been lost in the urban assault on the interior, the modern novelist moves further inward, searching for the lost object precisely where Proust's narrator finds it, in 'the inner walls of his being'" (156).

Fuss's interest in examining and interpreting the rooms of writers rests upon an association of interior spaces with psychic interiority. This paper, however, is interested in thinking about the room not as the "inner space" of emotional or psychological trauma but as an externalized object. As object, the room allows Proust's narrator to strategically navigate an ambitious project of evolution from passive reader to active writer. As the descriptions of the hotel room in Balbec illustrate, the threat of being devoured by the difference of the room is central to the Proustian narrator's interaction with the world. The room functions as the stage for a fantasy of mastery, in which a weak young hero learns the ways of the world, acquires the appropriate skills, and eventually defeats and absorbs the external threat. And yet, as I will show below, this fantasy of the room is indeed nothing but a stage: the narrative voice fully recognizes the falseness of the authority gained over the vanquished room. In fact, he depends upon the falseness of the fantasy, so that at certain moments we can witness him exposing its very fictitiousness, in order to catalyze the development of his imagination and his growth as a writer.

The femininity that Fuss highlights in regards to the room plays an important role in Proust's depiction of mastery and gestures toward a more general claim I make elsewhere.³ The domestic room, historically and figuratively, is a space that women occupy, embody, and represent. The very biographical fact of Proust's cork-lined room, argues Fuss, soils the male modernist with effeminate domestic concerns that supposedly shy away from the masculine world of war and politics. Proust's male body hiding in a female space confuses and upsets gendered expectations. Yet, the fantasy of mastering the feminized space of the room that Proust's narrator simultaneously performs and unmasks leads us to question not so much the strictly feminine characterization of domestic space, but its strict differentiation and separation from the public world. If the room is not simply an internal space of private struggle but also is an external object of narrative strategy, then the feminized figure that the room signifies is not simply a shrinking violet divorced from public affairs, but is actually the very object upon which public figuration depends. The room's ambivalent femininity—and the struggle to contain and master it—conditions masculine authorship.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has already made a similar claim in *Epistemology of the Closet*, explaining how the narrator of the *Recherche* creates the conditions of his own authorship on the back of Albertine's incoherent sexuality. The narrator transforms the homosexual "closet"—the private same-sex relations that occur behind closed doors—into a public spectacle that, through a discursive sleight of hand, allows him the space to closet not only his own homosexual desires but also the arbitrariness of his narrative authority. Extending Sedgwick's reading, I argue that prefiguring and supporting the narrator's discursive

construction of the homosexual closet—which in turn authorizes his narrative efforts—are his encounters with rooms in general as feminized domestic spaces whose ostensible impenetrability, but always-potential breach, is the subject of much concern for the narrator. From the narrator's early struggles with the room materialize the trope that is doomed to repeat throughout the *Recherche*: the mastery of the feminine other, whose difference from the self must be absorbed and contained. Albertine, “la prisonnière” ‘the prisoner,’ becomes the exemplary ungovernable woman. Both trapped within the room and embodying the very space of the room, Albertine's “fugitive” lesbian desire provokes acute suffering in Marcel while simultaneously prolonging his agonized love for a person who otherwise would become an uncomplicated bore. The acuteness of his suffering, he discovers, is matched by the liveliness of his imagination, which seeks to fill in the gaps left in Albertine's incomplete stories and explanations. His non-mastery of Albertine, his inability to control her distance and difference from him, is a necessary—and I argue, an invented—non-mastery that enables the aspiring author to write the stories of her transgressions. For the Proustian narrator, the room and the lesbian are both figures that provide the fantasy of enclosure whose inevitable failure, or traumatic vulnerability to contingency and transgression, make possible the task of narration.

The path to authorship for the narrator of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* is a long journey during which he must decipher the banalities of the social world, confront the mysteries of sexual encounters, and overcome his own idleness and insecurity. Before establishing himself as a writer, an achievement reached during the final pages of the seven-volume novel, the narrator is first and foremost a reader.⁴ The first images we encounter are of reading: the narrator dozing before an open book, a magic lantern projecting a fairytale onto a bedroom wall, a mother reading *François le Champi* (*The Country Waiif*) to her son, and a digression on the pleasures of reading alone in his room. This last episode—which describes a childhood room as a refuge for afternoon reading—is a re-writing of an early essay, *Sur la lecture* (1905) (*Days of Reading*), that served as a preface to Proust's French translation of *Sesame and Lilies* by John Ruskin. Proust opens this essay, which meditates on Ruskin's theories of reading, with an autobiographical episode from his childhood: “Il n'y a peut-être pas de jours de notre enfance que nous ayons si pleinement vécus que ceux que nous avons cru laisser sans les vivre, ceux que nous avons passés avec un livre préféré” (SL 9) ‘There are no days of my childhood which I lived so fully perhaps as those I thought I had left behind without living them, those I spent with a favourite book’ (DR 49). Reading is imagined as a pathway to the possibility of preserving the truth of living. Rather than hiding from the outside world, the narrator declares that reading occasions a communication between self and world, externalizing what is commonly regarded as an introverted act.

