

Question of Identity : The “Talmudic” Experience of Marcel Proust

1 Red and White

The number of references to Judaism in Proust’s text attests both to the influence it had on the writer and to the singular way he approached the subject. Proust frequently quotes from the Old Testament, but he certainly does not neglect the Gospels. His biblical citations articulate the primary moment of a sentence or thought by pointing to the canonical meaning of the sacred text while granting it a personal, emotional, or comical connotation. These biblical references are part of Proust’s general cultural background, but he manipulates them with a frequency and intensity all his own.

Proust was also interested in the esoteric tenets of Judaism and their affinities with Christian culture. The art of cathedrals, discovered through Ruskin and his cult of Venice, is what filled Proust with wonder and offered the narrator a privileged example of the incorporation of the sacred that “time regained” seeks to achieve. The Jewish tradition seeps discreetly into the splendors of this Christian art and imbues it with a mysterious ambiguity that draws the narrator’s aesthetic not only toward the abstract purity of wisdom (the Zohar) but also toward an avowal that vice is ever-present (Sodom and Gomorrah).

Let’s examine this fragmentary sentence taken from the *Carnet de 1908*: “The only merit / of being expressed what / has appeared in the *depths* / and usually except / when illuminated / *by a flash of lightning*, or in / weather that is exceptionally / clear and brisk, these / *depths are hidden*. *This / depth*, this inaccessibility / for us is the / only mark of / worth, thus perhaps a form of / *joy*. It does not matter / what kind it is. A / steeple if it is indiscernible / for a few days is worth / more than an / entire theory about the / world. See in my large / notebook the description of the arrival / in front of the Campanile / and also the Zohar.”

Proust links Venice to the Zoharic light symbolizing esoteric wisdom and redemption. While Proust was creating his pastiche of Renan, he read Pauly’s translation of the Zohar. This text, which dates from the second half of the thirteenth century, was strongly influenced by Plato and Plotinus and emphasizes disembodied wisdom as the palace of the Ineffable.

Is he deciphering Venice using the Zohar or, inversely, the Zohar as well as Plotinus encompassed by the aesthetic splendor of Venetian Catholicism? Anyone who interprets Proust must inevitably confront this dilemma, which undoubtedly posed a problem for Proust himself.

A link between Judaism and Venice had already been mysteriously established in *Jean Santeuil*, when the young man, after breaking a Venetian glass, dreads his mother's anger and his father's reprimand. Much to his surprise, however, he is the object of nothing more than a sort of incestuous affection followed by his Catholic mother's bizarre explanation: "He thought his mother would scold him and threaten to punish him harshly. Yet she remained calm, kissed him, and whispered into his ear: 'We can look at it as a symbol of the indestructible union performed at the temple.'" On the other hand, in the drafts of *Contre Sainte-Beuve* written in late 1908, the narrator's mother is endowed with some stereotypically Jewish traits.

Proust's references to Judaism are ambiguous yet widespread, and they turn up when you least expect them. To the ritual of the Dominican Mass, for example, Proust curiously adds *the Saturday ritual* at Roussainville. On Saturdays, the family eats one hour earlier than usual because Françoise has to go to the Roussainville market. Moreover, in Notebook 9, the servant is shown to be a follower of "ancient Jewish law," which is at once cruel and delicate. These details are omitted in the final versions of the book, where Françoise is cleansed of her Judaism.

What is more, Gilberte's Jewish redness, passed down from her father, is associated with the *pink* – a colour Proust so loved. Note "the lady in pink" (Odette at Uncle Adolph's), Oriane's red dress and shoes, and the hawthorns, which at first are pink or white and which serve, from Gilberte's first appearance on the scene, to divide the text into two sequences: a virginal, Catholic, white one and its sexual, Jewish, pink counterpart. Although pink often has maternal undertones, it can also suggest the secret attraction of paternal authority when such a status is thought to be Jewish, as in this description of the narrator's father: "crowned with the pink and violet {Indian} cashmere scarf which he used to wrap around his head . . . standing like Abraham in the engraving after Benozzo Gozzoli which Swann had given me."

