

Proust on the Beach

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The beach is a surprisingly generative site for the modernist novel. Surprising, because the city, with its dynamism and potential for interconnecting plotlines, has long been recognized as modernism's preferred novelistic setting.¹ Yet even quintessential city novels are unable to resist the lure of the beach. The urban plots and conspiracies of Andrei Bely's *Petersburg* (1913) are interrupted by a vision of the seashore's 'wrinkled' saltwater pools and 'white-maned' waves. James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) twice leads us out of Dublin and onto the 'seaspawn and seawrack', 'razorshells' and 'squeaking pebbles' of the strand — a site of philosophical and autoerotic investigations. Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) opens on a London morning 'fresh as if issued to children on a beach'.² And in Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–27) — a work partially drafted at a coastal resort in northern France — the seashore breaks into the novel's city–village counterpoint like an improvisation, unsettling the symmetry of time lost and regained and enabling new encounters and lines of flight.³

What made the beach so enticing for early twentieth-century authors? One possible answer lies in the perceived emptiness and isolation of this space. The seashore would appear to flatten the social and temporal heterogeneity that powers the urban novel, instead invoking what Michael Taussig calls the fantasy of a 'spectacular return of the archaic within modernity'.⁴ Indeed, as Rosalind Krauss points out, the sea has often been perceived as a 'special kind of medium for modernism'. This is due, she claims, to its supposed 'detachment from the social', and to the way it opens onto a 'visual plenitude' that is also a 'no-space of sensory deprivation'. The seashore, according to this view, invites a 'rapt stare' because it enables the abstraction of sheer aesthesis, offering the eye nothing but 'patterns and colors and lines'.⁵ Krauss herself challenges this official story of modernist abstraction by exploring the unruly compulsions and disruptive forces

that lurk within that entranced gaze. In what follows, I also counter the mythology of the beach as an empty, asocial space, but along different interpretive lines: I examine the modernist seashore as a stage for the reconfiguration of social ritual and corporeal style. After all, the beach is only partly a matter of sand and sea. Proust in particular is fascinated by the seaside resort as a setting that facilitates intimate contact with strangers. With its theatrical construction, its central casino, and its exposed, mutable seascape, the Proustian beach resort is a modernist chronotope that enables a new sort of queerness to emerge — one that materializes as the *élan* (energetic propulsion, vital force, erotic impulse) of a gang of girls who can't keep their feet on the ground.⁶

The *Recherche* has sometimes been viewed as a novel pulled between two spatial poles: the fictional village of Combray, with its surrounding countryside, two 'ways' and ritualized family life; and the real city of Paris, with its sophisticated salon culture.⁷ Yet no place is more frequently evoked in the novel than the fictional resort town, Balbec.⁸ Much of *Within a Budding Grove* (*À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, 1919) and *Sodom and Gomorrah* (*Sodome et Gomorrhe*, 1921–2) takes place on and around Balbec's beach and in its hotel, casino and restaurants. The quaintness of a village past is born of the contact of a *petite madeleine* with a cup of tea. Proust's beach, by contrast, appears as the end point of an intoxicated train trip. It issues not from the eucharistic meeting of pastry and herbal brew but from the head-turning encounter of beer and locomotive velocity. An extension of its casino and its vast 'amphitheater' sea, Balbec is a space of performance, equipped with esplanades, terraces and promenades. Site of dream and speculation, marked by 'blue peaks of the sea which bear no name on any map', it is a landscape that opens not to the past but to the future.⁹

We might therefore understand the Proustian beach as queer in José Esteban Muñoz's sense of the term, where queerness is allied with ideality. For Muñoz, writing against the negativity of Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, queerness indicates a 'wish-landscape' or a 'longed-for future'; it is bound up with the 'intention to be lost'.¹⁰ Balbec might bear some resemblance to the historical beach town of Cabourg, where Proust wrote much of his novel, but it's ultimately an imaginary space: otherworldly, utopian. This is why the narrator gets drunk for the first time on the train to Balbec, to his grandmother's chagrin. It is as if entrance to that seaside world required an initiatory rite of intoxication, a deliberate disorientation.

This article contends that the seaside is a crucial but undertheorized setting in the *Recherche*, and it makes this case in two parts. I show, first, that at Balbec, expected social hierarchies and rituals of invitation and introduction give way to an atmosphere in which contingency rules. If Combray, seen from a distance, is no more than a ‘church summing up the town’, Balbec might be ‘summed up’ by its casino. The second part of the chapter demonstrates that the beach in Proust enables a new conception of the body in time, emblemized by the leaping adolescent assemblage, or ‘petite bande’, that rises one day from the sand. Proust’s depiction of the seaside as a virtual ‘springboard’ (‘tremplin’) brings his novel into the orbit of cinematic and balletic experiments by the likes of Charlie Chaplin and Jean Cocteau. For Proust, Balbec is a zone of the unexpected — a site not of social reproduction, but of queer flirtation and adolescent *élan*.

‘Gambling fever’

We cannot understand the importance of the seaside to the world of the *Recherche* without reflecting on Proust’s fascination with contingency and chance as ordering and disordering forces. In his depiction of Balbec, Proust sets aside a romantic conception of the seaside as sublime, exploring it, instead, as a place of accident and improvisation. As a geography on the edge and a site of temporary habitation, Balbec’s social rules are more open-ended than those of either Paris or Combray. At Balbec, invitations fall by the wayside and random encounters are the norm.