But as David Ellison claims, in *The Reading of Proust*, the narrator of *Sur la lecture* quickly closes down the means of communication that reading purportedly offers. Creating an allegory of the act of reading, the narrator moves from a description of a boy reading to a description of the room, or rather a description of two distinct rooms. According to Ellison, this move to allegory illustrates the narrator's reaction to the contradictions inherent in reading, a reaction that "simulate[s] openness to exterior reality and receptiveness to that which menaces the integrity of his ego while he forges a logic of domination and control that allows for no real communication with the outside" (91). In other words, the narrator's claim that reading both serves as a communion with the world and allows the reader to escape from his own ego is a ruse. For Ellison, the allegory of the room, because of its isolation, exposes the lie of the narrator's liberatory avowal and uncovers a more totalitarian agenda, so that what began as an essay offering an illustration of openness to external difference ends up elaborating instead "the idea of hiding and . . . the delightful possibility of an unobservable observation point or inviolable sanctuary" (90).

Yet the room is not as inviolable as Ellison suggests, and thus perhaps complicates the image of a totalitarian narrator, disavowing difference to protect the ego. As the narrator of *Sur la lecture* describes it, his room of reading—his childhood bedroom at his aunt's house in Combray—certainly appears disconnected from the outside world. It was a room that "était pleine de choses qui ne pouvaient servir à rien et qui dissimulaient pudiquement, jusqu'à en rendre l'usage extrêmement difficile, celles qui servaient à quelque chose" (SL 15) 'was full of objects that could serve no purpose and which modestly concealed, to the extent of making it extremely hard to use them, those which did serve a purpose' (DR 54-55). The room envelops the reading child in a space that is both sacred and, in its lack of usefulness, unintelligible. Filled with impractical objects, the room is devoid of use-value; its aesthetic principle derives not from utilitarian simplicity, but rather from a kind of brash egotism: "Mais c'est justement de ces choses qui n'étaient pas là pour ma commodité, mais semblaient y être venues pour leur plaisir, que ma chambre tirait pour moi sa beauté" (SL 15) 'But for me it was from these very objects which were not there for my convenience, but seemed to have come for their own pleasure, that my bedroom derived its beauty' (DR 55). What the narrator encounters when he enters the room is something radically other: the objects within make no attempt to accommodate his needs and seem to enjoy a pleasure of their own in which he does not participate. The otherness and uselessness of the room are interpreted as sacred inaccessibility: "Elles [les choses dans la chambre] la remplissaient d'une vie silencieuse et diverse, d'un mystère où ma personne se trouvait à la fois perdue et charmée ; elles faisaient de cette chambre une sorte de chapelle" (SL 18) 'They [the things in the room] filled it with a diverse and silent life, with a mystery in which my

person was at once lost and entranced; they made that bedroom into a sort of chapel' (DR 57). The narrator describes this world of the room as one in which the meaning of the sacred objects within points only back to themselves. They are objects of pure self-referentiality whose significance does not refer to anything outside of themselves, to any demand to be comfortable or useful or profitable.

The pleasure Proust's narrator takes from this egotism of the room, as Ellison suggests, shows him working to reject an external world of difference. Although the room confronts the narrator as different from and hostile to him, it is difference and hostility encountered within a secure and private environment. The narrator can bask in the exoticism of difference without any of its risks, as the description of a second room will make clear. From the sacred room of this childhood bedroom, the narrator brings the reader to a seedy hotel on the "avenue de la Gare, sur le Port, ou place de l'Église—dans un de ces hôtels de province aux longs corridors froids où le vent du dehors lutte avec succès contre les efforts du calorifère" (SL 20) 'Avenue de la Gare, overlooking the harbour, or in the Place de l'Église—in one of those provincial hotels with long cold corridors where the wind from outside is winning the battle against the efforts of the central heating' (DR 58-59). While the corridors may be drafty, the hotel rooms themselves "gardent un parfum de renfermé" (SL 20) 'retain a musty or close scent' (my translation). It is a room whose atmosphere is stale from lack of ventilation or any opening to fresh air. Their common detachment from the outside world connects these two opposite spaces: the sacred childhood bedroom and the seedy hotel room.

It is this detachment that produces the narrator's erotic desire. He wants to feel "plongée au sein du non-moi . . . en jouant le maître dans cette chambre pleine jusqu'aux bords de l'âme des autres" (SL 20) 'plunged into the heart of the non-self . . . playing the proprietor in a room filled to overflowing with the souls of others' (DR 58-59). As spaces that allow for the imagined mastery of difference, these rooms present a domain of fantasy in which the narrator can encounter radical otherness with pleasurable, non-threatening results:

où le soir, quand on ouvre la porte de sa chambre, on a le sentiment de violer toute la vie qui y est restée éparse, de la prendre hardiment par la main quand, la porte refermée, on entre plus avant, jusqu'à la table ou jusqu'à la fenêtre ; de s'asseoir dans une sorte de libre promiscuité avec elle sur le canapé . . . de toucher partout la nudité de cette vie dans le dessein de se troubler soi-même par sa propre familiarité. (SL 20)