The union between sexuality and Judaism is also colored pink in the case of Albertine, who is merely a patch of pinkness when the narrator first sees her in *Within a Budding Grove*. And is her last name not Simonet! A name with only one *n*, as if prompting us to read the name of Simon Maccabeus of biblical fame. Yet this hardly keeps her from hating the Jews as well the Simonnets with a double *n*. Was it because they were too close to her, too shameful to mention?

Finally, *In Search of Lost Time* is strewn with a broad range of literary references to Judaism. The grandfather's humming of passages from the second act of Halevy's *La Juive* when Bloch comes to the house, the "Rachel when from the Lord" nickname taken from the fourth act of the same opera, and the line from Halevy's opera that irresistibly evokes Nissim Bernard's Oriental atavism—all this prepares us for a more elevated art form: Racine's two Jewish tragedies, *Esther* and *Athalie*.

The homosexuals of *Sodom and Gomorrah* recite lines from Racine's Jewish plays. Is this a parody of Racine's love for Judaism, of his predilection for cross-dressing, or of homosexuality itself, which displays Louis XIV-like pretensions?

Proust's irony, which was clearly a consequence of his guilt, combined two "peculiarities"—the Jew and the homosexual—through a never-ending pursuit of what they have in common. In this way, Sodom and Zion contaminate each other and become merged into one, suggesting a crossing of paths or an intolerable hostility. From this perspective, some of Charlus's flights of oratory prefigure modern-day horrors as yet unknown to Proust: "But then a ghetto is as beautiful as it is homogenous and filled to capacity." In the end, Proust's irony—the flip side of his uneasiness and loneliness—is what keeps him going. Far from eradicating difference, Proust's carefree superimposition of codes reinforces polysemy and overloads his characters with sensations and impressions. They become as ambiguous and indiscernible as the "trans-vertebration" of a kinoscopic image. Proust clearly is not attempting to describe the sociological situation of a Jew or his community, nor even the psychological situation of the homosexual. Instead, by juxtaposing these two marginalities and by cataloging the criticisms and scandalmongering that "polite society" inflicted on them both, Proust turns *all this malevolent behavior on its head*. By dissipating persecution, however, he also invalidates the persecuted person's *need to have his own identity*. He snatches him away from his pedestals, whether sociological or psychological, and reduces him to a single, unique character. In the end, nothing will remain but the bursts or folds of his own character—his differences, regrets, and secret desires.

In Proust, the intertwining fates of Judaism, homosexuality, and art are placed within the context of his references to the Hebraic cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and to the Book of Daniel.

The Bible condemns Sodom and Gomorrah for their sexual wickedness and greed. The beginning of *Sodom and Gomorrah* (which "reverses" Proust's condemnation of homosexuality found in the part of *Contre Sainte-Beuve* entitled "The Race upon which a curse is laid") describes the invert as "an extraordinary creature" destined for exile and redemption. Charlus's transmutation into a woman is described in a long digression referring to the Book of Daniel.

The Zoharic tradition, and more particularly Daniel, knew how to look inside a face in order to make out the signs of another soul with which it is "coupled." In like manner, Proust looked into the face of a homosexual and saw the presence of maternal traits. He thus resurrected the esoteric tradition without abandoning his predilection for treating both esotericism and homosexuality with acute irony. This sort of polysemy, however, also leaves open the question of a promised salvation.

At the same time, the narrator mistrusts and rejects any attempt to inflict forced social identities, generalizations, or facile classifications on the Jew and the homosexual: “Let us ignore for the moment those who . . . wish to share their taste (with) apostolic zeal, just as others preach Zionism, conscientious objection, Saint-Simonianism, vegetarianism or anarchy.” “But I have thought it as well to utter here a provisional warning against the lamentable error of proposing (just as people have encouraged a Zionist movement) to create a Sodomist movement and to rebuild Sodom.” Exemplary militant behaviour, vice and even anarchy consolidate and destroy unique experience.