Proust represents the seaside vacation at the turn of the century as an increasingly democratized activity that facilitates new social configurations, new human geographies.¹¹ ‘Aristocracy is a relative thing’, his narrator learns during a first formative summer spent at Balbec (*ISLT* II, 520). In the ‘blinding light’ of Proust’s beach, ‘social proportions are altered’ (*ISLT* II, 344–5). When the narrator and his grandmother dine at the Grand Hôtel restaurant for the first time, he gazes with ‘passionate curiosity’ at the room full of strangers while she surreptitiously opens a window, ‘unable to endure the thought that I was losing the benefit of an hour in the open air’. This rebellious act ‘at once sent flying, together with the menus, the newspapers, veils and hats of all the people at the other tables’ (*ISLT* II, 345). This extemporaneous rearrangement of the room sets the mood for the adolescent acrobatics that grace this volume — a

phenomenon to which we will return below — and it also underscores the precariousness of social distinctions at the seaside.

The line dividing workers from the vacationers they are employed to serve is blurred at Balbec, such that the Proustian narrator performs a series of social misreadings, seeing a waiter as a bourgeois acquaintance, a hall porter as a ‘foreign visitor’, and a (male) bathing superintendent as the fashionable Odette Swann (*ISLT* II, 359). Such confusion is widespread. Thus a stranger strikes the hotel staff as being ‘of the most humble extraction’, while impressing the notary’s wife as ‘a gentleman of great distinction, of perfect breeding’, and Françoise, the narrator’s cook, is deemed a ‘lady’ (*ISLT* II, 355–6). Balbec is a place of social flexibility and inversion, where a Frenchman can claim to be king of a small island in the South Seas, and declare his mistress a ‘queen’ — although the other guests are convinced that he’s a ‘pantomime prince’ and she’s a mere shop-girl. It’s difficult to convince other beachgoers that you’re a king when the ‘royal bathing hut’ is available to anyone who can pay 20 francs. As one provincial guest says to another, ‘you can take it yourself, if you care for that sort of thing’ (*ISLT* II, 347).

In this alternative social world, the established rules don’t necessarily apply. An invitation is absolutely required to secure entry to a Parisian salon. Consider, by contrast, the refused introduction that shadows the narrator’s first stay at the seashore. Early in the novel, the narrator’s father tries — and fails — to obtain an invitation that would connect his son to a powerful family on the Normandy coast. Balbec’s atmosphere of indeterminate, non-patriarchal affiliation is made evident in this passage, which presents the resort in the guise of a quickly retracted recommendation. Legrandin, a gay engineer whose sister has married a provincial aristocrat with Balbec ties, and whose lyrical effusions sound like a pastiche of Proust’s own style, raves about Balbec’s charming sunsets, golden beaches, rugged cliffs and newly constructed hotel. But when the narrator’s father attempts to pin down a letter of introduction to the well-placed sister, Legrandin merely gazes off into space, vaguely intoning, when pressed, ‘There, like everywhere, I know everyone and no one’ (*ISLT* I, 143). Despite the father’s persistence, Legrandin continues to acrobatically dodge the question. He evades the request out of snobbishness, of course. And yet his choice not to heed the father’s interpellation could be read less as a simple refusal than as a door left open — a deferred or suspended invitation.¹² By declining to answer the question, Legrandin creates an overture of a different sort, intimating that Balbec will be a place untethered from any hetero-patriarchal system of hospitality.

At the seaside, then, expected rituals of invitation cease to hold the social world in place. Vincent Descombes has argued that, in contrast to Paris — a novelistic space marked by the copresence of strangers and the continuous exchanging of invitations — Balbec, and especially its Grand Hôtel, is a zone of sheer detachment and ‘mutual indifference’ in which no one owes anyone anything: ‘no one intrudes into the affairs of the others; each remains at his own table’.¹³ It is true that, unlike the world of Parisian high society, the seaside resort is a universe adrift from the usual connections and backchannels. Yet, *contra* Descombes, I would contend it is not quite the case that this is a space of ‘sheer detachment’; rather, if Paris is a world in which ‘one receives invitations’, and Combray is one in which invitations are not needed, at Balbec, invitations tend to be misplaced or blown off course.

At the seaside, the framework of social ritual is loosely woven and open to chance. Invitations at Balbec do not travel quite as expected — they are extended but not accepted, or desired but not received. In this regard, Legrandin’s refusal to grant the narrator’s father the introductory letter he seeks aptly sets the scene. During his first summer by the sea, the narrator spends weeks waiting for a little group of adolescent girls to materialize on the sand and wishing he could speak to them. Yet when at last one of them directly crosses his path, their gazes simply pass by one another like clouds in a stormy sky. At the Grand Hôtel, the narrator’s grandmother and her childhood friend, the Marquise de Villeparisis, will pretend not to recognize one another until a chance meeting in a doorway forces their reacquaintance. In a queer variation on Legrandin’s initial refusal to open a channel of introduction, when the Baron de Charlus speaks to the narrator for the first time, he extends an invitation — asking the boy to come to tea with his grandmother in Mme de Villeparisis’s hotel room. But when they arrive, they discover that the hostess is not expecting them, and Charlus himself pretends to have forgotten that he invited them. On another rare occasion in this volume in which the narrator promptly and willingly accepts an invitation — to Albertine’s hotel room — he immediately ruins the occasion by attempting to plant on her face an uninvited, unwelcome kiss.

