

The Proustian Harem

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## THE PROUSTIAN HAREM

En me disant adieu il me serra la main à me la broyer [...] et en continuant pendant quelques instants à me la malaxer [...]. Chez certains aveugles le toucher supplée dans une certaine mesure à la vue. Je ne sais trop de quel sens il prenait la place ici. Il croyait peut-être seulement me serrer la main, comme il crut sans doute ne faire que voir un Sénégalais qui passait dans l'ombre et ne daigna pas s'apercevoir qu'il était admiré. Mais dans ces deux cas le baron [de Charlus] se trompait, il péchait par excès de contact et de regards. 'Est-ce que tout l'Orient de Decamps, de Fromentin, d'Ingres, de Delacroix n'est pas là-dedans?' me dit-il, encore immobilisé par le passage du Sénégalais. 'Vous savez, moi je ne m'intéresse jamais aux choses et aux êtres qu'en peintre, en philosophe. D'ailleurs je suis trop vieux. Mais quel malheur, pour compléter le tableau, que l'un de nous deux ne soit pas une odalisque!'

(*Le Temps retrouvé, A la recherche du temps perdu*, IV, 388).<sup>1</sup>

Charlus's wistful evocation, in *Le Temps retrouvé*, of nineteenth-century Orientalist painting transforms the streets of wartime Paris into a forbidden harem interior. The term 'harem' is itself derived from the Arabic word for forbidden and sacred, and just as the Orientalist painters of the harem paradoxically made visible what is, by definition, unseen, so too do Charlus's words and actions make visible a sexual identity that is intended to be hidden, namely his homosexuality.<sup>2</sup> I have discussed elsewhere how this particular passage is both shot through with, and framed by, suggestions of an 'exotic' and, according to contemporary mores, deviant form of sexuality, suggestions that betray the true nature of Charlus's interest in the 'Sénégalais'.<sup>3</sup> These suggestions, which are intensified by the comically revealing non-sequitur of 'D'ailleurs je suis trop vieux', do not, however, mean that Charlus is *not* interested in the object of his gaze 'en peintre'. On a number of occasions in the novel, the boundaries between sexual and aesthetic appreciation (unwittingly?) blur for Charlus, as becomes apparent in this particular instance if we consider possible pictorial sources for his words.<sup>4</sup> Proust may not, of course, have had a specific painting featuring both a black man and an odalisque in mind, but a

<sup>1</sup> Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, 4 vols, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, ed. by Jean-Yves Tadié (Paris: Gallimard, 1987–89). All page references are to this edition (hereafter *ARTP*). Although the term 'odalisque' can refer both to the female slaves of the concubines of a harem and to the concubines themselves, in the Orientalist paintings which include 'odalisque' in their titles the term is clearly being used to describe a concubine. It is, therefore, in this sense that it is used in the present discussion.

<sup>2</sup> The *Petit Robert* gives the following definition of 'harem': 'arabe hārām "ce qui est défendu, sacré", appliqué aux femmes qu'un homme étranger à la famille ne doit pas voir'.

<sup>3</sup> See my 'Les Mille et Une Nuits Proustiennes', *Essays in French Literature*, 35/36, 1998/99, 113–30, especially pp. 122–25. For a full discussion of contemporary perceptions of homosexuality and of representations of homosexuality in Proust, see J. E. Rivers, *Proust and the Art of Love: The Aesthetics of Sexuality in the Life, Times, and Art of Marcel Proust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

<sup>4</sup> Most notably, potent sensual undercurrents colour Charlus's ostensibly aesthetic tribute to an imagined performance on the violin by Morel: 'le jeune Morel [...] reste un instant immobile; puis pris du délire sacré, il joue, il compose les premières mesures; alors épuisé par un pareil effort d'entrance, il s'affaisse, laissant tomber la jolie mèche pour plaire à Mme Verdurin, et de plus, il prend ainsi le temps de refaire la prodigieuse quantité de substance grise qu'il a prélevée pour l'objectivation pythique; alors, ayant retrouvé ses forces, saisi d'une inspiration nouvelle et suréminente, il s'élançait vers la sublime phrase intarissable' (*Sodomie et Gomorrhe*, *ARTP*, III, 398). A not dissimilar blurring of the amorous and the aesthetic occurs in Swann's appreciation of Vinteuil's 'petite phrase': 'Il souhaitait passionnément la revoir [la petite phrase] une troisième fois. Et elle reparut en effet mais sans lui parler plus clairement, en lui causant même une volupté moins profonde. Mais rentré chez lui il eut besoin d'elle, il était comme un homme dans la vie de qui une passante qu'il a aperçue un moment vient de faire entrer l'image d'une beauté nouvelle qui donne à sa propre sensibilité une valeur plus grande, sans qu'il sache seulement s'il pourra revoir jamais celle qu'il aime déjà et dont il ignore jusqu'au nom' (*Du côté de chez Swann*, *ARTP*, I, 207). The element of idolatry common to both instances is precisely what Proust attacked Ruskin for.

consideration of those few well-known paintings by the artists mentioned that do feature both of these figures yields some highly suggestive parallels. Ingres's *L'Odalisque à l'esclave* depicts an Orient which is 'essentially feminine, incarnated by unclothed and languishing female beauties' and as with all of Ingres's Oriental compositions, is imbued with a 'profound voluptuousness'.<sup>5</sup> As such, this possible source would serve to underline the sexual connotations both of the passage from *Le Temps retrouvé* and of its wider context.<sup>6</sup> Crucially, too, the black slave who appears in the background of Ingres's painting has his eyes averted from the odalisque, just as the Senegalese in the passage from the novel affects a nonchalant disregard for the would-be odalisque, Charlus. Moreover, if the trio in the scene in *A la recherche du temps perdu* does mirror that depicted in the Ingres painting, then the only role left for the narrator is that of the mandolin player. Arguably no more than a joking aside to the reader alert to the implicit presence of this pictorial source, it may also be a fanciful allusion on the part of the narrator-writer to the narrator-protagonist's as yet unrealized status as artist.<sup>7</sup> Whatever the significance of the narrator's role, however, Proust characteristically preserves the outlines of the painting but subversively reworks it, depicting a male odalisque and a homosexual drama, yet one that does not diminish the fact that this is also genuine aesthetic appreciation on Charlus's part.

