

Seeing Albertine Seeing: Barbey and Proust through Balzac

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In *Le Temps retrouvé*, Gilberte informs Marcel that she is reading the Balzac tale, *La Fille aux yeux d'or* and that she finds the plot of the story implausible: it could never really happen, or, at the very least, even if a *woman* might imprison the woman she loved, a *man* would never imprison the woman he loved. This is a nice bit of irony, because, as Marcel argues, it *is* true that a man might imprison a woman; in fact, he knew a woman who had been imprisoned and who could go out only with devoted servants.¹ The reader understands that the woman's jailer was Marcel himself; the prisoner, Albertine; and the tale of this imprisonment the subject of one of the preceding volumes, *La Prisonnière*. The discussion between Marcel and Gilberte and the intersection between the two texts (Balzac's and Proust's) provide both a terse summary of *La Prisonnière* and that novel's themes: desire, homosexuality, truth and lying, imprisonment, the chiasmus of genders.

Another text interposes itself between the Balzac and the Proust texts: Barbey d'Aurevilly's *Le Rideau cramoisi*. Also mentioned in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, specifically in *La Prisonnière*, *Le Rideau cramoisi* carries on those same Balzacian themes that later reëmerge in Proust: the themes of secret love in an enclosed space (with the significant change in Barbey and Proust that it is the woman who comes to the man's space to make love, and the man who limits himself to the domestic space), the themes of gender ambiguity (which abound in Balzac's corpus), and the covert or overt theme of homosexuality.² All three texts present men who are somewhat dandyish and narcissistic, and in all three texts the women who desire die, while the men live on.³

The title of Balzac's text provides the one theme that structures all three texts and that regulates the vagaries of their plots: the image of the eyes of the woman who desires. In *La Fille aux yeux d'or*

Paquita's eyes draw the gaze of her suitors, and it is ultimately because of her eyes that she dies at the end of the novel. Her eyes do not remain passive reflecting surfaces but gain the depth of otherness when Paquita desires to see, to flee her domestic prison in order to gaze at men—when she desires to *know*, to break out of the prison of her concubinage, and to discover what her own desires are.

Her activities arouse in those who desire her a parallel desire to know her, to reveal her secrets, as when Henri resorts to melodramatic espionage methods to learn who she is and thus to solve the enigma of her identity. Her gaze at the outside world and her investigation of her own desire set up a network of significations between woman, seeing, knowledge, and desire, that raise important questions ultimately silenced when she is murdered at the end of the story.

The nineteenth-century texts of Balzac and Barbey differ in a significant way from the twentieth-century opus of Proust, however (a difference that is not simply one of length). Barbey's and Balzac's texts continue to propagate the "myth" of the enigma of woman and of her desire, but Proust's text treats that theme in a very different way. Let us work through the Barbey text, whose female protagonist goes significantly by the names of Alberte *and* Albertine, and then turn to *La Prisonnière* to see how Proust's Albertine is similar yet different.⁴

In the frame of Barbey's story, when the narrator and Brassard travel together in a coach and stop before the house in which Brassard and Albert(in)e (as we will dub her) were together many years earlier, both men become interested in one of the windows whose crimson curtains allow them to see the light burning behind but not to see who is in the room. The impossibility of seeing engenders a kind of voyeuristic need to see and to know the solution to the mystery of the identity of those behind the curtain (19).⁵ Brassard is quite affected by the sight of the curtain, and the narrator easily guesses just why: it is because there was at one time a woman (Albert[in]e) behind it (23). The remainder of the story presents the two men, sitting before that veiled window, who discuss the nature of the woman who was, and perhaps is, behind that veil, a woman described later as mysterious, Sphinx-like (47).

The desire to see behind the curtain is linked to the narrator's (and our) desire to hear Brassard's story, which the narrator subtly seduces from Brassard. The narrator's desire, born from Brassard's hint at knowledge about what goes on behind that curtain, reflects Brassard's desire to "know" Albert(in)e, and thus the promise of

storytelling in this text is that it will reveal and let us “know” the woman, reveal and let us know the truth.

And Albert(in)e is a mystery in this text. She is incomprehensible to Brassard, who cannot fathom how a young woman, obviously well brought up, could throw herself at him with no guilt or remorse, with no blushing or trembling: “Je sentis une main qui prenait hardiment la mienne par-dessous la table. . . . Mes yeux cherchèrent l’autre de ces deux mains que je n’avais jamais remarquées, et qui, dans ce périlleux moment, tournait froidement le bouton d’une lampe qu’on venait de mettre sur la table” (33–34) [“I felt a hand that boldly took mine beneath the table. . . . My eyes sought the other of those two hands I had never before noticed, a hand which, in this perilous moment, coldly turned the button of a lamp just placed on the table”]. She is a mystery—impassible, proud, whose origins are impossible to explain (32).

Part of her mystery stems from her double nature, as seen in that image of the two hands, one of a young woman who lights the lamp in the presence of her parents in an image of domestic peace, the other that of a strong, desiring woman who lights the desire of Brassard, who takes the lead in the relationship, and who has no qualms about doing so literally in the presence of her own parents. Her mystery is thus generated in part by the gender ambiguity caused by the reversal of traditional roles between man and woman in their love affair. As Brassard says: “Aussi ne fut-ce pas une femme qui fut prise ici: ce fut moi!” (24) [“So it was not a woman who was taken here: it was I!”].