Where in the evenings, when you open the door of your bedroom, you feel you are violating all the life that remains dispersed there, taking it boldly by the hand as, the door once closed you enter further in, up to the table or

the window; that you are sitting in a sort of free promiscuity with it on a settee . . . that you are everywhere touching the bareness of this life in the intention of disturbing yourself by your own familiarity. (DR 59)

The narrator enters the enclosed room and encounters a feminine presence of otherness—the promiscuity he enjoys is “avec elle” (*la vie*; ‘with her,’ the feminine-gendered ‘life’)—with which he enjoys an erotic “disturbance,” but which contains overtones of violation and mastery. According to Ellison’s interpretation: “But this plunge into the heart of the *other*, which carries with it the force of alienation and subjective dispossession, soon gives way to its opposite: the violent appropriation of the room’s identity in an act of mastery or imprisonment whose closest psychological equivalent is a phantasmatic rape” (92). In other words, Proust’s narrator claims that he yearns for the radically other and for encounters with difference that would wrench him away from self-reflective egotism; but what he shows us, instead, is an image of violent appropriation in which he play-acts alienation in order to reinforce the potency of his own autonomy. The reader here bears witness to a masculine fantasy of virility and autonomy: “alors, cette vie secrète, on a le sentiment de l’enfermer avec soi quand on va, tout tremblant, tirer le verrou ; de la pousser devant soi dans le lit et de coucher enfin avec elle dans les grands draps blancs qui vous montent par-dessus la figure” (SL 21) ‘then you have the sense of locking this secret life in with you, as you go, trembling all over, to bolt the door; of driving it ahead of you into bed and at last of lying down with it in the great white sheets’ (DR 59). The narrator, initially praising the act of reading as a means of communion with difference, ends up locking himself in a room in order to exercise his mastery over the feminine other and exalt in his imagined domination.

And yet, lodged in the middle of this fantasy of the room is the curious image of Prince Eugène. Bridging *Sur la lecture*’s sacred room and the hotel’s erotic ones, and injecting a seeming incoherence between the two self-contained spaces, the narrator describes an engraving of the “terrible et beau” ‘handsome and terrible’ Habsburg commander. Born in Paris under Louis XIV’s reign, Prince Eugène of Savoy was directed toward a career in the church because of his small physique and ungainly appearance. Intent upon a more prominent occupation, Eugène fled to Austria to join its military forces and eventually became one of the most successful commanders under the Habsburg monarchy. Decorating the wall of the narrator’s childhood bedroom, the image of Prince Eugène perhaps offers the asthmatic child an image of puissance housed in an unlikely body:

Quant à la photographie par Brown du Printemps de Botticelli ou au moulage de la Femme inconnue du musée de Lille, qui . . . sont la part concédée par William Morris à l’inutile beauté, je dois avouer qu’ils

étaient remplacés dans ma chambre par une sorte de gravure représentant le prince Eugène, terrible et beau dans son dolman, et que je fus très étonné d'apercevoir une nuit, dans un grand fracas de locomotives et de grêle, toujours terrible et beau, à la porte d'un buffet de gare, où il servait de réclame à une spécialité de biscuits. Je soupçonne aujourd'hui mon grand-père de l'avoir autrefois reçu, comme prime de la munificence d'un fabricant, avant de l'installer à jamais dans ma chambre. Mais alors je ne me souciais pas de son origine, qui me paraissait historique et mystérieuse et je ne m'imaginai pas qu'il pût y avoir plusieurs exemplaires de ce que je considérais comme une personne, comme un habitant permanent de la chambre que je ne faisais que partager avec lui et où je le retrouvais tous les ans, toujours pareil à lui-même. (SL 18-9)

As for the photograph by Brown of Botticelli's "Spring" or the cast of the "Unknown Woman" from the museum in Lille, which were William Morris's concession to a useless beauty on the walls . . . I have to confess that in my bedroom they had been replaced by a sort of engraving showing Prince Eugène, handsome and terrible in his dolman, which I was greatly astonished to catch sight of one night, amidst a great crashing of locomotives and hailstones, still handsome and terrible, in the entrance to a station buffet, where it was serving as an advertisement for a make of biscuits. Nowadays I suspect my grandfather of having got it in the old days as a bonus from a generous manufacturer, before installing it permanently in my bedroom. But at that time I was unconcerned by its origins, which seemed to me historical and mysterious, and I did not imagine that there might be several copies of what I looked on as a person, as a permanent inhabitant of the room which I merely shared with him and where every year I rediscovered him, forever the same. (DR 57-58)

This less-than-ideal example of Morris's "useless beauty" in fact provides the narrator a useful lesson about the contingencies of history and representation. In his youth, the narrator regarded the image of Prince Eugène as a singular figure, irreplaceable and impervious to the requirements of time or society. He was not simply a representation, he was the man himself. There was no distance between representation and its meaning since, like all the objects within the sacred space of the room, significance emerged as fully present, "toujours pareil à lui-même" 'forever the same.' As he ages, however, the narrator discovers the fundamental vulnerability this sacred image has to outside influence. Not only does he come to recognize the iterability of the image, that "plusieurs exemplaires" 'several copies' of the same image can exist in several different rooms, but he must also admit the image's role in a chain of references: the engraving refers to an army

commander as much as it refers to biscuits, is subject to the demands of profit, and can be offered as a manufacturer's bonus.