However, if the dynamic between odalisque, slave, and musician in Ingres's languorous vision is a fitting embodiment of the scene enacted by Charlus, the Senegalese, and the narrator, the blend of furious, unbridled sensuality and violence that characterizes Delacroix's *La Mort de Sardanapale*, another celebrated painting featuring both odalisque and black slave, offers a more accurate reflection of what we are soon to discover about Charlus's masochistic sexual tastes.<sup>8</sup> In fact, it is only six pages later that the narrator witnesses Charlus being whipped in Jupien's 'Temple de l'Impudeur', an establishment that, extending this metaphorical paradigm, is itself referred to as a harem.<sup>9</sup> In an evaluation that echoes Charlus's masochistic pleasures, Christine Peltre describes the violent eroticism of Delacroix's vision as follows:

<sup>5</sup> Christine Peltre, *Orientalism in Art*, trans. by John Goodman (New York: Abbeville, 1998), p. 184. For a reproduction of the painting see p. 187.

<sup>6</sup> It cannot be determined with complete certainty that Proust knew Ingres's *L'Odalisque à l'esclave*, although given his wide knowledge of nineteenth-century French painting, and Ingres's prominent place within that canon, it is likely that he did. The painting itself is not referred to in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, but the artist is mentioned on six occasions, and the novel does contain an implicit reference to Ingres's *Grande Odalisque* in the context of a discussion of Manet's *Olympia* (*Le Côté de Guermantes*, *ARTP*, II, 713). In addition, Proust's essay on Montesquiou, 'Un Professeur de Beauté', makes reference to a number of Ingres's works and contains lengthy quotations from Montesquiou's study of the artist (*Essais et articles*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), pp. 506–20). As for the correspondence, it contains eight direct references and one indirect reference to Ingres. Of these eight explicit references, four date from 1921 and relate to an exhibition of Ingres's work being held at the *Hôtel des Antiquaires et des Beaux-Arts* which Proust confirms having attended (*Correspondance de Marcel Proust*, ed. by P. Kolb, 21 vols (Paris: Plon, 1970–93), Vol. xx).

<sup>7</sup> The fact that gender-crossing in imagery is commonly used by Proust to denote homosexuality, as here with Charlus, could be seen to cast a rather different light on the narrator's gender-crossing in his implied role as mandolin player.

<sup>8</sup> For a reproduction, see Peltre, p. 87. Proust definitely knew this painting. It is not mentioned explicitly in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, although the artist himself is referred to on three occasions. In the essay 'Un Professeur de Beauté', however, Proust makes a clear allusion to the painting when he quotes Montesquiou saying, 'Le bûcher de Sardanapale en flamboie', *Essais et articles*, p. 520.

<sup>9</sup> See *Le Temps retrouvé*, *ARTP*, IV, 394 for the narrator's account of Charlus being beaten. See below for the description of the young men of the 'Temple de l'Impudeur' as a harem.

All fantasies become possible in *this spatio-temporal never-never land*. The besieged prince, reclining on a couch atop a pyre, has ordered the destruction of all the objects of his pleasure, and the spectator becomes a *voyeuristic witness to an orgy of flesh, gold, and blood*. The Orient shown here is not that of the anodyne 'blue sickness' that Gautier later ascribed to those nostalgic for Levantine azures; it manifests itself in a red torrent that traverses the scene on a diagonal and is echoed throughout by the artist, who kindles other cracklings on the necks and costumes. The *passion already simmering* in the 'massacres' of the Turks and the Greeks, in *the sensuality of odalisques*, here flares up in sudden conflagration. It is still easy to understand why the work gripped its original public, for few paintings achieve such a paroxysmic effect. Many interpretations of this manifesto-picture are possible. For one thing, it proposes a particular vision of the Orient, one 'that serves as *an outlet for our secret desires* [and] languishes, spends itself, kills for us.' But it also posits an ideal realm — ideal in the sense of *distant and unknown* — where outdated Western notions could be casually swept aside. (p. 89, my italics)

Physical and mental enclosure, voyeuristic urges, proscribed eroticism, and secret desires: these are the stereotypical associations and impulses surrounding the odalisque and, by extension, the harem as they are conceived by the Western imagination, and it is these that Proust plays upon, via the mediation of nineteenth-century Orientalist painting, to unmask Charlus's protestations of purely aesthetic or philosophical curiosity in the 'Sénégalais'. Moreover, although this is the only occurrence of the term 'odalisque' in the novel, the image of the harem transcends this particular context, allusively evoked or explicitly recreated throughout the novel as a means to explore the problematic nature of love, the vagaries of human sexuality, and even the processes of artistic creation. I shall therefore examine, by reference to the three inter-related emblems of enclosure, eroticism, and voyeurism, how and to what effect Proust conjures up the harem.