But her mystery resides most of all in her eyes and in her gaze which represent her desire. Normally, as this text makes explicit, the woman is meant to be seen: mothers display their daughters in a kind of ceremony, and women place themselves in the church in a spot where they are sure to be seen (26). Albert(in)e, however, looks, gazes, stares. She even looks at Brassard as they make love: “Son premier mouvement avait été de se jeter le front contre ma poitrine, mais elle le releva et me regarda, les yeux tout grands,—des yeux immenses! . . . La bouche s’entr’ouvrit . . . mais les yeux noirs, à la noirceur profonde, et dont les longues paupières touchaient presque alors mes paupières, ne se fermèrent point” (45) [“Her first move had been to bury her face in my chest, but she raised it and looked at me, her eyes open wide—immense eyes! . . . Her mouth opened . . . but her black eyes, of deepest blackness, and whose long lids almost touched mine, did not close at all”].

On the next page the image of Medusa appears, and very aptly so (46), for Albert(in)e's gaze is not one that admires the man and reassures him of his masculinity, but is rather one that is independent, one that shows otherness not similarity, one that as a result is seen by Brassard as a threat that will turn him to stone, will nail him to his place (31). This aggressivity of her stare is countered in the rhetoric of the text by a similar aggressivity on the part of Brassard, although his aggressivity remains rhetorical. In that hackneyed metaphoric equation constantly repeated, love is likened to war, and Brassard is a soldier. In speaking of his relation with Albert(in)e, he says: "Je n'y ai cependant pas soutenu de *siège*. . . . Quant à prendre une femme avec ou sans *escalade*, je vous l'ai dit, en ce temps-là, j'en étais parfaitement incapable" (23–24, emphasis added) ["I did not, however, hold *seige*. . . . As for taking a woman with or without an *escalade*, I told you, at that time, I was perfectly incapable of it"].

In this equation of love and war, one image is particularly revealing, because it shows how the field of love is as dangerous as the battlefield: while dancing, Brassard is significantly wounded on the foot, another of the rather overt symbols of castration and of the phallus much discussed by readers of this text. It is not surprising that the aggressive, masculine Albert(in)e should make her pass at Brassard with her foot (which replaces her hand), for she is, as Brassard himself notes, more masculine than he in his own terms. In recognizing this, he wounds himself on his lips (we recall that Albert[in]e's lips were "érectiles," here Brassard's are wounded): "Honteux pourtant d'être moins homme que cette fille hardie qui s'exposait à se perdre, et dont un incroyable sang-froid couvrait l'égarement, je mordis ma lèvre au sang dans un effort surhumain" (34) ["Ashamed however at being less a man than this bold young woman who was taking such a risk, and whose wild conduct was covered by an incredible sang-froid, in a superhuman effort, I bit my lip until it bled"].

Thus in the rhetoric of the text a battle is waged between Brassard and Albert(in)e for the rights to activity, to the gaze, to sexuality. Although it would seem that Albert(in)e dies of fear of being discovered, the rhetoric of the text in fact shows that she dies because she looks, because she desires, she dies in the act of making love—she dies because she makes love. Brassard is victorious, he is the man who triumphs in this battle of love and he survives. Following the standard fate of desiring females (so often discussed in feminist analyses of

French narrative), Albert(in)e dies, a death described significantly by the absence of her gaze and by the cold of her feet and lips: “Je la regardai comme elle était, liée à moi, sur le canapé bleu, épiant le moment où ses yeux, disparus sous ses larges paupières, me remontreraient leurs beaux orbes de velours noir et de feu. . . . Mais ni les yeux ne revinrent, ni les dents ne se desserrèrent. . . . Le froid des pieds d’Alberte était monté jusque dans ses lèvres et sous les miennes” (51) [“I looked at her as she was, linked to me, on the blue sofa, and I watched for the moment when her eyes, which had disappeared under their large lids, would show me again their beautiful orbs of black velvet and of fire. . . . But her eyes did not return, and her mouth did not open. . . . The cold of Alberte’s feet had risen all the way to her lips that lay under mine”]. Desire in the nineteenth century can belong only to the male, and Albert(in)e’s deprivation of her desiring attributes, which in this text must be phallic, return desire to the man. This story tells the same old story of the fate of female desire.

And indeed, if we look closely at just what the two men finally “see” in the text in their voyeurist search for the truth of the Sphinx, they in fact see nothing but that same old curtain that the woman continues to hide behind: “On dirait que c’est toujours le même rideau!” (21) [“You would think that it is still the same curtain!”]. The story ends as it began, with the curtain hiding a woman’s form, and the carriage leaves before they can attempt to see behind it. Similarly, the story does not leave us in any kind of suspense about its revelation at the end, for we know from the beginning what will happen. Before he even begins recounting the tale, Brassard tells of the outcome of his role in the story—he flees (24).

In fact, it seems that the purpose of the story is to leave the curtain intact, to leave the myth of the truth behind the curtain in place. The story seems to promise to reveal the mystery, but it fails to do so because we never know who is behind the curtain in the end. The tale propagates the belief in the existence of that truth, and it implies that we are prevented from knowing it merely by circumstances, chance (the carriage leaves before the two men can make any attempt to draw back the curtain). The mystery of the identity of the silhouette of the woman remains intact, and it is the continuation of the mystery of woman that is important. Her truth exists and is there for all to see, the two men simply fail to reach it.