If the narrator's description of the room is meant to work as an allegory of reading, it ends up revealing a gap in the heart of the fantasy of enclosure and domination, a gap that leaves space for the possibility of writing. The room is not, in fact, a sacred, self-referential space in which to enact fantasies of masculine conquest and a rejection of external difference. Rather, the narrator's room turns out to be retrospectively contaminated by contingency. The adult narrator, wiser and more worldly than his childhood self, shows us that in the center of this memory of enclosure are external forces of *différance*, of influence and repetition—the very elements necessary for the act of representation, where distance and difference come to separate the sign from the object of signification. The etching of Prince Eugène that inhabits the childhood room—the picture of masculine virility, seemingly ageless and unaffected by time—acts as the very instrument that exposes the work of fantasy. Bought and sold or given away for free, battered by the “great crashing of locomotives and hailstones,” the image of Prince Eugène reveals how the sacred contents of the room are, have been, or will be exposed to the elements and thus are vulnerable to other significations.

This vulnerability of enclosed interior space produces for the Proustian narrator the necessary opportunity to break free from the fascinating, entranced position of reader and step into the role of author. If the room threatens to overcome the narrator, it threatens not with the overwhelming force of its feminine difference, but rather with the irresistible opportunity for a young man to enact his pretended mastery over it. Locked within this fantasy, he would have indeed been stuck in the very position Ellison sees him in: trapped in a cycle of violence, repeating his domination of the victimized feminine other over and over again. But there is a noticeable distance and difference between the entranced young reader and the wizened narrator that suggests that he has managed to escape not the overpowering otherness of the room, but the seductive fantasy of his ability to overpower otherness. The older narrator recognizes the very openness of the room, its susceptibility to external threat, its inability to actually or effectively protect the occupant from the outside world. This fundamental powerlessness to provide a stable ground upon which to stage the performance of masculine prowess—the room as not at all the private safe haven in which to hide from a scary public world—is precisely what allows the narrator to become a narrative voice, recounting the stories of his youth.

More than a conflict between external activity and internal sanctuary, the room is a figure that allows the weaving of a complex fabric of narrative perception. If, in his youth, the narrator believed the room to be a refuge for containing an eroticized feminine Other, the wiser narrative voice reveals the room as offering the disruption rather than the fulfillment of desire. The

perspective of childhood is interwoven with the retrospective voice of the adult narrator who dispels the naïve fantasies of the desiring youth. Confronting the failure of desire becomes imperative for the Proustian narrator in his journey toward authorship. The retrospective failure in/of the room in *Sur la lecture* is repeated in *A la recherche du temps perdu*. In the latter text, the room merges with its female occupant and captive, Albertine, whose suspected lesbian desire occasions the narrator's loss of illusions. This failure of the narrator's mastery appears as a purposeful event authorially enacted in order to both demonstrate and provoke the narrator's writerly talents. Lesbian desire gets written into the story of Albertine in order to produce the possibility of the young protagonist's fall from innocence into the role of the seasoned, cynical author. In order for Marcel to become a writer, he must create the conditions of his own authorship, in this case the twin images of the degraded room and the lesbian lover, two fantasies of sacred femininity come undone.

In much the same way as the narrator of *Sur la lecture* reveals the uncertainty of the room's inviolability, the narrator of *Recherche* questions Albertine's faithfulness. Albertine's relation to the room is more than a parallel tendency to disappoint the narrator: she travels the text as the embodiment of fantasized domestic space, a walking vision of protective enclosure and security. In *La Prisonnière*, Albertine's refusal to remain imprisoned—her status as “fugitive” and her alleged lesbian desire—undermines Marcel's youthful fantasy of domination but also allows for his eventual progression from reader to writer. Albertine becomes imagined as an evasive coquette, purposefully read as unfaithful so that the narrator might create the space for his own authoritative voice. As Marcel admits in the middle of a complaint regarding Albertine's mendacity: “ses aveux, parce que si rares . . . ils laissaient entre eux, en tant qu'ils concernaient le passé, de grands intervalles tout en blanc et sur toute la longueur desquels il me fallait retracer, et pour cela d'abord apprendre sa vie” (RTP 1675-6) ‘her confessions were so few . . . that they left between them, in so far as they concerned the past, great blanks which it was my duty to fill in with the story of her life’ (P 86). The narrator depends upon these blanks, indeed generates their appearance, so that he may retrace and apprehend her life. In his retracing and apprehension, in his move to control Albertine's story, the narrator effectively becomes the author of her life.