The quintessential 'femme enfermée' in *A la recherche du temps perdu* is, of course, Albertine who, in *La Prisonnière*, is sequestered by the jealous narrator-sultan.<sup>10</sup> Drawing on, but also re-writing, a trope that was routinely used of the inhabitants of the harem, the narrator, on more than one occasion, describes Albertine as a caged bird but, in Proust's version, this is a bird whose plumage has faded as a result of being imprisoned: 'Une fois captif chez moi l'oiseau [. . .] avait perdu toutes ses couleurs' (*La Prisonnière*, *ARTP*, III, 678). Departing from the traditional image in this way, Proust highlights the fact that not only has Albertine objectively lost some of her vitality, but also that, from the narrator's subjective point of view, she has lost some of her appeal. This re-writing of the trope thus reinforces a key idea in Proust's portrayal of love, namely that possession decreases desire. As for Albertine's lifestyle during her captivity, it too resembles that of the oriental seraglio. As Emily Eells-Ogée observes:

Elle est habillée de robes luxueuses, comme les odalisques qui étaient vêtues de somptueux brocarts. Le narrateur, conformément à son rôle adopté de sultan, lui procure du luxe, en

<sup>10</sup> Although fantasies of the harem tend to people this forbidden space with a multitude of women, it was suggested by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu that, in reality, and appropriately to Albertine's enclosure, most harems consisted of a single woman, only the very wealthy being able to afford to keep more, or the very profligate desiring to do so: 'Tis true their Law permits them 4 Wives, but there is no Instance of a Man of Quality that makes use of this Liberty, or of a Woman of Rank that would suffer it' (quoted in R. Bernard Yeazell, *Harems of the Mind: Passages of Western Art and Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 18).

gâtant sa sultane avec des cadeaux (robes, peignoirs de Fortuny, et le projet de lui acheter un yacht, une Rolls-Royce et de la vieille argenterie).<sup>11</sup>

She is subject to the 'lois draconiennes' of the narrator-sultan, which are enforced by his vizir, Françoise, and she is always accompanied when outside the enclosed space of the harem: 'Le rôle d'eunuque ou de vizir qui garde Albertine hors du sérail est joué par plusieurs personnes: Françoise l'emmène aux grands magasins pour acheter une robe, Andrée l'accompagne au Trocadéro, le chauffeur la conduit à Versailles', and all of this 'dans le but de calmer son [the narrator's] agitation et sa jalousie, et d'assurer qu'Albertine ne reprend pas ses habitudes homosexuelles' (p. 158). What Eells-Ogée does not highlight, however, is that two of these three 'eunuchs' are female, and that one of them, Andrée, is shrouded in suspicions of lesbianism. In other words, they represent precisely that from which the narrator wishes to shield Albertine. Proust thus recasts the various figures associated with the harem in order to underline, through metaphor, an idea that is developed more explicitly elsewhere, namely that all measures taken by the lover to assuage his jealousy are inevitably counterproductive. As I continue this discussion of the metaphorical paradigm of the harem, I shall show that the effect of these transpositions of East onto West is often one of closing the gap between the two and beginning to crumble the Self–Other opposition that has dominated so many discourses on the West's construction of the East, by uncovering a Western reality that is as 'exotic' as any offered by this imagined East. This is certainly one function of Proust's oriental imagery, but it can also be argued that certain of the characters the narrator encounters, notably Albertine and Charlus, remain profoundly Other to him, and are never fully enclosed within a single, apprehendable identity. I return to this idea later in the article.

Albertine is not the only 'femme enfermée' in the novel. Odette, too, is an initially resistant but subsequently compliant odalisque to Swann.<sup>12</sup> Prior to their marriage, we, the voyeuristic consumers of the artist's own gaze, witness Swann, driven by jealousy of Forcheville, assuming the dual role of the excluded outsider burning with

<sup>11</sup> Emily Eells-Ogée, 'Proust et le sérail', *Les Cahiers Marcel Proust* 12, *Études proustiennes*, v, ed. by Jean-Yves Tadié (Paris: NRF/Gallimard, 1984), pp. 127–81. Eells-Ogée provides a valuable and, for the most part, convincing survey of the ways in which Proust evokes 'le sérail'. Her summary of the main characteristics of the harem as revealed in Proust's predecessors, and likely sources, is particularly useful, these being the *Mille et Une Nuits*, Racine (especially echoes of *Esther* and *Bajazet*), Montesquieu, Chateaubriand, Hugo, Nerval, and Loti. Having surveyed the characterization of the harem in each of these writers, Eells-Ogée devotes the rest of the article to an assessment of Proust's debt to, and departures from, their vision. A wide variety of the tropes associated with the harem are covered, both as they appear in Proust and in his predecessors, for example the harem as a forbidden space (although 'forbidden' sexuality is only very briefly mentioned), women as prisoners, the despotic power of the sultan, jealousy, the threat of death, and the question of marriage. In dealing thematically with each of these in turn, Eells-Ogée's discussion is broader in scope than the present one which focuses in detail on three related ideas. The broad range of topics dealt with by Eells-Ogée does make the article more descriptive than analytical, however. For example, she makes only a passing reference on one occasion to Albertine wearing a veil (p. 158), but does not deal with Proust's metaphorical use of the veil (see my note 17); nor does she address in detail the tone and effects of the metaphorical transpositions of East onto West, which she highlights, nor suggest how all of these allusions work together: each section she devotes to an individual trope is a coherent unit, but the fact that the interactions between these tropes are often an important source of irony, humour, and/or revelation in Proust, is missed, such as Charlus's dual status as both a submissive odalisque and a despotic sultan, which I discuss in this article.