In addition to these missed or thwarted overtures, the volume is replete with declined invitations. Dining in the hotel restaurant, the narrator longingly gazes at a clique of young people whom he would give anything to join, only to ultimately decline their belated invitation in the final pages of the volume. He will likewise refuse his new friend

Saint-Loup's invitation to Doncières, a gesture made sincerely to the narrator but insincerely to Bloch, who (by contrast) is eager to accept it. Similarly, the narrator nearly disregards an amicable summons by the celebrated painter, Elstir, ultimately visiting the painter's studio only at his grandmother's insistence. Finally, two volumes later, he returns to Balbec bearing a valuable letter of introduction from Saint-Loup to the Cambremers, establishing the very connection that his father had failed to secure in 'Combray'. Despite his newfound social capital, he begins this second summer in a state of mourning, hiding from everyone who seeks his company. In *Sodom and Gomorrah*, the narrator's possessiveness will ultimately overshadow the luminous indeterminacy of the seaside world, as a toxic jealousy plot comes to dominate a space that was once alive with the pleasures of evanescence.¹⁴ Yet, in its initial scenography at least, the Proustian seashore is a zone of ephemerality and nonfulfillment, a place where conventional social choreography is disrupted and the usual rhythms of interclass hospitality are out of sync. Encounters tend to take place by accident, and expected pathways towards social prestige are swept away.

A place for looking and being seen, Balbec is highly amenable to the stranger encounter. By chance, the narrator meets some of the novel's most important queer characters on the beach: Albertine and her *bande*; Saint-Loup, with his impossible elegance and his eyes the colour of the sea; and Charlus, spotted in *Within a Budding Grove* as he's eyeing the narrator in front of the casino that adjoins the hotel. Each surprise appearance is an event. In each case, the emergent figure is dramatically spotlighted, as if arriving on stage. Every afternoon at Balbec, men and women come out to stroll along the esplanade, observed and judged by seated 'critics' in a line of chairs; it is on this virtual catwalk that Albertine and her friends first appear in the novel, silhouetted against the sea (*ISLT* II, 503–4). A more intimate dramaturgy structures the scene in which Saint-Loup makes his entrance: the narrator is lurking in the darkened hotel restaurant when he first spots Robert passing by through an opening in the curtains, illuminated by the sun and sporting an outfit that few men would dare to wear (*ISLT* II, 410–21). And when Charlus shows up, the narrator suddenly finds *himself* on stage: he has the 'sensation of being watched by someone who was not far off', and turns his head to see a man of about 40, who, 'nervously slapping the leg of his trousers with a switch, was staring at me, his eyes dilated with extreme attentiveness' (*ISLT* II, 452).

It is telling that this last encounter takes place in front of the hotel casino — an erotically charged social space in which improvisation supplants fixed ritual. In the *Recherche*, the beach is not primarily a space for bathing. In fact, we never actually see the narrator enter the water, although we know that he wears a bathing suit with anchors embroidered on it, provoking Charlus's disdain (*ISLT* II, 474). We do, however, accompany him into the casino numerous times. Casinos sprang up in tandem with seaside hotels in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; in about 1930, when Walter Benjamin imagined composing a 'psychological and ontological study' of gambling, he was thinking in particular about 'gambling at the seaside'.¹⁵ Yet the casino in the early twentieth century did not only enable the placing of bets. It was a dynamic social space facilitating various kinds of play: in addition to a gambling room, Cabourg's Grand Hôtel Casino comprised a theatre, a private club, a dance hall, and grill-room.¹⁶ If the casino's queerness is first indicated by the scene, cited above, in which the narrator is cruised by Charlus, this association is made explicit in *Sodom and Gomorrah*, when girls dance chest to chest in a casino dance hall and check each other out with the aid of its mirrored walls. When one day the narrator spies a young woman in the casino fixing 'the alternating and revolving beam of her gaze' on Albertine, he concludes that it is by these peculiar 'materializations' that a dispersed Gomorrah achieves an 'intermittent reconstruction' of its mythical city (*ISLT* IV, 338–9). Intermittency is the key word here: the casino is a space of flirtation, where commitments can be suspended and long-term plots set aside.

At the seaside in Cabourg, during the summer months between 1907 and 1914, Proust himself moved between hotel and casino, establishing a network of intimate confidants and amateur stock market advisors and dreaming up the *Recherche*. It was also during these years that he developed what he called his 'gambling fever' (*Correspondance* XI, 41). The more he worked on his novel, the more he gambled, notes William Carter. If Carter dismisses Proust's gambling as a mere escape from the pressures of writing and a distraction from poor health, I suggest that we take such play seriously.¹⁷ As I have argued elsewhere, practices of risky, irrational expenditure shaped Proust's literary imagination, giving rise to a narrative that foregrounds the volatility of value.¹⁸ During the years in which he was drafting the *Recherche*, Proust became not only an ardent gambler but an avid speculator — with disastrous results for his personal finances. The full scale of what Rubén Gallo has termed Proust's 'financial masochism'

is beyond the scope of the present article.¹⁹ Yet this author's love of the seaside cannot be understood without considering his affinity for the seaside casino.