Albertine lives in Marcel's home, in *La Prisonnière*, as a text already read but misunderstood. Jealous of a possible lesbian affair with Mlle Vinteuil, whose lesbianism has been verified by the narrator in his youth, Marcel has coerced Albertine into secretly living in his family's home. The question of her lesbianism functions as the threatening, but also compelling, mystery that provokes the narrator's hermeneutic will: “Et maintenant qu'elle m'avait dit un jour « Mlle Vinteuil », j'aurais voulu non pas arracher sa robe pour voir son corps, mais, à

travers son corps, voir tout ce bloc-notes de ses souvenirs et de ses prochains et ardents rendez-vous” (RTP 1672) ‘And now that she had once said to me “Mlle Vinteuil” I longed, not to tear off her dress and see her body, but to see through her body to the whole note-book of her memories and plans for further, ardent lovers’ meetings’ (P 82). The name “Mlle Vinteuil” comes to signify lesbian desire and works to trigger Marcel’s drive to read and understand.

The problem that Marcel confronts throughout the novel, however, is sustaining his interest in a given text long enough to want to continue reading. Once he feels he understands Albertine, he loses interest in her. But the moment she triggers his jealousy, his desire for her reignites. Marcel admits that “D’Albertine, en revanche, je n’avais plus rien à apprendre. Chaque jour, elle me semblait moins jolie. Seul le désir qu’elle excitait chez les autres, quand, l’apprenant, je recommençais à souffrir et voulais la leur disputer, la hissait à mes yeux sur un haut pavois” (RTP 1623) ‘Albertine, on the other hand, held nothing new for me. Every day I found her less pretty. Only the desire which she excited in others, when I learned of it and began to suffer again . . . could put her back on her pedestal’ (P 21). As the narrator puts it in a rare moment of brevity: “Par la souffrance seule, subsistait mon ennuyeux attachment” (RTP 1623) ‘Suffering alone gave life to my tedious attachment of her’ (P 21). Marcel needs to suffer in order to sustain his sexual desire as well as his hermeneutic drive. He thus sees himself torn between the agonizing stimulation of his desire for Albertine and the deadening reprieve that full possession of her achieves for him. Albertine is likewise characterized as either a passive prisoner under Marcel’s control or a terrifying lesbian with secret desires eternally hidden from his view. But, as much as the thought of her lesbianism upsets him, Marcel requires the threat of this exclusive feminine desire to maintain his interest in her.

Thus, throughout *La Prisonnière*, Albertine is the object of Marcel’s fantasy of domination. The young Marcel’s will to tame and contain the feminine other causes him not only to physically coerce Albertine to live in his home, but also to demand that her desires and thoughts be totally transparent to him: “L’image que je cherchais . . . c’était une Albertine ne reflétant pas un monde lointain, mais ne désirant rien d’autre . . . qu’être avec moi, toute pareille à moi, une Albertine image de ce qui précisément était mien et non de l’inconnu” (RTP 1658-9) ‘The image I sought . . . was an Albertine who did not reflect a distant world, but instead desired nothing . . . nothing but to be with me, to be exactly like me, an Albertine who was precisely the image of what was mine and not of the unknown’ (P 65). Like the seedy hotel room in *Sur la lecture*, Albertine embodies the feminine otherness that the narrator fantasizes domesticating so that difference will become sameness.

Albertine is not only imprisoned in the room, she comes to embody the room as the walking metaphor that provides Marcel the reassurance that (to quote

Ruskin) “home is yet wherever she is” (Ruskin 54). Marcel has the sense, when looking at his companion, of a “réunion plus stable encore et mieux enclose dans mon chez-moi, qui était aussi son chez-elle, symbole matériel de la possession que j’avais d’elle” (RTP 1734) ‘stable unity, better enclosed in my home, which was also her home, the material symbol of my possession of her’ (P 158). The connection between Albertine and the home becomes so closely related that Albertine disappears into it: “et c’était toujours ce même calme inerte et domestique que je goûtais à la voir ainsi. . . opulente et captive, rentrer tout naturellement avec moi, comme une femme que j’avais à moi, et, protégée par les murs, disparaître dans notre maison” (RTP 1734) ‘I still experienced the same pleasantly inert, domestic calm as I saw her . . . opulent and a prisoner, coming home with me as if it were the most natural thing in the world, like a woman who belonged to me and, protected by the walls, vanishing into our house’ (P 158). The narrator imagines that he has imprisoned Albertine, both her body and her fugitive desires, and transformed her into a stable unity, the embodiment of domestic space, a woman shorn of difference and desire. She has come to parallel, in other words, the phantasmatic image of a room.

In the above image of the captive Albertine, the woman becomes the representation of a peaceful interior space where interiority suggests protection against external disturbance and difference. But, as the original French text suggests more strongly, Marcel’s possession of Albertine isn’t secure. The “chez-moi” and “chez-elle” are separated by their individual pronouns so that the fact that Marcel and Albertine share the same home gets lost in the struggle between two “chez.” The phrase “symbole matériel de la possession que j’avais d’elle” (whose direct translation would be ‘the material symbol of the possession that I had of her’), describes in tortuous passivity Marcel’s control over Albertine, so that the home is not the “symbole matériel de *ma* possession d’elle” ‘the material symbol of *my* possession of her’ but a pale reflection of an uncertain attachment. In another meandering phrase, the opulent prisoner entering the shared home is only “comme une femme que j’avais à moi” (whose direct translation would read ‘like a woman that I had for/to me’), rather than simply “ma femme” (‘my woman’ or ‘my wife’). The weak simile suggests not only the distance between Albertine and the narrator’s possession of her, but also the complexity of Marcel’s own sexuality, where “femme” could be understood as both the woman by his side and the woman who is part of his very being.