<sup>12</sup> The phonetic parallelism of *Odette* and *odalisque* is itself worthy of note, nor is this an isolated example of such sound patterning: Swann's association with the aristocracy, for example, is conveyed through a parallel with the Aristaeus of classical mythology (*Aristée/aristocrate*). See *Du côté de chez Swann*, *ARTP*, 1, 17.

curiosity to know what pleasures are being indulged in within the harem,<sup>13</sup> and of the would-be sultan who wishes to sequester the object of his desire from the outsider's gaze:

— Ah! s'il avait pu l'empêcher! si elle avait pu se fouler le pied avant de partir, si le cocher de la voiture qui l'emmènerait à la gare avait consenti, à n'importe quel prix, à la conduire dans un lieu où elle fût restée quelque temps *séquestrée*, cette femme perfide, aux yeux émaillés par un sourire de complicité adressé à Forcheville, qu'Odette était pour Swann depuis quarante-huit heures! (*Du côté de chez Swann*, *ARTP*, I, 297, my italics)

Charlus, too, is drawn into this scenario. By association with the role in which he is later explicitly cast by the narrator in the context of d'Argencourt's protectiveness of his young wife, Charlus becomes the 'gardien du sérail', guarding Odette on behalf of Swann. Hinting at subsequent revelations about Charlus's sexuality, Swann entrusts Odette to him on the grounds that 'Entre M. de Charlus et elle [. . .] il ne pouvait rien se passer' (*Du côté de chez Swann*, *ARTP*, I, 310). This strikes an immediate chord with d'Argencourt's own appeal to Charlus later in the novel: 'M. d'Argencourt, fort jaloux et un peu impuissant, sentant qu'il satisfaisait mal sa conquête et voulant à la fois la préserver et la distraire, ne le pouvait sans danger qu'en l'entourant d'hommes inoffensifs, à qui il faisait ainsi jouer le rôle de gardiens du sérail' (*La Prisonnière*, *ARTP*, III, 777). However, the evocation of the harem is here lent a humorous dimension, for M. d'Argencourt does not live up to the stereotype of the oriental sultan in whose role he is being cast. Far from being endowed with an enormous sexual appetite and capable of satisfying an entire harem of concubines, this once homophobic champion of masculinity finds himself unable to satisfy his young wife and thus at the mercy of those he once so proudly despised.<sup>14</sup> Proust is as fascinated by inversions of fate as he is by sexual inversion. This is just one example that draws together both of these strands. As for Charlus, his associations with the harem are amongst the most evocative in the novel, and I shall return to them presently.

To complete the Odette-odalisque paradigm, however, she later becomes, in an ironic twist to her previous incarnation, the *mock-compliant* odalisque of the duc de Guermantes, who 'imitant dans ce dernier amour la manière de ceux qu'il avait eus autrefois, *séquestrait* sa maîtresse au point que si mon amour pour Albertine avait répété, avec de grandes variations, l'amour de Swann pour Odette, l'amour de M. de Guermantes rappelait celui que j'avais eu pour Albertine' (*Le Temps retrouvé*, *ARTP*, IV, 593, my italics).<sup>15</sup> This eagerness to sequester the object of desire and the

<sup>13</sup> Swann 'descendit de voiture, tout était désert et noir dans ce quartier, il n'eut que quelques pas à faire à pied et déboucha presque devant chez elle [Odette]. Parmi l'obscurité de toutes les fenêtres éteintes depuis longtemps dans la rue, il en vit une seule d'où débordait — entre les volets qui en pressaient la pulpe mystérieuse et dorée — la lumière qui remplissait la chambre et qui, tant d'autres soirs, du plus loin qu'il l'apercevait en arrivant dans la rue, le réjouissait et lui annonçait: "elle est là qui t'attend" et qui maintenant, le torturait en lui disant: "elle est là avec celui qu'elle attendait". Il voulait savoir qui; si se glissa le long du mur jusqu'à la fenêtre, mais entre les lames obliques des volets il ne pouvait rien voir' (*Du côté de chez Swann*, *ARTP*, I, 268).

<sup>14</sup> *Le Côté de Guermantes*, for example, relates d'Argencourt's sudden coldness with the narrator after meeting him in the company of Charlus (*ARTP*, II, 588). Later, too, in *La Prisonnière*, d'Argencourt is described as 'cet homme si terrible pour l'espèce d'hommes dont était M. de Charlus' (*ARTP*, III, 776).

<sup>15</sup> Odette plays a submissive role for M. de Guermantes in order to further her own ambitions: 'Ces circonstances nouvelles, elle s'y était prêtée sans doute par cupidité, aussi parce que, assez recherchée dans le monde quand elle avait une fille à marier, laissée de côté dès que Gilberte eut épousé Saint-Loup, elle sentit que le duc de Guermantes, qui eût tout fait pour elle, lui amènerait nombre de duchesses enchantées de jouer un tour à leur amie Oriane' (*Le Temps retrouvé*, *ARTP*, IV, 593).

fact that, as explicitly highlighted by the narrator, the same pattern of sequestration is repeated in many of the relationships depicted in the novel, chime with the underlying rationale for the existence of the harem and with the perception of women that the rationale implies, namely that women are naturally lascivious and faithless creatures, unable themselves to control their amorous impulses.<sup>16</sup> Does this then mean that Proust's portrayal of women as odalisques betrays an essentially misogynistic vision of them? It precisely does not, for in implicitly casting his female characters as odalisques and his male characters as jealous sultans, Proust is telling us something not about women's intrinsically flawed nature, but about the nature of desire and its effects on our perception. The harem is the metaphorical embodiment of the abstract notion of jealousy.

If the harem symbolizes the jealous lover's desire to remove the loved one from society's gaze, the veil is the extension of that enclosure, traditionally replacing the physical walls of the harem when the loved one is in society. As Yeazell explains, the women 'remain inviolable by adopting the veil when they venture outside' (p. 1).<sup>17</sup> The veils worn by Proust's female characters, though described as 'grand' (*La Prisonnière*, *ARTP*, III, 568), are not as ample as those of the concubines of the harems. Yet Proust does imply that these fashionable accessories serve to separate women from the world: 'tandis que les amis du jeune homme riche l'enviaient d'avoir une maîtresse si bien habillée, les écharpes de celle-ci tendaient devant la petite société comme un voile parfumé et souple, mais qui la séparait du monde' (*A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, *ARTP*, II, 42). Moreover, when introduced metaphoric-ally by Proust, the veil still more explicitly represents a barrier to the visibility of sexuality and an obstacle to sexual gratification. Fantasizing about a romantic encounter with Mlle de Stermaria in her native environment of Brittany, for instance, the narrator describes how:

il me semblait que je ne l'aurais vraiment possédée que là, quand j'aurais traversé ces lieux qui l'enveloppaient de tant de souvenirs — voile que mon désir voulait arracher et de ceux que la nature interpose entre la femme et quelques êtres [. . .] afin que trompés par l'illusion de la posséder ainsi plus entière ils soient forcés de s'emparer d'abord des paysages au milieu desquels elle vit et qui plus utiles pour leur imagination que le plaisir sensuel, n'eussent pas suffi pourtant, sans lui, à les attirer. (*A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, *ARTP*, II, 50)