Enticed by the aesthetics of risk and the modes of sociability the casino made possible, Proust spent a good deal of time in this space: baccarat was his favourite game.²⁰ According to Thomas Kavanagh, baccarat is similar to dice — 'a game of pure chance, a dialogue between the player and his luck where skill has no role to play'.²¹ The pleasure of baccarat lies in its offer of escape from 'controlled expenditure, prudent calculation, and a careful reciprocity of services offered and expected'. Baccarat's temporality is not that of continuity and accumulation; instead, it plunges the player into a 'more intense yet more precarious way of being'.²²

Contingency is the law of the casino, and the logic of what *could be otherwise* also played a key role in Proust's invention of Balbec.²³ The beach preoccupied Proust for years before he began composing his novel.²⁴ But if Balbec was long dreamed of, its actual existence owes much to chance. The composition of the Balbec chapters was facilitated by two unplanned occurrences: first, the 1913–14 flight and accidental death of Alfred Agostinelli, Proust's beloved chauffeur-secretary, and second, the outbreak of war, which closed publishing houses and granted Proust an unforeseen span of time in which to expand and reconceptualize the middle stretch of the *Recherche* — including, in particular, the Albertine story. During this imposed publication hiatus, the proportions of the text began to go awry as the middle material swelled. As Suzanne Guerlac puts it, the intrusion of the war into Proust's carefully planned, symmetrical form causes the narrative to 'go off in new directions'. With the arrival of Albertine, 'something like improvisation sets in'.²⁵ Indeed, the descriptions of Albertine are rife with expressions indicating contingency and variability, such as 'some days', 'other days', 'other times', 'most often' (*ISLT* II, 718–19). As Jacques Dubois reminds us, Albertine is not properly introduced as a character: an interruptive figure, emblem of speed and luminosity, she 'transmits her energy to the novel', and with it, the possibility of a new kind of sociality and desire.²⁶

Historical contingency, then, and not a pre-orchestrated artistic plan, facilitated Albertine's appearance in the novel, and her sexuality is similarly protean. Despite the narrator's eventual attempts to contain her and compel her fidelity, Albertine neither accepts to play her part in a marriage plot, nor is she quite legible as a lesbian. In her ambiguous queerness, Albertine resists typification. Eve Kosofsky

Sedgwick underscores this point, noting that the period's predictable 'inversion model' of sexuality is simply not applied to Albertine, whose practices and desires are never subjected to taxonomic scrutiny.²⁷ As Elisabeth Ladenson puts it, female same-sex sexuality is the 'site of unpredictability' in the *Recherche* and the 'exception' to the novel's stated rules.²⁸

My wager is that Proust's fascination with female same-sex desire and gender rebellion is intimately connected to his penchant for surprise, his 'gambling fever'. Non-normative sexualities have been allied historically with concepts of chance and contingency — as what could be otherwise. As Valery Rohy has argued, when fin-de-siècle heteronormative cultures 'enshrine' heterosexuality as 'the ultimate human necessity', all other forms of desire appear 'radically unnecessary'.²⁹ Proust embraces this contingency effect, which is heightened in regard to queer women. In refusing to class Albertine and her friends as 'inverts' and in describing them (and their ambiguously sapphic desires) as changeable and dynamic, Proust is exploring a vernacular theory of sexuality that, according to Benjamin Kahan, had gained traction in the early twentieth century — namely, that lesbianism is more situational (more dependent on chance and context) than either heterosexuality or male homosexuality.³⁰ Proust was specifically drawn to the aura of chance and situation-specificness that accompanied lesbianism in this period. Queer women in the *Recherche* trouble assumptions about the constancy of desire and of sexual-object choice: the practices and affiliations of Albertine and her *bande* do not indicate a stable state, but a style of existence that takes 'ephemerality, mutability, transitoriness, and environmental factors' as conditions of possibility.³¹ The narrator's enchantment with Albertine and her beach-born friends is ultimately an enchantment with contingency itself — and with Balbec as the site of the little gang's irrepressible and exuberant play.

Beach Bodies

From the start, then, the beach was a fantasmatic landscape for Proust — a space of desire in which the intimate mixes with the irremediably strange. The dreamlike quality of the seashore is already evident in *Jean Santeuil*, the fragmentary novel that Proust worked on, and subsequently abandoned, during the last decade of the nineteenth

century. Many pages are devoted to the beach in this early work, which opens with a preface in which the narrator describes lingering during the off-season while vacationing in northern France. In *Jean Santeuil*, however, the beach is not yet a casino, much less a site of acrobatic social mobility. Instead, it features, tellingly, as an enormous bed. In a fragment titled 'Reading on the Beach' ('Lecture et farniente sur la plage. — Les clairs de lune'), the eponymous hero lies on the dunes with his companion for hours, reading, dozing and digesting by day, watching the moonlight on the sea by night:

But before settling down to read during the long hours of digestion (...) the two young men would lie for long periods trying to sleep, exchanging remarks at rare intervals, smoking, turning their faces this way and that, looking at the sea or sky, keeping the sun from their faces with spread handkerchiefs.³²

Here we see the Proustian beach as a space in which to test out a different rhythm of life — one in which intellection cedes to a more elemental way of being.