And what, then, is revealed by the story? If Albertine’s death figures her castration, a castration that ratifies Brassard’s masculinity,

then it is his masculinity that he displays to the narrator in his recounting of his story. He really aims at preserving the veil that covers the woman so he can display, exhibit, himself. Indeed, the two men display a kind of rivalry in this exhibitionist storytelling, a kind of one-upmanship when the narrator twice implies that Brassard's tale is not so unusual as all that, and when he himself offers a better minitale. They do not look behind the curtain; they significantly remain in the dark in the carriage together, because they are busy displaying their masculinity to each other, mirroring each other both in their places in the carriage and in their roles as narrators. It is as if they are attempting to seduce each other, as the narrator attempts to seduce the story from Brassard. If the narrator uses the metaphor of hunting for the search for good stories, then the narrator and Brassard are the hunters whose prey is the veiled, dead body of the woman which makes the good story and which verifies that they are, in fact, men. If they are the storytellers in dialogue with each other, then it is not surprising that Albert(in)e does not speak or write back to him (she uses body language), and the one word that she utters is incomprehensible.

Barbey's text, then, leaves intact the belief in the truth behind the curtain, and storytelling in this text, although promising to deliver the answer to the mystery behind the curtain, holds back on giving that answer. It presents itself as the search for the truth, but supplies instead a reconfirmation of narcissistic male plenitude in the face of the threat of castration.

Proust's text, although it begins with this belief in truth, moves on to a different understanding of the quest for the truth of Albertine. In turning to Proust's text now, let us return to the Balzac tale for a moment. There, the main problem for *Mariquita* is to imprison Paquita and to keep her ignorant of *men*; for *Marcel* in *La Prisonnière* it is to imprison Albertine and keep her from *women*, and more importantly, to learn the truth about her desires, a truth that she seems to keep hidden from him. (If the genders are mixed up *between* the Balzac and Proust texts, something that is commonplace in Proust's, Barbey's, and Balzac's texts, the characters who die are still always women: Albertine, Albert[in]e, and Paquita). It is the need to know the truth about her point of view, her perspective on desire, her desire for other women. How does this woman desire? How does she look at others? What can a woman mean for Albertine? (308).

The need to know the truth goes by the name of jealousy in this text: "Combien de personnes, de villes, de chemins, la jalousie nous

rend ainsi avide de connaître! Elle est une soif de savoir" (86) ["How many persons, cities, roads jealousy makes us eager thus to know! It is a thirst for knowledge" (80)]. But in Proust's text as in Barbey's, the man never learns the final answer of the woman's gaze, of her desire. Marcel may learn bits and pieces about what that gaze might be, but he is never sure of knowing it completely.

More than any other author, perhaps, Proust investigates the link between desire and knowledge, and pursues his investigation to the verge of obsession.⁶ This excessive desire to learn the truth manifests itself in a kind of voyeurism, which, of course, is explicitly present in important scenes throughout the different volumes of the *Recherche*, most notably when Marcel sees Mlle Vinteuil and her friend through the window, and when he sees Charlus being whipped, once again, through a window.⁷ And it is important in smaller, less important scenes, such as when Marcel sees Françoise's cruelty and insensitivity when she attempts to kill a chicken in the kitchen.

Voyeurism aims, in *La Prisonnière*, more particularly at seeing the woman—an ideological structure whose importance is reinforced because, as so many critics have pointed out, this is a text written by a man more interested in men than in women. It is particularly curious (in the light of Barbey's text) that, in one little scene, it is a fetishistic unveiling of a *foot* that Marcel wants: "Qu'elle me permette de la déchausser avant qu'elle aille se coucher, cela me fera bien plaisir" (78) ["She must let me take her shoes off before she goes to bed, it will give me such pleasure" (72)]. He also gazes at her eyes which he describes in one passage as veiled, "curtained": "Ses longs yeux bleus—plus allongés—n'avaient pas gardé la même forme; ils avaient bien la même couleur, mais semblaient être passés à l'état liquide. Si bien que, quand elle les fermait, c'était comme quand avec des rideaux on empêche de voir la mer" (18) ["Her blue, almond-shaped eyes—now even more elongated—had altered in appearance; they were indeed of the same colour, but seemed to have passed into a liquid state. So much so that, when she closed them, it was as though a pair of curtains had been drawn to shut out a view of the sea" (10–11)].