The veil he wishes to snatch away is woven of her knowledge and memories of Brittany, a mesh of thoughts in which the narrator cannot share. Yet this veil is also what stimulates his imagination ('plus utiles pour leur imagination'). Crucially,

<sup>16</sup> This is, for example, implied by Montesquieu at the beginning of Letter 26 of the *Lettres Persanes*, which is addressed to Roxane from Uzbek: 'Que vous êtes heureuse, Roxane, d'être dans le doux pays de Perse, et non pas dans ces climats empoisonnés où l'on ne connaît ni la pudeur ni la vertu! Que vous êtes heureuse! Vous vivez dans mon sérail comme dans le séjour de l'innocence, inaccessible aux attentats de tous les humains; vous vous trouvez avec joie dans une heureuse impuissance de faillir: jamais homme ne vous a souillée de ses regards lascifs', *Classiques Garnier*, ed. by Paul Vernière (Paris: Garnier, 1960), p. 59.

<sup>17</sup> A number of women in the novel wear veils, but the veil bought for Albertine by the narrator is mentioned more than any other. Significantly, too, our attention is actively drawn to the fact that she wears it when outside the 'harem'. Having just been out for a walk with Andrée, 'et ayant encore autour d'elle le grand voile gris, qui descendait de la toque de chinchilla et que je lui avais donné à Balbec, elle [Albertine] se retirait et rentrait dans sa chambre, comme si elle eût deviné qu'Andrée, chargée par moi de veiller sur elle, allait [. . .] apporter quelque détermination aux régions vagues où s'était déroulée la promenade qu'elles avaient faite' (*La Prisonnière*, *ARTP*, III, 568). This veil is mentioned on at least five other occasions, and the narrator also alludes to the veil of a sultaness in a description of Albertine's Fortuny dress: 'Elle [la robe] était envahie d'ornementation arabe comme Venise, comme les palais de Venise dissimulés à la façon des sultanes derrière un voile ajouré de pierre' (p. 896).

therefore, the veil here becomes not only a barrier to the satisfaction of desire but also a necessary spur to the development of desire. As Ali Behdad observes in his article on Nerval's *Voyage en Orient*, 'the Oriental veil does not annul the subject's desire; rather, it arouses his scopophilic urge to overcome the barrier [. . .] The mask also eroticizes what is seen by the subject'.<sup>18</sup> This paradox, which characterizes the veil, also applies more generally to the pattern of Proustian desire. To use the words of René Girard: 'Every passion feeds on the obstacles placed in its way and dies in their absence'.<sup>19</sup> What further distinguishes Proust's treatment of the veil here from more literal evocations of it is that Mlle de Stermaria's metaphorical veil is woven into an already elaborately inventive theory of desire in which the resonances of name and place as much as the realities (or perceived realities) of the person generate passion.

In the Western imagination, the harem is defined by sexuality, its eroticism only enhanced by its 'unseenness', for it is precisely because of the mystery surrounding it that it becomes not just a locus of sexuality, but a locus of exotic, forbidden sexuality. To conclude this first strand of my discussion on the theme of enclosure, therefore, and to lead into the next strand, that of proscribed eroticism, the striking frequency with which verbs of veiling and sequestration occur in the novel in contexts linked to sexuality must be highlighted. A considerable number of these are, as one would expect, largely literal descriptions of Albertine's confinement by the narrator.<sup>20</sup> Some, though, are more subtly allusive in nature than straightforward statements: expressing his (short-lived) satisfaction at having succeeded in removing Albertine from the temptations of other women, for example, the narrator describes how 'les eaux immenses et bleues, l'oubli des préférences qu'elle [a woman with whom he is almost certain that Albertine had sexual relations] avait pour cette jeune fille [Albertine] et qui allaient à d'autres, étaient retombés sur l'avanie que m'avait faite Albertine, l'enfermant dans un éblouissant et infrangible écrin (*La Prisonnière*, *ARTP*, III, 679). In likening Albertine to something enclosed 'dans un éblouissant et infrangible écrin', the narrator indirectly endows her with the qualities of a material possession, albeit a precious one. The importance of the inanimate, unchanging status he tries to impose on her is discussed below. For the moment, however, the narrator, like the jealous sultans, has managed to conceal her from the sexual interest of others, but in a further inversion of the original context of the metaphor of the harem, these others are not men, but women. Extending this reference to Albertine's suspected lesbianism, yet other examples of Proust's use of verbs of enclosure hint at the concealment of what were, for the time, considered to be illicit sexual practices. Aimé's letter to the narrator in which he recounts his discoveries about Albertine's lesbian encounters with the 'doucheuse' relates how 'Elle et (Mlle A.) s'enfermaient toujours dans la cabine, restaient très longtemps, et la dame en

<sup>18</sup> 'Orientalist Desire, Desire of the Orient', *French Forum*, 15 (1990), 37–51 (p. 44).

<sup>19</sup> *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. by Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. 177.