The narrator keeps his characters’ ambiguities alive, and he also engages in the inversion of values, either through the passing of time or by merging disparate points of view into a single instant. In doing so, he amasses contradictory meanings that produce a comical effect drawn from the inadequacy of meaning. The twists and turns of Proust’s never-ending sentences are sometimes accompanied by a knowing smile. At other times, however, they provoke wild laughter. In turn, the polyphony of interpretations gives the impression that everything is contradictory, which may lead to a psychological “flash of lightning.” We know that the Jewish tradition, particularly in the Talmudic currents that interested Proust, tends to offer different interpretations of the same event, such that one attains an understanding of meaning and of the divine that includes—and perhaps requires—laughter. After teetering on this delicate balance point, religion topples over into what it no longer is: the intermittencies of meaning that approach nonmeaning. It is from this perspective that Proustian experience could be called a “Talmudic” one.

2 The Dreyfus Case; or, The Indiscernible Truth

“I was the first Dreyfusist, for it was I who went to ask Anatole France for his signature.” Indeed, Proust, along with his friends Jacques Bizet, Robert de Flers, Léon Yeatman, Louis de la Salle, and the two brothers Halevy, organized the *Manifeste des 104*, which gathered three thousand signatures on Dreyfus’s behalf within a month’s time. In a touching gesture revealing a naive faith in literature and its potential to influence people’s lives, Proust had a copy of his *Les Plaisirs et les jours* placed in Colonel Picquart’s cell at Mont-Valerien.

And yet, at the end of *Time Regained*, the narrator places the Dreyfus case, along with the First World War, in the category of those secondary events that “turn” the writer away from the “interior book of unknown symbols”: “*every public event, be it the Dreyfus case, be it the war, furnishes the writer with a fresh excuse for not attempting to decipher the book: he wants to ensure the triumph of justice, he wants to restore the moral unity of the nation, he has no time to think of literature*”. Besides offering an indictment of “descriptive literature,” this sentence reveals Proust’s dissatisfaction with social and political life, and especially with the dogmatic stances that are inevitably prompted by political commitment. In this particular case, Proust, initially a Dreyfusard, became appalled at the anticlericalism and cynicism displayed by some supporters of his own cause.

In his naivete, Bloch believes that truth resides “permanently, beyond the reach of argument and in a material form, in the secret files of the President of the Republic and the Prime Minister, who imparted it to the Cabinet.” On the other hand, as the Affair progresses and as Dreyfus’s innocence becomes clear (even if it is never really acknowledged), the narrator, and Proust by implication, becomes convinced that partisan interests had secured the truth for personal or ideological gains. These same partisan interests resulted in intolerance, indolence, and arbitrary thinking. As a result, the narrator’s attitude toward the Dreyfus case changes as the book develops. He identifies with the fate of the convicted and exiled Jewish captain (who is like those homosexuals “driven from every lodging . . . excluded even, save on the days of general misfortune when the majority rally round the victim as the Jews rallied around Dreyfus”), and he eventually finds society to be under a sort of hypnosis, prone to fraud and abuse of power and unable to tell the truth. More specifically, Proust was hardly sympathetic to the Combesian anticlericalism and Marxist antipatriotism adopted by some Dreyfusist groups. In sum, with his cathedrals and his Venice, Proust may have been closer in spirit to Bernard Lazare and even to Charles Péguy, whom he criticized, than to Romain Rolland.

L’Affaire is presented as a junction of mistakes, excesses, imitations, changes of opinion, sincere contradictions, and ambiguities that are cravenly maintained. It occurred at just the right time to show, with the help of the prism of Proust’s characters, how the most undeniably innocent person can be maligned, belittled, and diverted from his goals—in the hands of his detractors, of course, but also of his supporters. Truth is never partisan, for there can never be an “appropriate” bias. In the end, and whatever one may initially or naively believe, everything is a pretext for schemes and abuses.

So let’s take refuge in our “interior book.” The Dreyfusards’ exploitation of the Affair, which preceded and accompanied the death of Proust’s mother, eventually convinced Proust that social commitment was futile and that the experience of writing a novel was the only thing he could do to offer an “authentic” frame for “real life.”