What becomes apparent, therefore, in Albertine’s captivity is the specter of externality. The room she is supposed to embody is not safe from outside influence, but contaminated by it. The purported reason for Albertine’s imprisonment lies in the name “Mlle Vinteuil,” uttered one night in Balbec, signifying a potential facet of Albertine’s interior life that lies outside of Marcel’s control: “Si Albertine n’avait pas vécu avec moi, avait été libre, j’eusse imaginé,

et avec raison, toutes ces femmes comme des objets possibles, probables, de son désir, de son plaisir” (RTP 1732) ‘If Albertine had not been living with me, if she had been free, I should have been imagining all these women, and quite rightly, as possible, as probable objects of her desire, of her pleasure’ (P 155). Shutting Albertine indoors is supposed to shut out the possibility of her desire for women, the threat of “Gomorrhah.” But as Marcel has come to realize, this desire is uncontainable: “En réalité, en quittant Balbec, j’avais cru quitter Gomorrhe, en arracher Albertine; hélas! Gomorrhe était dispersé aux quatre coins du monde” (RTP 1619) ‘The truth was that in leaving Balbec I had thought I was leaving Gomorrhah behind, that I was tearing Albertine away from it; alas! Gomorrhah was dispersed to the four corners of the Earth’ (P 16). The pervasiveness of Gomorrhah and its refusal to remain geographically fixed threatens the security of the narrator’s domestic bliss. Lesbian desire, and what Marcel imagines as its exclusion of his masculine presence, punctures the certainty of his possession of the feminine other.

His suspicion of the ungovernability of desire forces him to begin to examine the ability of interior space to block out disturbances:

Malheureusement, à défaut de la vie extérieure, des incidents aussi sont amenés par la vie intérieure ; à défaut des promenades d’Albertine, les hasards rencontrés dans les réflexions que je faisais seul me fournissaient parfois de ces petits fragments de réel qui attirent à eux, à la façon d’un aimant, un peu d’inconnu qui, dès lors, devient douloureux. (RTP 1621)

Unfortunately, failing contact with the outside world, the inner world can also provide incidents; even when I did not go out with Albertine, chance meetings in my own solitary thoughts sometimes provided those little fragments of reality that magnetically draw to themselves scraps of the unknown which immediately begin to hurt. (P 18)

Marcel comes to realize that the “vie intérieure,” indicating both interior space and psychic interiority, is as jolting and disturbing as the external world. Although locked away indoors, one is not safe from the externalizing effects of difference. Disturbed by his own thoughts, the narrator here describes what Freud would call *Nachträglichkeit* ‘deferred action,’ but what Marcel refers to simply as the workings of jealousy. Retrospection causes what was originally a seemingly innocent, and thus meaningless, event to acquire dangerous significance so that “des souvenirs postérieurement à tout événement se comportent tout à coup dans notre mémoire comme des événements eux aussi” (RTP 1667) ‘memories, occurring long after any events, can behave in our minds like events in their own right’ (P 76). All the externality and difference of an “event” arises with the

surfacing of a re-examined memory. Marcel realizes that, even though he is alone in his room, ostensibly protected from the free-floating lesbian desire that could seduce him or his lover, danger lurks within his refuge: "il suffit d'être seul dans sa chambre, à penser, pour que de nouvelles trahisons de votre maîtresse se produisent" (RTP 1667) 'one need only be alone in one's room, thinking, for new betrayals by one's mistress to occur' (P 76). Thus, it is not necessarily lesbian desire itself that acts as an external force intruding upon his "inner world" but rather the fact of solitary thinking. Interior space contains the elements of its own intrusion. The cause of fantasy's destruction, according to the narrator, comes from within.

Retrospectively examining his past life with Albertine ends up destroying the fantasy of his mastery over Albertine and of the security of his room. But in the suffering caused by the failure of fantasy, Marcel finds the space for his own imaginative voice:

C'était peut-être une certaine Élisabeth, ou bien peut-être ces deux jeunes filles qu'Albertine avait regardées dans la glace, au Casino . . . Elle avait sans doute des relations avec elles . . . De telles relations, si elles m'avaient été révélées par un tiers, eussent suffi pour me tuer à demi, mais comme c'était moi qui les imaginais, j'avais soin d'y ajouter assez d'incertitude pour amortir la douleur. (RTP 1666)

Perhaps it was a certain Élisabeth, or perhaps the two girls Albertine had watched in the mirror at the casino . . . No doubt she had sexual relations with them . . . Such relations, if they had been revealed to me by a third person, would have been almost enough to kill me, but as it was I who was imagining them myself, I was always careful to include enough uncertainty to make the pain bearable. (P 74)

Marcel, in the above quotation, causes his own suffering in order to prevent future suffering, providing himself with the vaccine for a self-diagnosed disease. If "par la souffrance seule, subsistait mon ennuyeux attachment," then the narrator's retrospective act creates the tragic story that would not only allow his attachment to Albertine to endure but would also minimize the pain that an actual revelation might cause. He fabricates Albertine's affairs, with an unknown Élisabeth or two nameless girls, provoking his own feelings of jealousy and, in so doing, evolves from suffering reader to creative writer, exercising his skills as the author of the secret life of his captive lover.