<sup>20</sup> Images of enclosure or confinement are embedded in the novel. The verb 'enfermer' appears in its various forms on 101 occasions in the novel, whilst 'séquestrer'/'séquestration' and their various forms appear six times. Strikingly, of the 101 occurrences of 'enfermer', approximately a third (thirty-four) either appear in sexual contexts or are being used in contexts that, literally or metaphorically, relate to women. Of the six occurrences of 'séquestrer'/'séquestration', five refer to the enclosure of women. Thirteen of the thirty-four uses of 'enfermer' appearing in sexual contexts or in relation to women concern Albertine, as do three of the six uses of 'séquestrer'/'séquestration'.



gris donnait au moins dix francs de pourboire à la personne avec qui j'ai causé' (*Albertine disparue*, *ARTP*, IV, 97). Aimé is not explicit as regards the nature of this encounter, but the enclosure of women in the harem was often believed to have encouraged lesbian practices. The seventeenth-century French traveller, Jean Chardin, for instance, describes, in his *Voyages en Perse*, the close supervision to which the odalisques were subjected:

On les observe de fort près, de peur, dit-on, qu'elles ne fassent des intrigues, ou des complots, contre leurs Rivaless, ou qu'elles ne deviennent amoureuses les unes des autres. Les femmes Orientales ont toujours passé pour *Tribades*. J'ai ouï assurer si souvent, et à tant de gens qu'elles le font, et qu'elles ont des voies de contenter mutuellement leurs passions, que je le tiens pour fort certain.<sup>21</sup>

Certainly, this was also intimated in a number of well-known Orientalist paintings.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the same verb, 'enfermer', is used on numerous other occasions to describe surreptitious male and female homosexual experiences. Aimé confirms Saint-Loup's homosexuality to the narrator, relating how 'M. le marquis s'enferma avec mon liftier, sous prétexte de développer des photographies de Madame la grand-mère de Monsieur' (*Albertine disparue*, *ARTP*, IV, 259–60), and Charlus too is enclosed within Jupien's 'Temple de l'Impudeur': 'Enfin au terme de son calvaire, il trouva Mlle Noémie qui devait le cacher avec Jupien, mais commença par l'enfermer dans un salon persan fort somptueux d'où il ne voyait rien' (*Sodome et Gomorrhe*, *ARTP*, III, 465). This reference to the contemporary taste for Eastern decors in itself transports us into a world of fantasies, but much more is suggested by this and subsequent associations between Charlus and the harem.

The figure of Charlus has been present throughout our exploration of the harem, but, highlighting the sheer mobility of the analogy, every reference to this forbidden space that draws Charlus into its metaphorical web has cast him in a different role. Our point of departure was his own evocation of nineteenth-century Orientalist paintings of the harem, an evocation that indirectly transformed him into a would-be odalisque. Feminized in this incarnation, Charlus was elsewhere desexualized in his role as 'gardien du sérail' to Odette and M. d'Argencourt's young wife. Lack of sexual interest in women is expressed as physical castration, but whilst Charlus assumes the role of the eunuch for women, his sexuality is restored in the 'Temple de l'Impudeur', the male brothel in which he is flogged by young men. Like the sultan whose whim dictates which concubine he will favour, Charlus chooses from the collection of young men at his disposal, and having indulged his sexual impulses, Charlus spends a few moments with his harem. The narrator, who has witnessed the entire scene, remarks:

Je lui retrouvai de nouveau, dans toute la sémillante frivolité dont il fit preuve devant ce harem qui semblait presque l'intimider, ces hochements de taille et de tête, ces affinements du regard qui m'avaient frappé le soir de sa première entrée à La Raspelière, grâce héritées de quelque grand-mère que je n'avais pas connue et que dissimulaient dans l'ordinaire de la

<sup>21</sup> *Voyages de M<sup>r</sup> le Chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l'Orient*, 10 vols (Amsterdam: Jean Louis de Lorme, 1711), VI, 232 (spelling modernized).

<sup>22</sup> This is discussed later in the article. It should also be noted, at this point, that the one other use of the term 'sérail' in the novel is in relation to M. Nissim-Bernard's 'hunting ground' for young waiters: that is, it is used in a context where it acquires strong homosexual associations: 'Il [Nissim-Bernard] aimait d'ailleurs tout le labyrinthe de couloirs, de cabinets secrets, de salons, de vestiaires, de garde-manger, de galeries qu'était l'hôtel de Balbec. Par atavisme d'Oriental il aimait les sérails et quand il sortait le soir, on le voyait en explorer furtivement les détours' (*Sodome et Gomorrhe*, *ARTP*, III, 239).

vie sur sa figure des expressions plus viriles, mais qu'y épanouissait coquettement, dans certaines circonstances où il tenait à plaire à un milieu inférieur, le désir de paraître grande dame. (*Le Temps retrouvé*, ARTP, IV, 403)

What Proust offers us, then, is a male harem governed by a sultan whose true inclination is to play the submissive role of the odalisque: not only has he, just fifteen pages earlier, hinted at an ostensibly aesthetic desire to play this part, but the passive sexual role he assumes in this harem transforms him into the willing victim of the stereotyped cruelty of the Oriental male. In an inversion of gender, role and indeed, stereotype, which is not without humour but which, curiously, offers an entirely convincing portrait of this paradoxical figure, the concubines beat the sultan — an improbable sultan who betrays, at once, a diffident but coquettish desire to please and the *grande dame* magnanimity of an Oriane de Guermantes.

Charlus's palimpsestic sexual identity is expressed through the different roles he plays and the different genders he assumes within the single metaphorical paradigm of the harem. He is a male and female concubine, a female sultan and an asexual eunuch: the superimposition and, at times, blurring of these layers serves to reinforce an idea explored directly in the novel in relation to Morel, the mutability of whose sexual identity is famously discovered by Charlus through the use, in Léa's letter, of the expression 'en être'. (*La Prisonnière*, ARTP, III, 720).