However, although it appears that Proust would continue the voyeurist trend of the novel in a fetishist vein, and although spying and prying are certainly key elements in the relation between Marcel and Albertine, there also seems to be a continuous undermining of the voyeurist gaze and a desire for another type of relation. For instance,

there is a small scene in which Marcel sees Albertine's body unveiled, he gazes at it, and the narrator describes it to the reader. Here her body is compared to that of a man's (as is Albert[in]e's), and although the smooth surface of her shape is valorized, lack is emphasized both in the mode of comparison (she lacks something that belongs to a man, and her "sun" has disappeared), and in the description of her breasts which do not seem to be integrated with her body:

Ses deux petits seins haut remontés étaient si ronds qu'ils avaient moins l'air de faire partie intégrante de son corps que d'y avoir mûri comme deux fruits; et son ventre (dissimulant la place qui chez l'homme s'enlaidit comme du crampon resté fiché dans une statue descellée) se refermait, à la jonction des cuisses, par deux valves d'une courbe aussi assoupie, aussi reposante, aussi claustrale que celle de l'horizon quand le soleil a disparu. (79)

Her two little uplifted breasts were so round that they seemed not so much to be an integral part of her body as to have ripened there like fruit; and her belly (concealing the place where the man's is disfigured as though by an iron clamp left sticking in a statue that has been taken down from its niche) was closed, at the junction of her thighs, by two valves with a curve as languid, as reposeful, as cloistral as that of the horizon after the sun has set. (74)

Ultimately, however, this scene of unveiling fails to unveil the woman's body, because from Marcel's point of view, he cannot actually see her sex because her stomach blocks his vision. The woman in this scene is not completely exposed; a man's gaze cannot unveil just what a woman is.⁸

Of course, this physical veiling is a metaphor for the inner truth she hides from Marcel. The relation between physical exposure and inner unveiling is neatly represented in one scene in which Marcel questions Andrée about Albertine's activities while Albertine is *undressing* in her room (62). Indeed, as Marcel says, it is not her body he is aiming to possess but her thoughts and desires: "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" (94) ["I should have liked, not to tear off her dress to see her body, but through her body to see and read the whole

diary of her memories and her future passionate assignments” (89)].

Marcel’s desire to see Albertine is complicated because, if his gaze is his desire, he can also see that Albertine, in fact, also gazes. As Marcel’s gaze at her is driven by his desire to know, hers is driven by her own desire and seems to be a kind of physical caress (150).⁹ He cannot bear the fact that she takes a voyeurist pleasure in looking, specifically in looking at women. Marcel cannot tolerate, as he is practicing his own voyeurism, that she too practices it, and he cannot bear her *regard*, both active (she looks) and passive (the expression on her face as she looks) (150). Albertine’s desiring gaze seems to be as problematic as Albert(in)e’s.

It is difference itself that he cannot tolerate in her desire. It is the distance put between Marcel and Albertine when she engages in exchanges with others, and it is the distance of her type of desire from his. And since their desires are different, it is that space of ignorance that will always remain because he can never know her desire. Her eyes will always show to him how many things he does not know: “Les yeux qu’on voit ne sont-ils pas tout pénétrés par un regard dont on ne sait pas les images, les souvenirs, les attentes, les dédains qu’il porte et dont on ne peut pas les séparer?” (169) [“Are they not, those eyes one sees, shot through with a look behind which we do not know what images, memories, expectations, disdains lie concealed, and from which we cannot separate them?” (167)].¹⁰

Marcel’s strategy in attempting to learn Albertine’s truth is to eliminate that truth and to substitute his own for it. This he attempts to accomplish by controlling her and possessing her completely so that she can have no other desires. He needs in effect to eliminate her desires because they do not correspond to his own. He would remove her from subjectivity (the state of seeing and desiring) and reduce her to an object to be possessed and viewed.¹¹ This is most evident in the well-known passage in which Marcel watches Albertine sleep. Eyes closed, she can no longer gaze (“je n’étais plus regardé par elle” (70) [“I was no longer observed by her” (64)].¹² The narrator links the absence of her gaze while she sleeps with a kind of plenitude and beauty possible only when her eyes are closed: “Ces paupières abaissées mettaient dans son visage cette continuité parfaite que les yeux n’interrompent pas” (71) [“Those lowered lids gave her face that perfect continuity which is unbroken by the obtrusion of eyes” (65)]. The continuity without interruption by the manifestations of

self or desire displayed when she sleeps is perhaps assimilable to the description of the smooth surface of Albertine's naked body deprived of the attributes of the male sex. To bring Albertine into his house and make her a part of himself is to "domesticate" her, to give her that nineteenth-century female identity which is relegated to the home, to domesticity, to a desireless, passive, castrated state. The images of her in his home are, indeed, of a "bête domestique" (15).

The narrator, in fact, understands that what he was trying to do with Albertine was to make her into a special image of absolute knowledge that was his own invention, an image that had something to do with Albertine only because she could never fit that image: "L'image que je cherchais, . . . ce n'était plus l'Albertine ayant une vie inconnue, c'était une Albertine aussi connue de moi qu'il était possible . . . , c'était une Albertine ne reflétant pas un monde lointain, mais ne désirant rien d'autre—il y avait des instants où, en effet, cela semblait être ainsi—qu'être avec moi, toute pareille à moi, une Albertine image de ce qui précisément était mien et non de l'inconnu" (75) ["The image which I sought . . . , was no longer that of Albertine leading an unknown life, it was that of an Albertine as known to me as it was possible for her to be . . . , an Albertine who did not reflect a distant world, but desired nothing else—there were moments when this did indeed appear to be the case—than to be with me, to be exactly like me, an Albertine who was the image precisely of what was mine and not of the unknown" (69–70)]. If, when she sleeps, she has the rigidity of stone (359), then it is clear that Marcel is the reverse of Pygmalion: instead of turning a statue into flesh and blood, he tries to turn Albertine into his own stone creation: "Nous sommes des sculpteurs. Nous voulons obtenir d'une femme une statue entièrement différente de celle qu'elle nous a présentée" (142) ["We are sculptors. We want to obtain of a woman a statue entirely different from the one she has presented to us" (138)].¹³ If Eileen Sivert, in her excellent article on *Le Rideau cramoisi*, says that Brassard, by drawing the image of Alberte and by describing her when she first appears as if describing a group of drawings, creates the effect of "suspending life for a moment, of holding Alberte still within the frame of the room and of the story so that she may be examined," then Proust may indeed have been heavily influenced by this image of the "creation" of a fictional, still, controllable woman out of a real one.¹⁴