Thus Marcel imagines Albertine's lesbian adventures. Throughout the narrator's account of his love and jealousy, there is a noticeable lack of hard evidence that would actually prove Albertine's infidelity. Aside from a suspicious

hug with her friend Andrée and her admitted friendship with “known” lesbians, Marcel’s accusation of Albertine relies on hearsay and “à tirer des conclusions incertaines d’imprudences de langage” (RTP 1645) ‘drawing uncertain conclusions from slips of language’ (P 49). Emphasizing the ambiguity of Proustian lesbianism, Lowry Martin notes, “Proust’s more robust development of Charlus and other male homosexual characters stands in contrast to the seemingly superfluous references to undeveloped lesbian characters, some of whom are either invisible or anonymous” (97). Accordingly, the specific content of Albertine’s affairs—the stories of her secret relations with actresses and milkmaids—are in large part the product of the narrator’s powers of invention.⁵ Albertine’s lesbianism can be read as the created masterpiece of the narrator’s imaginative powers and as the very cause of his authorial undertaking. If lesbian desire punctures a hole within the fantasy of mastery, it also creates the space of suffering necessary for the writing act.

We see this imagined lesbian desire most powerfully in the narrator’s account of the fateful night before Albertine’s disappearance. Returning home from an evening spent at the Verdurins’, the narrator confronts an angry Albertine, who had wanted to go the Verdurins’ herself and is offended by Marcel’s apparent disregard for her happiness or, worse, his intentional obstruction of it. In an attempt to make it up to her, Marcel offers her money so that she can throw her own party to impress the Verdurins. Albertine snaps: “Grand merci! dépenser un sou pour ces vieux-là, j’aime bien mieux que vous me laissiez une fois libre pour que j’aille me faire casser . . .” (RTP 1857) ‘Thanks a lot! Spend money on those old gargoyles. I’d much rather you left me alone for once, let me go out and get . . .’ (P 311). Albertine leaves her exclamation unfinished, and the narrator is left trying to fill in the blank of her sentence. After several pages of agonizing mental searching, the narrator finally stumbles upon the conclusion of the sentence and consequently the proof of Albertine’s lesbian desire. What she wants to go out and do is to “me faire casser le pot” ‘get my jar broken,’ a vulgar expression meaning to participate in anal sex: “Horreur ! c’était cela qu’elle aurait préféré. Double horreur ! . . . Avec une femme seulement, si elle les aime, elle dit cela pour s’excuser de se donner tout à l’heure à un homme” (RTP 1859) ‘Horrors! That is what she would have preferred. Horror upon horror! . . . Only with another woman, if she prefers women, will she use it, as if to excuse herself for yielding to a man’ (P 314).

Marcel’s discovery and interpretation of the missing word raises a number of questions about his relation to Albertine. If the phrase “casser le pot” is one that women use only with other women, what does it mean that Marcel is positioned as Albertine’s female interlocutor? And why would anal sex—a typically male homosexual sex-act—be a term that signals lesbian desire? For Sedgwick, the revelation of Albertine’s full sentence, *me faire casser le pot*, and

along with it her lesbian desire, elicits a response from the narrator that exceeds its cause. The narrator's exaggerated shock indicates a refusal to participate in the kind of polymorphous sexuality endorsed by Albertine's alleged desire. The narrator's emphatic refusal has the effect, according to Sedgwick, of closeting his own queer, or at least undetermined, sexuality beneath the blatant sexuality of Albertine.

But my question is: is it really "le pot" that Albertine wants to get broken? The narrator never confirms his suspicion, but rather declares it a discovered truth. The story of Albertine's desire is the result of Marcel's efforts of retrospection: "la réponse . . . elle me fit d'un air de dégoût, et dont, à dire vrai, je ne distinguai pas bien les mots . . . Je ne les rétablis qu'un peu plus tard, quand j'eus deviné sa pensée. On entend rétrospectivement quand on a compris" (RTP 1857) 'she answered with a look of disgust and, to tell the truth, using words which I did not perfectly understand . . . I was only able to supply them a little later, once I had guessed her meaning. One can hear retrospectively once one has understood' (P 311). In a creative act of re-reading, or reading as writing, the narrator provides Albertine with the truth she refuses to provide herself. She gives the narrator only half a sentence, which Marcel then uses as the occasion upon which to establish his own narrative voice. Overcome by the drive to complete Albertine's sentence, the narrator fills in the blanks himself:

Pendant qu'elle me parlait, se poursuivait en moi, dans le sommeil fort vivant et créateur de l'inconscient (sommeil où achèvent de se graver les choses qui nous effleurèrent seulement, où les mains endormies se saisissent de la clef qui ouvre, vainement cherchée jusque-là), la recherche de ce qu'elle avait voulu dire par la phrase interrompue dont j'aurais voulu savoir quelle eût été la fin. Et tout d'un coup deux mots atroces, auxquels je n'avais nullement songé, tombèrent sur moi : « le pot ». (RTP 1858)