Albertine, too, remains elusive. Like Charlus, she defies the identity imposed on her in the narrative; she does, after all, flee the harem. However, there is a distinction between Charlus's and Albertine's common slipperiness of identity. The narrator's casting of Charlus in various harem roles is a carefully crafted device which, with a certain piquancy, evokes, but consciously falls short of encompassing entirely, the complexities of Charlus's character and sexuality. This is Proust, the weaver of metaphor, at the height of his power, playing off against one another a kaleidoscope of associations which span the entire novel. Albertine, in contrast, does not change roles with the alacrity of Charlus; in fact, she does not change roles at all, only ever cast by the narrator in the role of odalisque. (This is true at least within the harem paradigm; Proust does draw, of course, on other metaphorical sources to describe Albertine, such as water and animal, mythological and religious imagery.) Given that these are the two principal representatives of homosexuality in the novel, it is perhaps surprising that one is denied the mutability granted the other, particularly when this mutability is so important a factor in Proust's characterization of homosexuality. The distinction, however, lies in the subtle shifting between the two voices of the narrator, that of the intradiegetic narrator-protagonist and the extradiegetic narrator-writer; it lies, in other words, in that mixture of subjectivity and distance that makes Proust's writing so compelling. The writer can embrace and celebrate Charlus's plurality, granting it expression in an ever-shifting network of images; the protagonist, in contrast, cannot embrace Albertine's uncertain sexuality with the same detachment. Refusing her any role but that of the 'femme enfermée' is the symbol of his desperate attempt to fix her identity, to control her. As has been suggested, however, such an attempt is inevitably doomed to failure. This is an idea explored by Yeazell in her discussion of a text that also addresses the counterproductiveness of sequestering women, and echoes of which we find in *A la recherche du temps perdu*: namely Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes*:

Rather than preserve its inhabitants' innocence and chastity, the harem as Montesquieu conceives it makes true virtue impossible. For if only the free exercise of self-control offers

any hope of keeping the passions in check, then depriving women of freedom will assure nothing but corruption and defiance [. . .] the women of the harem can exhibit only that simulacrum of 'virtue' that is compelled by necessity. (p. 68)<sup>23</sup>

It is this vicious circle that is dramatized in the intricate analysis of love, desire, and loss in *La Prisonnière* and *Albertine disparue*.

The impossibility of the sequestered world the narrator has attempted to create becomes clear with the dissolution of the harem at the end of *La Prisonnière*. A progressive loss of control precedes Albertine's escape, to be followed by an overwrought quest in letters for proofs of her misconduct. These stages, which pave the way for Albertine's own final letter and death, are reminiscent of the downward spiral of Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes*, culminating as they do in Roxane's final letter to Uzbek and suicide, after an increasingly agitated correspondence between sultan and eunuchs reporting the gradual loosening of control over the harem. Roxane's final act of defiance in suicide may be an equivocal declaration of independence, but Albertine's end has a tragic banality which retrospectively weakens the force of the one exercise of freedom that her flight represented.<sup>24</sup> The difference in pace between the two narratives is also important: in the *Lettres persanes*, Roxane's death follows swiftly on the heels of the dissolution of the harem; what is more, the narrative ends at that point. By contrast, in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, a gradual decline leads us from Albertine's flight to her death and beyond into a lengthy account of the narrator's festering obsession, then growing indifference. In this sense, it could be argued that Proust offers us a more faithful vision of the cycle of love and loss, but the continuation of the Albertine saga beyond her death also highlights his ongoing inability to 'fix' her. Through this lack of definite closure, Albertine retains her otherness.

Charlus and Albertine, the principal representatives of proscribed eroticism in the novel, can thus be seen as embodying the positive and negative poles of alterity. In the case of Albertine, Otherness is the painful symbol of the impossibility of love: love is impossible because complete possession of the loved one is impossible. In Charlus, in contrast, that Otherness is the celebratory and almost carnivalesque idea that people have infinite capacity to be transformed, that they are constantly changing, and are thus never fully definable.

Proust is the fascinated observer of the richness and complexity that human nature has to offer, as indeed is his narrator. He greedily devours details that will later be filtered through the prism of his imagination to find their artistic expression in the novel. The idea of the observer is itself bound up, as I have already suggested, with the harem. Artistic representations of it, whether literary or pictorial, have always presupposed the gaze of an intruder who makes what is hidden visible (even if, in many cases, the vision the artist offers us is still the product of his imagination rather than of any authentic experience), and it is precisely this idea of trespass that further eroticizes the harem in the Western imagination.

<sup>23</sup> As is evident from his pastiche of the *Lettres Persanes* in 'Lettre de Perse et d'ailleurs' (*Contre Sainte-Beuve*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), pp. 424–30, Proust was entirely familiar with this text.

<sup>24</sup> This impression of banality is largely attributable to the rather pedestrian way in which her death is reported to the narrator: 'Mon pauvre ami, notre petite Albertine n'est plus, pardonnez-moi de vous dire cette chose affreuse, vous qui l'aimez tant. Elle a été jetée par son cheval contre un arbre pendant une promenade. Tous nos efforts n'ont pu la ranimer. Que ne suis-je morte à sa place!' (*Albertine disparue*, *ARTP*, iv, 58)

Scenes of voyeurism, as has often been mentioned, are written into the fabric of *À la Recherche du temps perdu*, and whilst the object of the voyeur's gaze is not always sexual, in most cases it is. Léonie is the notable exception. Having described the objects on his great-aunt's bedside table, the narrator continues: 'De l'autre côté, son lit longeait la fenêtre, elle avait la rue sous les yeux et y lisait du matin au soir, pour se désennuyer, à la façon des princes persans, la chronique quotidienne mais immémoriale de Combray, qu'elle commentait ensuite avec Françoise' (*Du côté de chez Swann*, *ARTP*, 1, 51). In a comically bathetic juxtaposition of the exalted and the trivial, the Persian princes' scrutiny of their domains is placed on a par with Léonie's nosiness about the minutiae of her neighbours' lives in Combray. The objects of her gaze are as unaware of her attention as are most of the targets of sexual voyeurism in the novel, but there the similarity ends, for this Persian prince is on the inside looking out, a model that is elsewhere reversed in a more conventional representation of the voyeur. Swann attempts to spy on Odette, imagining what is happening within the enclosed space of her apartment which, at this stage, is significantly oriental in its decor.<sup>25</sup> Charlus too spies on Morel, again in search of evidence of sexual misconduct, in a brothel which, as has been noted, is also oriental in style.