When Proust wrote the beach into the *Recherche*, he no longer imagined it as a bed — although this early vision subtly shapes his account of Balbec as a dreamlike expanse on which figures appear and vanish.³³ In the passage cited above, the encounter with the unthinking intensity, or 'intoxications' ('enivrements') of seaside life occurs in the horizontal mode. In the *Recherche*, it will take the mobile form of a body in flight. At Balbec, waves 'leap' one after the other like 'jumpers on a springboard' ('des sauteurs sur un tremplin') and the beach itself opens a 'breach (...) in the midst of the rest of the world' (*ISLT* II, 342). When a little band of adolescent girls materializes like a flock of birds and traverses time and space in a manner the narrator has never seen before, we are witness to the apparition of an entirely new corporeal style (*ISLT* II, 504). In the Paris of Proust's novel, the laws of the aristocratic salons still hold sway. At the Proustian seaside, even the laws of gravity seem to lose their hold.

How would we have to adjust our critical assumptions in order to recognize the *leap* as a quintessential Proustian posture or spatio-temporal configuration? Antoine Compagnon has drawn our attention to the Proustian stumble, taking the narrator's comical performance of lurching on the uneven paving stones of the Guermantes' courtyard as evidence of Proust's penchant for disequilibrium, disproportion and unresolved dialectic.³⁴ Yet readers do not readily associate this author — who famously wrote in bed — with a repertoire of

mid-air poses. Indeed, the bodily posture most readers would ally with Proust is the supine position, or some variation on it. Proust, whose novel begins in the bedroom and periodically draws us back in, is a writer known to have worked long nocturnal hours in a 'semi-recumbent' posture.³⁵ Moreover, within the diegetic universe of the novel, the bed features as a launching pad for fiction, as narrativity's zero degree. As Gérard Genette has shown, the bedroom is the point of origin for narrative in the *Recherche*, functioning as the 'embryonic cell' for Proustian fictionality itself.³⁶ It is therefore striking when, in the Balbec section of *Within a Budding Grove*, Proust instead spotlights the image of a cheeky young girl in flight, hurtling spontaneously through space. While we do learn that the narrator enjoys lying around on the dunes — 'Ah, so you like basking in the sun like a lizard?' Albertine scoffs — this indolent pose scarcely features at Balbec (*ISLT* II, 623).

Art historian Linda Nochlin has pointed out that the invention of the leisure beach involves 'the politics and policy of putting the body in its place'. Anthropologist Marc Augé similarly depicts the beach as a phenomenon that draws attention to the 'occupation of space and the management of the body'.³⁷ In Proust, however, a rebellious body emerges on the sand — a collective metaphor-body that flauntingly oversteps its bounds. The narrator is waiting one day in front of the Grand Hôtel when he spots an apparition he has never seen before — a little band of adolescent girls, moving along the sea like a 'stain' or 'striking patch of color', a 'flock of gulls', a strain of music, 'a luminous comet', or 'a bower of Pennsylvania roses' (*ISLT* II, 503–6). The *petite bande* is an engine of figuration — a shifting assemblage of features and qualities that the novel cannot stop likening to one thing or another. As if revved up to the point of flight, one of the girls suddenly breaks with the pack and takes to the air. Leaping over the head of a shocked old banker, she brushes his cap with her 'nimble feet' (*ISLT* II, 508).

This particular episode is so important to Proust that it becomes a refrain: he will remind us of it four more times in the volume, never missing a chance to draw our attention to the image of the tall girl (Andrée, we'll later learn) who jumped over the elderly gentleman — referred to, alternately, as the 'old banker', the 'terrified old man', the 'octogenarian' and 'the First President'. The *petite bande* incarnates style as difference from the norm, as swerve from good behaviour, and as leap: 'they could not set eyes on an obstacle without amusing themselves by clearing it either in a running jump ("en prenant leur élan") or with both feet together'; they 'never let pass an opportunity to jump or to slide without indulging in it' (*ISLT* II,

507). The girls' impudence — 'we're too badly behaved' ('nous avons trop mauvais genre'), as Albertine puts it — is an expression of their gift for 'mingling all the arts': they leap and sing 'in the manner of those poets of old for whom the different genres were not yet separate' (*ISLT* II, 634, 646, translation altered). Inextricable from the beach setting from which they spring, their congruous bodies traverse space like poetry in motion, ready to lift off.

Examining the gesture of the leap in Homeric poetry, Alex Purves argues that 'the sheer force of [the epic hero's] kinetic energy has the potential to take the narrative off track'. Occasions of leaping draw the reader's attention to the possibility that the hero 'might break into the now, even into the fiction of living his story as it happens, by acting spontaneously and going off-script'.³⁸ The *petite bande*, too, draws on the plot-distorting energy of the epic leap — and yet, as 'ancient' as their art may be, the *bande's* gender-bending, collective disregard for traditional rules of genre is the mark of their modernity, and Balbec's. In the girls' improvisatory, elastic choreography, we see the novel itself working to disrupt its own 'muscle memory' — to depart from its habitual pathways and styles of movement and desire.³⁹

The figure of the leap is compelling because it combines various concepts key to Proust's vision of Balbec: queer style, contingency, improvisation, and the casino as the grounds for such insouciant play. If Proust himself enjoyed gambling, his narrator invests his affections instead in the wild mobility of the *petite bande* as it bounds through the casino's halls and ballroom. Indeed, this space is always associated in the *Recherche* with the *petite bande*, as a setting for their virtuosic misbehaviour. The narrator accompanies the girls to the casino on rainy days, conspiring with their mischief, 'playing tricks on the dancing master', and admiring them as they jump all over the place. Once again, these girls refuse to stay on the ground. Despite 'admonitions from the manager', they cannot move through the casino 'without breaking into a run, jumping over all the chairs, and sliding along the floor' (*ISLT* II, 645–6). During his second seaside holiday, the narrator will become suspicious of Albertine's every move. But in *Within a Budding Grove*, the figure of the flying leap encapsulates the ethos of Balbec — a site in which a new choreography of desire and a new modernist energy are at play.