Indeed, who could be trusted? “The social kaleidoscope was in the act of turning and . . . the Dreyfus case was shortly to relegate the Jews to the lowest rung of the social ladder.” Described as a “frenzy” and a “cyclone,” the event merely crystallized tendencies that were already present in French society. Although Bloch, who was not well known, could still pass unnoticed, “leading Jews who were representative of their side were already threatened.” The French salon cultivated its Jew as an eccentricity, as an “Orientalism,” as an “aesthetic interest,” or as a source of “local color,” especially when the Jew in question had not “been limbered up by the gymnastics of the Faubourg” or ennobled by a “crossing with England and Spain.”

The Jew, described as “a strange and savory spectacle,” as is Bloch, becomes caught up in the anti-Dreyfus cyclone and turns into an object of scorn, hatred, and exploitation.

Within the unfathomable swirls of this social kaleidoscope, Swann seems to identify once again with the narrators sympathies and reservations. Although he, too, is a Dreyfusard from the beginning of the Affair, he is described as “comically blind.” He has a certain admiration for Clemenceau, whom he had once believed to be a spy for England. What is even more important is that “the wave overturned Swann’s literary judgments too, down to his way of expressing them. Barres was now devoid of all talent, and even his early books were feeble, could scarcely bear rereading.” This display of fundamentalism (before the term was even coined) was initially spotted by the Dreyfusards, and it allowed Proust to accuse (cleverly, he must have thought) the anti-Dreyfusards of the same fault. The Dreyfusards’ attempt to close down churches could only have offended Proust, and this bolstered his defense of men who were as hostile toward Dreyfus as were the members of the *Action française*.

Proust will have to stake out a place for himself in the Saint-Simonian pantheon of literature. That will be another “affair.” Let’s call it *l’Affaire Proust*, which consists of superimpositions that make cathedrals tremble.

3 From Vice to Infinity

In a text entitled “On Anti-Semitism,” which was inspired to a large degree by the image of the Jews that emerges from Proust’s novel, Hannah Arendt stresses the important role played by the Jews’ assimilation into society. Because of Jewish support for the ideals of the bourgeois revolution and because of the part they played in financial and industrial growth as well as in politics, journalism, and the military, Jewish integration in society was primarily an upper-class phenomenon, which does not mean that these well-to-do members were “cleansed of their Jewishness.” More insidiously, “Jewish origin, without religious and political connotation, became everywhere a ‘psychological quality.’ It was changed into ‘Jewishness,’ and from then on could be considered only in the categories of virtue or vice.” It was an “interesting” vice for some, and for others, this vice was a crime that had to be eradicated, especially when political and economic factors were searching for a scapegoat: “Such perversion was made possible by those Jews who considered it an innate virtue.”

Hannah Arendt has drawn attention to the way Judaism was thereby reduced to a difference, to a strangeness, even to an object of psychic or moral curiosity. By relinquishing Judaism as a religious sign, Jewishness came to be identified with closed clans. They sometimes joined such clans. Arendt quotes Proust : “The question is not as for Hamlet, *to be or not to be*, but *to belong or not to belong*” (Search, 3:1055), where they were often praised for their eccentricity and distinctive perversity. Some thus declared themselves Dreyfusards through pure snobbery among them, people such as the Verdurins and even the due de Guermantes, whose sympathies for the Jewish captain were motivated only by his desire to please some Italian noblewomen he had met at the baths.

Yet once Dreyfus was declared innocent, he ceased to be vice-ridden and consequently lost his appeal. With him, the Jews regained the very limited status they had left behind, for he was presumed to have raised the tempting vice attributed to them to the rank of the crime for which they had always been held responsible.

Going beyond the confines of the Dreyfus case, Arendt foresaw the insidious sociological, religious, and psychological forces that would result in the death camps and the Holocaust. Whether it is desired or simply endured, the conversion of Judaism into Jewishness is seen as a precondition for these unprecedented massacres, which can only be thwarted, Arendt claims, if Jewish origins are restored through the courage of the Zionists. After taking the Proustian path of Jewishness-made-vice for a while and recognizing the veracity of Proust's diagnosis, Arendt was able to head very naturally in a more political direction. And she is right.