It must be made clear, however, that in the recounting of this tale of imprisonment, perhaps even in the actual "living" of it, the

narrator is aware of the futility of his own project, and of the fact that the attempt to so control the life of another simply makes of oneself the same kind of prisoner and even a slave (177).¹⁵ There is a certain poignancy to this tale of imprisonment which Marcel, both jailer and prisoner, is unable to escape even knowing its nefarious effects as well as its futility. *La Prisonnière* is the tale of the history of a mistake, one which one cannot escape making, the mistake of believing in plenitude and wholeness. As Deleuze says, it ends in the revelation that: "We are wrong to believe in truth."¹⁶

Of course, there are many reasons given that explain how the plenitude of knowledge and desire Marcel seeks is impossible. In order to know Albertine, she would have to be an object, fixed, immovable; but of course, she is a subject, she desires, she changes, she is movement (131); she will always escape captivity (23). She is the woman who will always be veiled, "une déesse dans la nue" (140) ["a goddess in a cloud" (136)], not because there is no truth, not because she wants to hide the truth, but because the truth is not closed, is not complete, but is rather an unending process of interpretation, "la tâche est à recommencer sans cesse" p. 151) ["the task must be incessantly repeated" (148)]. Jealousy, like analysis, is "interminable" (87).¹⁷ One needs all the details in all locations at every moment to have the desired plenitude of knowledge, but that is impossible (357n). Thus the real is true, but the real for each person is different, each position in time and space, each point of view, each "eye," changes it: "L'univers est vrai pour nous tous et dissemblable pour chacun. . . . Ce n'est pas un univers, c'est des millions, presque autant qu'il existe de prunelles et d'intelligences humaines, qui s'éveillent tous les matins" (191) ["The universe is real for us all and dissimilar to each one of us. . . . It is not one universe, but millions, almost as many as the number of human eyes and brains in existence, that awake every morning" (189-90)].

Thus this novel is about the mistaken belief that one can see the truth, the whole truth; that truth is revealed to the eyes, that it can be unveiled. The search for truth itself blinds one, jealousy wears a blindfold (151). It is not a coincidence that Brichot, the learned Sorbonne professor, is half-blind. One's perspective, which changes with time and is thus fragmented, causes one to have "les yeux fragmentés" (92) ["fragmented eyes"]: eyes are multiple, multi-visionary. Conversely, as Marcel believes that there is a knowledge obtainable by the lips (II, p. 364), and as he approaches Albertine to

kiss her, he confronts not one person whom he can dominate and control, but “c’est dix Albertines que je vis,” (II, p. 365) [“it was ten Albertines that I saw” (II, p. 379)]. He learns that the knowledge by the lips (both kissing and communicating) that he seeks is impossible, for one encounters “la clôture de la joue impénétrable et désirée” (II, p. 364) [“the barrier of the impenetrable but irresistible cheek” (II, 378)].

It is especially in that image of Pygmalion reversed that we see not only the mistake of Marcel’s search for the truth of Albertine, but also the mistake in his choice of object. He attempts to do the mirror opposite of what he should do, because he is attempting to make the real Albertine into a work of art. Indeed, numerous allusions in the text point to his recognition of this inversion of goals when he calls Albertine a most precious work of art (382), and when her life is called a novel which Marcel has spent much time writing (350).

Thus in one sense he is mistaking reality for fiction, he is doing with reality what he should attempt with fiction instead (Madame Bovary’s mistake, perhaps). Rather than trying to learn Albertine’s reality, he should be interested in the multiplicity of fictions she generates in him. He tries to eliminate what he calls his “hallucinations” (22) about Albertine’s life (hallucination being significantly the mistaking of fiction for reality) rather than being interested in the various hallucinations (fictions) themselves.

Furthermore, he attempts to reduce the plurality of selves and desires in Albertine to one controllable image, the one he creates for her. The “love” he has for her is one that demands unity, plenitude, oneness: “L’amour, dans l’anxiété douloureuse comme dans le désir heureux, est l’exigence d’un tout” (106) [“Love, in the pain of anxiety as in the bliss of desire, is a demand for a whole” (102)]. However, the reduction to sameness, to the one, is no longer interesting or desirable. It is almost as though Marcel, while he is involved with her, cannot see that it is the very irreducibility of Albertine that is important and that generates his fictions. It is the multiplicity of noses (in that incongruent but psychoanalytically significant Proustian image) that one wants in desire, not the reduction to the single nose:

Hélas! une fois auprès de moi, la blonde crémière aux mèches striées, dépouillée de tant d’imagination et de désirs éveillés en moi, se trouva réduite à elle-même. Le nuage frémissant de mes suppositions ne l’enveloppait plus d’un vertige. Elle prenait un

air tout penaud de n'avoir plus (au lieu des dix, des vingt, que je me rappelais tour à tour sans pouvoir fixer mon souvenir) qu'un seul nez, plus rond que je ne l'avais cru, qui donnait une idée de bêtise et avait en tout cas perdu le pouvoir de se multiplier. Ce vol capturé, inerte, anéanti, incapable de rien ajouter à sa pauvre évidence, n'avait plus mon imagination pour collaborer avec lui. Tombé dans le réel immobile, je tâchai de rebondir. (143)

Alas, as soon as she stood before me, the fair dairymaid with the streaky locks, stripped of all the desires and imaginings that had been aroused in me, was reduced to her mere self. The quivering cloud of my suppositions no longer enveloped her in a dizzying haze. She acquired an almost apologetic air from having (in place of the ten, the twenty that I recalled in turn without being able to fix them in my memory) but a single nose, rounder than I had thought, which gave her a hint of stupidity and had in any case lost the faculty of multiplying itself. This flyaway caught on the wing, inert, crushed, incapable of adding anything to its own paltry appearance, no longer had my imagination to collaborate with it. Fallen into the inertia of reality, I sought to spring back again. (139–40)

Instead of reducing the multiple fictional possibilities of the real Albertine to one prisoner under his eyes, he should attempt to multiply those fictional possibilities in art. Instead of combining Albertine's eyes with his own, substituting his for hers, reducing vision to one perspective, he should attempt to multiply those visions, those eyes, a multiplication of viewpoints possible only, perhaps, in art: "Le seul véritable voyage, le seul bain de Jouvence, ce ne serait pas d'aller vers de nouveaux paysages, mais d'avoir d'autres yeux, de voir l'univers avec les yeux d'un autre, de cent autres, de voir les cent univers que chacun d'eux voit, que chacun d'eux est; et cela nous le pouvons avec un Elstir, avec un Vinteuil, avec leurs pareils, nous volons vraiment d'étoiles en étoiles" (258) ["The only true voyage of discovery, the only really rejuvenating experience, would be not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes, to see the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to see the hundred universes that each of them sees, that each of them is; and this we can do with an Elstir, with a Vinteuil; with men like these we do really fly from star to star" (260)].

Indeed, at the end of *La Prisonnière*, one episode shows Marcel not attempting to unveil Albertine and thus to reduce her fictional possibilities to one banal reality, but rather shows how her very veiling (here symbolized by her dress), the impossibility of reduction, gives rise to his dreams:

La robe de Fortuny que portait ce soir-là Albertine me semblait comme l'ombre tentatrice de cette invisible Venise. Elle était envahie d'ornementation arabe comme Venise, comme les palais de Venise dissimulés à la façon des sultanes derrière un voile ajouré de pierre, comme les reliures de la Bibliothèque Ambrosienne, comme les colonnes desquelles les oiseaux orientaux qui signifient alternativement la mort et la vie, se répétaient dans le miroitement de l'étoffe. (394)

The Fortuny gown which Albertine was wearing that evening seemed to me the tempting phantom of that invisible Venice. It was covered with Arab ornamentation, like the Venetian palaces hidden like sultan's wives behind a screen [literally, veil] of pierced stone, like the bindings in the Ambrosian Library, like the columns from which the oriental birds that symbolised alternatively life and death were repeated in the shimmering fabric. (401)

The goal of the work of art thus presented in *La Prisonnière* is not one that will sing, after the fact, the praises of plenitude, as Marcel sees the works of Balzac and Wagner doing, but rather one that sees the impossibility of plenitude and the beauty of plurality, that does not make of the "inconnu" (or as we would say the "inconnaisable") a sickness (jealousy, the obsession with the truth) but rather "art" (the story of Marcel's failed search for Albertine's truth, this volume itself). It is not a work of art that is nihilistic, or naïve, but one that generates a positivity from impossibility, that generates art from the inevitable space that separates one from knowledge and from the fulfillment of desire.

Of course, it has often been said of Proust's work that through repetition of events, traits of character, memories, what was lost in the past is regained, and as Deleuze shows, a certain "essence" is transmitted from person to person, generation to generation, past to present through memory, and a continuity or plenitude is established. But in

La Prisonnière, repetition and plenitude do not seem to be the most important structure. In this novel about the discovery of a mistake, it is difference that seems most elemental, difference in the way Deleuze describes it as the “essence,” or what I would call the unique, and in this novel, the “inconnu.” Thus, what is most surprising is not that things repeat themselves and form a nice continuity, but that the product of that repetition of the same is the creation of something different and unique: from repetition comes difference.

This movement from repetition and similarity to difference can be seen first in the “genetic” images of family resemblances. Heredity passes on similarities to offspring (literary heredity too, from Zola, perhaps): Marcel is his grandmother (91), his mother and his father (79), his tante Octave (353), his tante Léonie (78–79).¹⁸ Even those who are not related pick up on those essential tics that make up one’s personality: one can always tell when Andrée has spent time with Marcel because she takes on his idiosyncratic ways (20). The laws of heredity and the code of individuality are “unknown laws” whose codified form we must obey. The essence of others, whether through biology or communication, transmigrates to our soul (78–79). One wonders what Proust would have made of recent scientific findings on the genetic code, because it so aptly incorporates the notions of the “laws” and codes of transmission that are elemental to his notion of repetition.