However, the narrator himself is also a literal and metaphorical voyeur, as is well recognized, not only at Montjouvain but also in the male brothel, watching Charlus through an *œil-de-bœuf* as the latter is beaten. The image of the *œil-de-bœuf* may itself be significant, for one of the most celebrated images of Oriental women, Ingres's *Le Bain turc*, is a tondo and, as such, is commonly interpreted as suggesting a forbidden view glimpsed whilst looking through a keyhole or peephole. The painting also contains 'intimations of homoeroticism' which are 'at once strong and elusive' (Yeazell, p. 41).<sup>26</sup> All of this may, therefore, be resonating in Proust's vision of the ambiguously gendered Charlus being watched by the narrator as he takes part in a masochistic, homosexual practice.

However, what, on a broader level, links these episodes and, indeed, other examples of voyeurism in the novel is the role they play in the processes of artistic creation. The narrator's account of what he witnesses at Montjouvain opens with a proleptic hint that in this and subsequent acts of observing, he will make a significant discovery about the nature of desire. The significance of what he observes is not yet clear to him, however:

C'est peut-être d'une impression ressentie aussi auprès de Montjouvain, quelques années plus tard, impression restée obscure alors, qu'est sortie, bien après, l'idée que je me suis faite du sadisme. On verra plus tard que, pour de tout autres raisons, le souvenir de cette impression devait jouer un rôle important dans ma vie. (*Du côté de chez Swann*, *ARTP*, 1, 157)

<sup>25</sup> Odette 'l'avait fait asseoir [Swann] près d'elle dans un des nombreux retraits mystérieux qui étaient ménagés dans les enfoncements du salon, protégés par d'immenses palmiers contenus dans des cache-pot de Chine, ou par des paravents auxquels étaient fixés des photographies, des nœuds de rubans et des éventails. Elle lui avait dit: "Vous n'êtes pas confortable comme cela, attendez, moi je vais bien vous arranger", et avec le petit rire vaniteux qu'elle aurait eu pour quelque invention particulière à elle, avait installé derrière la tête de Swann, sous ses pieds, des coussins de soie japonaise qu'elle pétrissait comme si elle avait été prodigue de ces richesses et insoucieuse de leur valeur' (*Du côté de chez Swann*, *ARTP*, 1, 217).

<sup>26</sup> A reproduction may be found in Yeazell, fig. 13. It is the two figures immediately to the left (our right) of the woman sitting with arms folded in the right foreground of the painting who prompt these references to homoeroticism, and specifically, the ambiguity as to whose hand is cupping the breast of the one wearing the necklace: her own, or that of her companion.

Only much later will the mysteries of the object of the artist's gaze be unravelled, to be rewoven in a pattern which makes them accessible to the reader.

The association between voyeurism and creation thus functions on two levels in Proust, one literal, one metaphorical. The first of these takes us back to the idea proposed at the beginning of this article, for just as the artists portraying the harem made visible what was, by definition, unseen, so too did Proust's discussion of proscribed eroticism offer contemporary readers a scrutiny of sexual mores that was not only ground-breaking but variously a source of scandal and titillation. On a metaphorical level, however, the discoveries about desire and sexuality that are expressed through imagery of the harem are also aesthetic discoveries. Not only will they form one of the thematic cornerstones of the novel but they will also act as a stimulus to aesthetic creation. The artist's gaze first uncovers hidden realities, realities the reader is able to apprehend only via the mediation of the artist's transforming vision. Metaphor is the prism through which the artist filters his vision, and ironically, in the context of the present discussion, the metaphorical paradigm through which Proust filters his vision has at its heart the idea of voyeurism. Proust explains the role and functions of metaphor in deciphering perceived realities in *Le Temps retrouvé*:

On peut faire se succéder indéfiniment dans une description les objets qui figuraient dans le lieu décrit, la vérité ne commencera qu'au moment où l'écrivain prendra deux objets différents, posera leur rapport, analogue dans le monde de l'art à celui qu'est le rapport unique de la loi causale dans le monde de la science, et les enfermera dans les anneaux d'un beau style. Même, ainsi que la vie, quand en rapprochant une qualité commune à deux sensations, il dégagera leur essence commune en les réunissant l'une et l'autre pour les soustraire aux contingences du temps, dans une métaphore. (*ARTP*, iv, 468)

As East and West are drawn together, an ageing baron becomes a coquettish concubine, a gossiping, hypochondriac old woman becomes a Persian prince, and a male harem whips its *homme-femme* sultan. In unlikely juxtapositions such as these, the artist-voyeur reveals to us 'realities' we might not otherwise see. On a number of occasions in this article, I have had recourse to nineteenth-century Orientalist painters of the harem as a possible source for Proust's own vision, many of whom, as Yeazell explains of Ingres, had 'never ventured further East than Rome' (p. 7). As a result, they were, in their representations of the East, merely adding another strand of fantasy to an existing web of fantasy. Like many of these painters, Proust himself never ventured further East than Venice, but in contrast to them, he is imposing a fantasy of 'Easternness' on a Western reality, and in so doing, he paradoxically makes that reality clearer. Although not an Orientalist writer, therefore, Proust's metaphorical harem both extends and transforms the legacy of the many writers and painters who turned for their inspiration to the East.

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