But as she talked, my mind was still pursuing, in the waking, creative sleep of the unconscious (a sleep in which things which first passed us by almost unnoticed now take full shape, in which our sleeping hands grasp the key to secrets hitherto sought in vain), the search for meaning of the interrupted sentence whose intended conclusion I wished to discover. And suddenly two dreadful words, of which I had not even been thinking burst upon my mind: "le pot." (P 313)

While Albertine is explaining to Marcel why she is angry, he is busy searching his unconscious mind—what he identifies as the site of a creative sleep—to locate the missing part of the sentence. Marcel describes the unconscious as a force of writing that engraves what would have otherwise remained impermanent. But, as

the unconscious, it is a kind of writing that lacks authorial intention. Separated from Marcel's conscious control, this unconscious writing force is both active and passive; it is compared to hands—detached from a whole and conscious person—that actively grasp the key which a willful seeker has already “sought in vain.” Thus, seemingly discovered in the unbiased territory of the unconscious, Albertine's lesbian desire emerges as truth.

Marcel finishes Albertine's sentence and consequently invents her sexuality. This agonizing truth of lesbian desire works to disrupt his fantasy of domination and enclosure. Isolated in a private room, the narrator envisages himself as a masculine despot forcefully overpowering the feminine objects in his realm and taming their fugitive desires. Although this power is comforting, it also tends to numb the aspiring writer's imaginative capabilities. The entrance of lesbian desire as an uncontrollable force outside of Marcel's control dislocates the fantasy of the room and thus causes profound personal suffering. In the face of lesbian love, Marcel must confront the reality of difference and of his own powerlessness. This confrontation and the suffering it causes are precisely the inspiration he needs to write. The blank of Albertine's speech provides Marcel the space to imagine her queer life.

If my more general argument is that the room (and the feminine or effeminate being supposedly locked within) is not “naturally” apolitical, but is made to be so in order to uphold a (masculine) fantasy of the individual as an autonomous figure upon a public stage, this essay wants to show how Proust acknowledges and manipulates that fantasy. Enclosed feminine privacy both enacts the narrator's personal suffering (Marcel suffers because Albertine is a lesbian) *and* makes possible his writing career (Marcel needs Albertine to be a lesbian so that he can suffer so that he can write). The Proustian room houses a fantasy of the domination of feminine difference. The woman embodies the space of the room, offering the hero a reassuring image of exotic difference subdued by the hero's dominating presence. Yet, if the goal is to write, difference cannot become sameness, the other cannot always become I, for then there would be no narrative drive. In order to break free from the stultifying trance of imaginary domination, the narrator must experience a suffering that would pierce through the chamber of fantasy. Rooms, and the women they figure, are revealed as never secure; the external world always seeps in to disrupt the promise of happiness. In order to assure the possibility of writing, Proust's narrative voice fabricates—invents or authors—the room's vulnerability and the consequent collapse of the fantasy of masculine prowess. The suffering caused by the failure of fantasy—the insecurity of rooms and the defiance of feminine desire—conditions Proustian authorship, where imagination begins the moment mastery fails.

Notes

1. The original French text is taken from Marcel Proust, *Sur La Lecture* (Arles: Actes Sud, 1998) (abbreviated as SL). The English translation is taken from the Penguin edition: Marcel Proust and John Sturrock, *Days of Reading*, trans. John Sturrock (London: Penguin, 1998) (abbreviated as DR). Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. Jean-Yves Tadié (Paris: Gallimard, 1999) (abbreviated as RTP). English citations of the text are from the recently published translations, edited by Christopher Prendergast and Lydia Davis: Marcel Proust, *In The Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, trans. James Grieve, ed. Christopher Prendergast (London: Penguin, 2002) (abbreviated as SF); Marcel Proust, *The Prisoner*, trans. Carol Clark, ed. Christopher Prendergast and Lydia Davis (London: Penguin, 2002) (abbreviated as P); Marcel Proust, *The Fugitive*, trans. Peter Collier, ed. Christopher Prendergast and Lydia Davis (London: Penguin, 2002) (abbreviated as TF); Marcel Proust, *Finding Time Again*, trans. Ian Patterson, ed. Christopher Prendergast and Lydia Davis (London: Penguin, 2002) (abbreviated as FTA).
2. See also Elizabeth Ladenson's *Proust's Lesbianism* (1999), where she argues that the figure of the lesbian, rather than the male homosexual, embodies the "sameness" Bersani wants to emphasize.
3. See Christina Stevenson, "'Here was One Room, There Another': The Room, Authorship, and Feminine Desire in *A Room of One's Own* and *Mrs. Dalloway*."
4. Along with Ellison, whom I will discuss in more detail below, see also Adam Watt's *Reading in Proust's A la recherche: "le delire de la lecture."* Watt offers detailed critical attention to moments of reading and learning to read throughout the *Recherche* in order to address the productive capacities of "delire," moments of instability, inherent in the act of reading.
5. Or his powers at igniting the imaginations and pity of the eyewitness observers of Albertine's rumored affairs who provide Marcel with second-hand accounts, after much pestering.

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