Where is the narrator? Proust is at the center and the periphery. The elegant idleness displayed by Swann, who wrongly believes life to be a novel, can fit in with the holy of holies found in the very faubourg that rejects Bloch's increasingly and destructively boorish behavior. Indeed, the Jews, those singular beings, hold up a mirror to the singularities of the clan or clans. When aristocrats, homosexuals, or those with the privileges of family or gender see their own reflection in it, they realize how different they really are. The groups' inner layers thus start to palpitate, for the barriers are no longer airtight. Everyone becomes uneasy and lets himself be seduced, penetrated, and contaminated. The hierarchies still endure, of course, but how long can they last?

A single logical process unites all these differences. Hannah Arendt called this process "vice," and Proust portrayed it in his novel, where each group congregates around a being who is not like the others, who enables the group to live out the logic of sadomasochism. It is the love of hate, the hatred of love, persecution, humiliation, and delectable sorrow. There is no specifically social means for escaping this logic, for the whole of social life is contained within it: "It is the soul of the ancient Hebrews, torn from a life at once insignificant and transcendental... and so disturbing because it nonetheless resembles humanity all too closely gives us a sense of the supernatural, in our poor everyday world where even a man of genius from whom, gathered as though at a table at a seance, we expect to learn the secret of the infinite." At once insignificant and transcendental, the soul of a genius or of a Jew uprooted from the past diffuses (like a "seance table"), the "secret of the infinite" into our meager world. The narrator, Jews like Swann, and homosexuals like Charlus all hold the key to society.

Vice is not an accident of history, my dear Hannah. Proust seems to say vice is latent within us; it is the other, infinite side of society. Proust seems to have discovered this Freudian truth without Freud's help. There is no way not to be one of them, not to be part of society—and thus of perversion, unless, of course, you describe, decompose, recompose, and reinvent them. Writing does not eradicate vice, but it does absolve it.

To the realism that it propels, the novel adds a metaphysical paradigm in which vice is at once approved and condemned. Ultimately, vice is displayed in order to be removed.

Thus Hannah Arendt is mistaken. According to Proust, Jewishness is not a vice. It is “assimilated” and displaced into another religion (Catholicism, in this case) under the name of a fascinating and abject foreign body. It reveals that sadomasochism adheres to the dark center of every society. When Jewishness irradiates social groups, it points to this truth. Yet *by extracting* Jewishness from these social groups to reinforce the purity of Judaism, we protect it and risk perpetuating the incessant wars between clans, ethnic groups, and nations. Such is the logic of history, and Hannah Arendt seeks a tolerable conclusion for history. Nevertheless, when Jewishness *reveals the intrinsic truth* of homogenous social groupings, it bears witness endlessly to the reversibility of the passions—of love, jealousy, and death. It is simply a source of beauty and does not solve the problems of history. Whereas Judaism has a history, Jewishness is an inspiration for art. And what remains is time regained—a mirror of the irreparably lost time that passes before us. Such is the path taken by Proust: the path of pure time embodied.

This process of embodiment is violent, but real beauty always comes at a price.

Let me summarize what I have said thus far. To create characters, one must know how *to be one of them* and how *not to be one of them*. To know how to be Swann, to love him, and also to be detached from him, to be no longer a part of him. To do both at once, before you encounter that strange osmosis between the projectionist and the shadow he casts: “And yet, my dear Charles (Swann), whom I used to know when I was still so young and you were nearing your grave, it is because he whom you must have regarded as a young idiot has made you the hero of one of his novels that people are beginning to speak of you again and that your name will perhaps live.” Who will live? Who is the character? Haas? Swann? Proust?

Inside and out, at the center of the clan (where the narrator thinks he is) and at its periphery (which is more likely)—in this way, you can engrave something into other people’s flesh and into your own, sadistically and with precision.

Neither on one side nor on the other, and by constantly bypassing them both, Proust never ceases to disturb those who wish to be “one of them.”

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