But these essences repeated in life do not come back exactly the same because they combine with other essences, situations, moments, and they return as different: “la même et pourtant autre, comme reviennent les choses dans la vie” (259) [“the same and yet something else, as things recur in life” (261)]. If Marcel mistakenly tries to make of Albertine a statue in *La Prisonnière* by eliminating in her all trace of her difference, it is significant that at the end of *Le Temps retrouvé*, the offspring of Robert and Gilberte, Mlle de Saint Loup, is also a “chef d’oeuvre” (1031), with a nose that would enable one to “reconnaître une statue entre des milliers” (1032n) [“one would have recognized one statue from among thousands” (1088)]. She, however, is a statue that does not reduce the living difference to a lifeless sameness, the sameness of memory as that which “supprime précisément cette grande dimension du Temps” (1031) [“suppresses the mighty dimension of Time” (1087)]. She is rather the embodiment of the *difference* of time, the difference of those same elements (Saint Loup’s and Gilberte’s nose, Saint Loup’s eyes) as they

combine in a new individual. She embodies the difference of time that memory erases: "Le temps incolore et insaisissable s'était, pour que pour ainsi dire je puisse le voir et le toucher, matérialisé en elle, il l'avait pétrie comme un chef-d'oeuvre" (1031) ["Time, colourless and inapprehensible Time, so that I was almost able to see it and touch it, had materialised itself in this girl, moulding her into a masterpiece" (1088)]. It seems then, that what is quite amazing and wonderful is not that heredity should pass on the *same* traits, but that those same traits combine to make something unique, individual, different, a new "world." The repetition and combination of the same elements create unique difference.

The metaphor of heredity was not chosen by chance, for the child represents an offspring similar to the work of art. The artist is mother: "Elle (l'oeuvre) était pour moi comme un fils dont la mère mourante doit encore s'imposer la fatigue de s'occuper sans cesse, entre les piqûres et les ventouses" (1041-42) [{"My work} was for me like a son for a dying mother who still, between her injections and her blood-lettings, has to make the exhausting effort of constantly looking after him" (1099-1100)].¹⁹ The metaphor between physical heredity and artistic heredity is established by the notion of a repeated language, code, pattern. Just as there are certain expressions used in a family that are passed on from generation to generation (325); so each artist uses a certain "genetic code" from previous artists. While listening to Vinteuil's work, Marcel says: "Je ne pus m'empêcher de murmurer: '*Tristan*,' avec le sourire qu'a l'ami d'une famille retrouvant quelque chose de l'aïeul dans une intonation, un geste du petit-fils qui ne l'a pas connu" (158-59) ["I could not help murmuring '*Tristan*,' with the smile of an old family friend discovering a trace of the grandfather in an intonation, a gesture of the grandson who has never set eyes on him" (155)].

Yet in this very same passage, the narrator emphasizes that Vinteuil's work, even though it repeats those previous patterns, is completely individual, unique (158). What is amazing is not the repetition of these coded patterns, the "geneology," but rather that "en dépit des conclusions qui semblent se dégager de la science, l'individuel existait" (256) ["in spite of the conclusions to which science seems to point, the individual did exist" (257)]. In a sense, what is extraordinary is that, as in our knowledge now of genetic coding, a limited number of "same" elements can form in different combinations to make the unique, the different, the new individual

child. The breath-taking originality of several musical phrases of Vinteuil is built merely of “les quatre mêmes notes, quatre notes qu’il (le public profane) peut d’ailleurs jouer d’un doigt au piano sans retrouver aucun des trois morceaux” (400) [“the same four notes, four notes which for that matter he may pick out with one finger upon the piano without recognizing any of the three passages” (408)]. A limited number of notes, colors, letters, words, form the proliferation of unique worlds and works of art.

In this light, the image of Niobe (whose children were murdered and who was turned to stone) that appears in *Le Rideau cramoisi*, and the horrible image of the dead child’s heart in *A un dîner d’athées* link Barbey’s texts to a kind of sterile narcissistic circularity that kills its offspring (the two male rivals face to face with each other at the end of the tale), that aims at killing off any acknowledgement of difference, and that merely wishes to perpetuate the image of the truth behind the veil. Proust’s texts, on the other hand, go beyond that narcissism to acknowledge the impossibility of attaining truth, yet through that acknowledgment is born the singing of the praises of difference in the work of art.

The lesson of *La Prisonnière* (and its innovative difference from *Le Rideau cramoisi*) is that plenitude is impossible, that one cannot imprison and assimilate the Other’s difference. One cannot see and know the truth of the other, cannot reveal it by casting furtive glances, nor by seeking the one true answer in the myriad hypotheses formulated about that truth—the image behind the curtain is a kind of hallucination. One cannot possess plenitude, cannot enjoy the constant repetition of the same in a cozy domestic contentment. The real is true in Proust, but that truth is utterly Other, inaccessible, might as well, in fact, not even exist. But from the recognition of the impossibility of any knowledge of the real or any possession of the truth comes the remarkable understanding of the eternal return of difference, and that the repetition of the “same” produces the unique, new fictions of our imagination, the offspring of impossible plenitude.