We might understand the leap as a turn-of-the-century 'kinaesthetic' or 'cultural-corporeal structure of feeling'.⁴⁰ Here it is helpful to recall that Proust was writing — and choreographing the *petite bande* — at a cultural moment preoccupied with the

expressive potential of gesture. Writing against the assumption that industrial capitalism ‘processes’ bodies into ‘dissociated, fetishized, ultimately empty and machinable elements’, Hillel Schwartz argues that modernism saw the emergence of a new kinaesthetic focus on ‘expressive release’ rather than ‘practiced achievement’.⁴¹ Although the *petite bande*’s impertinent grace represents a novelty within the world of the *Recherche*, by making the figure of the leaping girl into a seaside refrain, Proust brings his novel into conversation with early twentieth-century mass cultural and avant-garde art forms.

One could almost imagine that his depiction of Balbec as a stage on which adolescent girls vault over old men and kick over casino chairs was inspired by the gestural slapstick of Charlie Chaplin’s 1915 *By the Sea*, a one-reel film shot along the Ocean Front Walk and Abbott Kinney Pier in Santa Monica. (Proust almost certainly never saw this film, but he did, in 1915, enthusiastically sport what he called a Chaplin-style moustache, according to his housekeeper, Céleste Albaret.)⁴² Chaplin explores the seaside as a zone in which marital relations are suspended and other sorts of adventures and affiliations might occur: the film’s first intertitle — ‘Wifie is Away’ — invokes marriage only to set it aside. When the tramp appears, he walks down the promenade, munching a banana, then tosses the peel and slips spectacularly on it, feet in the air — a first indication that bodies will have difficulty staying upright on this beach. It is true that characters fall down regularly enough in Chaplin’s films, but in *By the Sea*, bodies and objects are carried by the wind, which takes on an unusual degree of agentic force. The wind features as an unruly medium in *By the Sea*: it is a wild, decorum-undermining element that represents — here as in Proust — a more general social volatility. As if the sand were but an extension of the wind that continuously knocks them off their feet, the tussling, flirting actors are whipped by the seaside breeze and thrown off balance by the slippery, granular surfaces of beach and pier. In Chaplin’s version of the Proustian hat gag, the tramp and a stranger get their wind-tossed bowler caps hopelessly mixed up, leading to a brawl in which the gale gets the upper hand (Figure 1). Chaplin’s beach is thus a vaudevillian version of Balbec — a space of identity-blurring acrobatic mobility, a zone suffused with *élan*, in its various senses: energetic momentum, vital force, erotic rush or romantic urge.

Proust’s attention to the *petite bande*’s stylized seaside embodiment also draws him close to early twentieth-century adventures in modern dance. In fact, the seaside leap features centrally in the one-act comic ballet *Le Train bleu*, the libretto of which was written by Proust’s



Figure 1. Windswept choreography. Screen grab from *By the Sea*.

friend, the poet, playwright and filmmaker Jean Cocteau. (Cocteau believed himself to be the model for Proust's minor seaside figure of 'Octave' — future playwright, virtuosic golfer, tennis player, gambler, 'gigolo' and accessory to the *petite bande*.⁴³) This ballet, performed by the Ballets Russes in 1924, was the product of a dazzling array of talents — costumes by Chanel, a curtain designed by Picasso, a score by Darius Milhaud, and choreography by Nijinska.⁴⁴ Part avant-garde experiment, part circus act, *Le Train bleu* is a generic and tonal oddity; its cast of characters includes a golf player and a tennis champion, along with a chorus of camera-waving, bathing-suit-clad 'gigolos' and 'tarts' (Figure 2). The ballet's very light plot, like that of Chaplin's *By the Sea*, involves an interplay of squabbling and flirtation. Cocteau is drawn to the beach as a space in which novel bodily feats become possible, and *Le Train bleu* plays especially on the gifts of a new star dancer who stood on his hands and performed 'breathtaking acrobatic stunts'.⁴⁵ Notably, the balletic set presents the sea as a large trampoline, so that when a bather leaps into it, he bounces off and disappears into the wings.⁴⁶ Riffing on both Chaplin's hat-swap gag and on the failed kiss



Figure 2. *Le Train bleu*, 1924. Library of Congress, Music Division.

between the Proustian narrator and Albertine, *Le Train bleu* ends with two characters meeting at centre stage for an embrace: their lips are about to touch when the young man's cap is blown into the sea. As the curtain drops, the dancers take a trampoline plunge into the waves.

It may seem incongruous to bring *In Search of Lost Time* into conversation with cinematic slapstick and a trampoline-enhanced ballet. Yet Proust is explicit in his depiction of Balbec as a space of performance, with its sea like a 'dazzling amphitheater' ('cirque éblouissant'), its catwalk-like esplanade and its characters who strut and leap in the spotlight (*ISLT* II, 341). For Proust, as for Cocteau and Chaplin, the seashore is not only a stage but a virtual springboard on which a new kinetic grammar takes form.