NOTES

1. Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu* (Paris: Pléiade, 1954), 3: 706. All further references to this novel appear in the text, and when references are to volumes other than III, those are so indicated. Translations are from C. K. Scott

Moncrieff, Terence Kilmartin, Andreas Mayor, *Remembrance of Things Past* (New York: Random House, 1981), III (if no volume indicated). When it has been necessary to alter the translation when taking an excerpt, those alterations appear within brackets.

2. For a discussion of the problem of gender in nineteenth-century French fiction see Dorothy Kelly, *Fictional Genders: Role and Representation in Nineteenth-Century French Narrative* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989).

3. Although Barbey credits Balzac's *Le Réquisitionnaire* as having had the greatest influence on him, Jacques Petit recounts that Barbey made a "lecture d'ensemble" of Balzac in 1849 and that there are certainly other Balzac texts which influenced Barbey's writing. Cf. Jacques Petit, Notice to *Les Diaboliques* in Barbey D'Aureville, *Oeuvres Romanesques complètes* (Paris: Pléiade, 1966), 70: 1276. All further references to *Le Rideau cramoisi* appear in the text, translations from the French are my own.

4. If, as has so often been suggested, Albertine should be read Albert, then Alberte provides an interesting compromise between the feminine and the masculine forms of the name.

5. Eileen Boyd Sivert studies voyeurism from a narratological point of view in "Narration and Exhibitionism in *Le Rideau cramoisi*," *Romanic Review*, 70, 2 (1979): 146-58. Jacques Petit studies voyeurism throughout the *Diaboliques* in *Essais de lectures des 'Diaboliques' de Barbey d'Aureville* (Paris: Minard, 1974), and Marcelle Marini studies a typical primal scene in which a male character peers through a window to a love scene inside and learns a certain truth by doing so, in "Ricochets de lecture: La Fantasmagorie des *Diaboliques*," *Littérature*, 10 (May 1973): 3-19.

6. Malcolm Bowie has an excellent section on knowledge and *La Prisonnière* in *Freud, Proust and Lacan: Theory as Fiction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

7. Roger Shattuck's study, *Proust's Binoculars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) maps out the importance of seeing and of vision in the texts in his study of optical images and metaphors.

8. Let us recall that in Freud, the fetishist refuses to accept the "fact" of the mother's/the woman's castration, and thereby becomes attached to an object that symbolizes her phallus (a foot, a nose), and that can assure him that castration does not take place. But the fetish has another role, that of preserving castration. Thus Marcel's desire for the foot, and this image of the woman whose genitals are veiled, serve to deny the threat of castration, while in this very image of Albertine "lacking" we have preserved an image of castration.

9. It is of course not only her gazes that reveal her desire but her slips of the tongue and memory lapses, and, as does Paquita in the Balzac story, Albertine mistakenly pronounces the name of a lover of her own gender (134). Curiously, in the Barbey text, Albert(in)e pronounces a word that is never understood.

10. Leo Bersani puts it in this way: "It is true that Marcel devotes most of his energy to trying to find out how Albertine spends her time, but he does this in order to know what kind of desire is separating her from him, to possess the images that possess Albertine" in *Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and of Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 61.

11. As Bersani notes, he wants the other women in his life to have the fixity of gaze that his mother had of him (56).

12. As Gilles Deleuze says: "There is an astonishing relation between the sequestration born of jealousy, the passion to see, and the action of profaning: sequestration, voyeurism, and profanation—the Proustian trinity. For to imprison is, precisely, to put oneself in a position to see without being seen, that is, without the risk of being carried away by the beloved's viewpoint which excluded us from the world as much as it included us within it. Thus, seeing Albertine asleep. . . . Seeing therefore transcends the temptation of letting others see, even symbolically" in *Proust and Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Braziller, 1972), p. 125.

13. Bowie shows how the narrator's "commemoration of his mother's tenderness takes a provocative form: in a world where everything else is exuberantly in process, he turns her to stone" (85)—he makes her into a statue.

14. Eileen Boyd Sivert, "Narration and Exhibitionism in *Le Rideau cramoisi*," *Romanic Review* 70, 2 (1979): 151.

15. If Marcel confines himself to his room in a kind of takeover of the woman's role, then this is also a theme from Barbey that perhaps attracted Proust's attention, since Brassard says of himself: "Je vivais la plus grande partie de mon temps chez moi, couché sur un grand diable de canapé de maroquin bleu sombre" (28).

16. Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, 90. Bowie also says that Albertine shows that "our other notions of what it is to know are the products of a lingering infantile wish for comfort or mastery" (59).

17. As Kristin Ross states, the major drama of this volume is "the continuing work of interpretation." In "Albertine; Or, The Limits of Representation," *Novel* (Winter 1986): 135.

18. As Jeffrey Mehlman says in a different context: "We too shall have come full circle: having begun with Marcel discovering himself as his mother (in Tante Léonie), we conclude with the author constituting himself as his own heir." In *A Structural Study of Autobiography* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1974), p. 59.

19. This is a notion discussed by Bersani and by Serge Doubrovsky in *Writing and Fantasy in Proust*, trans. Carol Mastrangelo Bové with Paul A. Bové (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986). Furthermore, Bowie states: "the narrator becomes an incestuously desiring mother—a mother of the very kind that, as a child, he had most wished to have" (83). Roger Shattuck, too, states: "His work had become a living being, making demands of its own. . . . He new he had given birth," in *Marcel Proust* (New York: Viking, 1974), p. 18.