As this article has shown, in Proust, the beach has little to do with the logic of aesthetic redemption or time regained. Rather, it's a space of contingency, marked by leaps and gambles of all sorts. With its intoxicating, habit-disrupting social choreography, Balbec tenders a queer invitation of its own: the reader who lingers on Proust's beach is

continuously reminded that things could be otherwise. At Balbec, an ethos of transgression and indetermination finds its ideal atmospheric milieu. This is a world on the edge, threshold of the unforeseen.

NOTES

- 1 On the importance of urban settings for modernism, see, for instance, Robert Alter, *Imagined Cities: Urban Experience and the Language of the Novel* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005); Barry McCrea, *In the Company of Strangers: Family and Narrative in Dickens, Conan Doyle, Joyce, and Proust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Adrienne Brown, *The Black Skyscraper: Architecture and the Perception of Race* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019); and Paul Haacke, *The Vertical Imagination and the Crisis of Transatlantic Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).
- 2 Andrei Bely, *Petersburg*, translated by Robert A. Maguire and John E. Malmstad (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1978), 270; James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 37, 41; Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Harcourt, 1953), 3.
- 3 According to Christian Pechenard, Proust began the work that would become the *Recherche* while vacationing in Cabourg during the summer of 1908 (*Proust à Cabourg* (Paris: Quai Voltaire, 1992), 84). The recent discovery of drafts penned in winter–spring 1908, however, casts doubt on this supposition. See Marcel Proust, *Les Soixante-Quinze Feuilles: et autres manuscrits inédits*, edited by Natalie Mauriac Dyer (Paris: Gallimard, 2021). Still, it was from Cabourg that Proust boasted to his friend Geneviève Straus, in August 1909, that he had just begun and finished a ‘whole long book’ (Marcel Proust, *Correspondance*, edited by Philip Kolb, 21 volumes (Paris: Plon, 1970–93), IX, 163). And in 1911, his assistant, Albert Nahmias, dictated the manuscript of *Swann’s Way* to typist Cecilia Hayward at the Cabourg Grand Hôtel (Jean-Yves Tadié, *Marcel Proust*, translated by Euan Cameron (New York: Viking, 2001), 557, 567).
- 4 Michael Taussig, ‘The Beach (A Fantasy)’, *Critical Inquiry* 26:2 (Winter 2000), 248–78.
- 5 Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 2–3.
- 6 ‘Élan’, *Trésor de la langue française informatisé*, Centre national de ressources textuelles et lexicales, <https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/élan>, consulted 24 August 2021.
- 7 See Roger Shattuck, *Proust’s Way: A Field Guide to In Search of Lost Time* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 9–10, and William C. Carter, ‘The Vast Structure of Recollection: From Life to Literature’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Proust*, edited by Richard Bales (Cambridge: Cambridge

- University Press, 2001), 25–41 (34). Barry McCrea argues that the ‘symbolic binary of the countryside and the city’ is key to the novel’s structure, but also examines how Proust subtly ‘dismantle[s]’ this opposition (*In the Company of Strangers*, 158, 199).
- 8 Pechenard, *Proust à Cabourg*, 176.
 - 9 Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, translated by C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, revised by D. J. Enright, 6 volumes (New York: Random House, 1992), II, 341, 343.
 - 10 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The There and Then of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1, 5, 72.
 - 11 On the invention of the beach as a space of leisure in modernity, see Alain Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea: The Discovery of the Seaside in the Western World, 1750–1840*, translated by Jocelyn Phelps (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994); Jean-Didier Urbain, *At the Beach*, translated by Catherine Porter (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Christophe Granger, *Les Corps d’été: naissance d’une variation saisonnière, XXe siècle* (Paris: Autrement, 2009); and John R. Gillis, *The Human Shore* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
 - 12 On the unconventional temporality of the ‘queer invitation’ — a ‘counterweight’ to normative interpellations — see Benjamin Bateman, *The Modernist Art of Queer Survival* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 64–9. Bateman argues that ‘where interpellation reinforces the subject’s location in his present circumstances (...) the queer invitation encourages him to move beyond them into unknown territory; it opens before or beside him an horizon of possibility’ (66).
 - 13 Vincent Descombes, *Proust: Philosophy of the Novel*, translated by Catherine Chance Macksey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), 191.
 - 14 Although the episode that we might call ‘Balbec II’ begins with refused invitations, the second holiday as a whole is quite different from the first. The narrator’s return to the seashore is shaped by two preoccupations: first, he now seeks to consolidate his social capital by furthering his relationships with Charlus, the Verdurins and the Cambremers; and secondly (and perhaps most significantly), he returns to Balbec armed with a theory of sexuality that incites him to track Albertine’s whereabouts (and potential lesbian activities) with increasingly maniacal jealousy.
 - 15 Walter Benjamin, ‘In Parallel with My Actual Diary’ in *Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part II, 1931–1934*, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 413–14 (414). This undated fragment was written between 1929 and 1931.
 - 16 Tadié, *Marcel Proust*, 526. For historical photographs of the casino’s interior, see Jean-Paul Henriët, *Proust et Cabourg* (Paris: Gallimard, 2020).

- 17 William C. Carter, *Marcel Proust: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 482.
- 18 See Hannah Freed-Thall, 'Speculative Modernism: Proust and the Stock Market', *Modernist Cultures* 12:2 (2017), 153–72.
- 19 Rubén Gallo, *Proust's Latin Americans* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).
- 20 During Proust's first summer at Cabourg in 1907, playing baccarat became part of his routine. As he put it, he would 'gamble — and lose — at baccarat every evening' (Marcel Proust, *Selected Letters Volume II: 1904–1909*, edited by Philip Kolb, translated by Terence Kilmartin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 333).
- 21 Thomas M. Kavanagh, *Dice, Cards, Wheels: A Different History of French Culture* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 171.
- 22 Kavanagh, *Dice, Cards, Wheels*, 178.
- 23 An orientation towards contingency — a sense that 'it could be otherwise' — could be seen as the ethos of modernity. See Niklas Luhmann, 'Contingency as Modern Society's Defining Attribute' in *Observations on Modernity*, translated by William Whobrey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), and T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from the History of Modernism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).
- 24 Anthony R. Pugh notes that the first sketch of 'Combray' (which dates to around May 1909) already includes pages about the narrator as a boy spending summer holidays on the Normandy coast (*The Growth of A la recherche du temps perdu: A Chronological Examination of Proust's Manuscripts from 1909 to 1914*, 2 volumes (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), I, 160).
- 25 Suzanne Guerlac, 'Rancière and Proust: Two Temptations' in *Understanding Rancière, Understanding Modernism*, edited by Patrick M. Bray (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 161–78 (173, 174). On Albertine's late arrival, see Pugh, *The Growth of A la recherche du temps perdu*, II, 802.
- 26 Jacques Dubois, *Pour Albertine: Proust et le sens du social* (Paris: Seuil, 1997), 29, 12, 164.
- 27 As Sedgwick puts it: 'With their plurality of interpretive paths, there is no way to read the Albertine volumes without finding same-sex desire *somewhere*; at the same time, that specificity of desire, in the Albertine plot, notoriously refuses to remain fixed to a single character type, to a single character, or even to a single ontological level of the text' (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 231).
- 28 Elisabeth Ladenson, *Proust's Lesbianism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 108.
- 29 Valery Rohy, *Chances Are: Contingency, Queer Theory, and American Literature* (London: Routledge, 2019), 6.

- 30 Benjamin Kahan, *The Book of Minor Perverts: Sexology, Etiology, and the Emergences of Sexuality* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 27.
- 31 Kahan, *The Book of Minor Perverts*, 33. Ladenson develops a divergent but related argument, allying Proust's lesbian fascination not with contingency per se but with fictional invention in an otherwise often autobiographical text (*Proust's Lesbianism*, 134).
- 32 Marcel Proust, *Jean Santeuil*, translated by Gerard Hopkins (New York: Penguin, 1985), 376–9.
- 33 The section of Cahier 12 in which Proust drafted his first plans for what he then called the 'Querqueville' episode is preceded by the following note: 'Resommeil/femme naissant avec Eve/sensations bizarres/Querqueville' ('Falling back asleep/ woman born with Eve/ bizarre sensations/ Querqueville'). What's striking here is the way the beach resort fantasy emerges from the generative site of the bed, after passing through the erotic and the 'bizarre' (Pugh, *The Growth of A la recherche du temps perdu*, I, 53).
- 34 Antoine Compagnon, *Proust entre deux siècles* (Paris: Seuil, 1999), 20.
- 35 Diana Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior: Four Rooms and the Writers that Shaped Them* (London: Routledge, 2004), 72.
- 36 On the Proustian bedroom as a key narrative 'dispatch center' or 'transfer point' in the novel's zigzagging timeline, see Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, translated by Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 35–47.
- 37 Linda Nochlin, *Bathers, Bodies, Beauty: The Visceral Eye* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 31, 30; Marc Augé, *L'Impossible voyage: le tourisme et ses images* (Paris: Rivages, 1997), 39 (my translation).
- 38 Alex C. Purves, *Homer and the Poetics of Gesture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 98, 114.
- 39 Purves, *Homer and the Poetics of Gesture*, 108.
- 40 Hillel Schwartz, 'Torque: The New Kinaesthetic of the Twentieth Century' in *Incorporations*, edited by Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 70–127; Derek P. McCormack, *Refrains for Moving Bodies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 43.
- 41 Schwartz, 'Torque', 91.
- 42 Céleste Albaret, *Monsieur Proust*, translated by Barbara Bray (New York: New York Review of Books, 1973), 83.
- 43 Emily Eells, 'Proust pasticheur de Cocteau: présentation d'un pastiche inédit', *Bulletin d'informations proustiennes* 12 (1981), 75–85 (78).
- 44 On Proust's enthusiasm for the Ballets Russes, see Marion Schmid, 'Proust's Choreographies of Writing: A la recherche du temps perdu and the Modern Dance Revolution' in *Swann at 100 / Swann à 100 ans, Marcel Proust Aujourd'hui*, volume 12, edited by Adam Watt (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 91–108,

- and Jo Yoshida, 'Proust et les ballets russes: autour de Nijinski', *Bulletin d'informations proustiennes* 31 (2000), 51–64.
- 45 Lynn Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 108.
- 46 Jean Cocteau, *Théâtre complet*, edited by Michel Décaudin (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 58.