Men in Love

Male Homosexualities from Ganymede to Batman

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9

The Sacred Precincts of Sodom

Many of them were apt to confuse panic with the arousing of the senses.

COLETTE, The Pure and the Impure

In gay slang, the term “cruising” (battire, in Italian; draguer, in French; streichen, in German, and cruzar, in Spanish), has nothing to do with prostitution but instead denotes simply loitering about in the open so as to meet other men. Cruising spots — places frequented by homosexuals from which heterosexuals are excluded — often assume the psychological dimensions of a sacred space. I could, of course, take a great deal of time here to outline the centuries of social history which have led to the establishment of these “sacred precincts of Sodom,” where an underground and clandestine subculture has long flourished. Instead, I would rather pay attention to the religious and ritual content of this “cruising” as a way of deepening our understanding of homosexualities.

The writings of Georges Dumézil, Mircea Eliade, Henry Corbin, and many others have shown a clear connection between masculine initiation and sacred revelation. Starved for spirit, and sometimes deprived of a paternal object of adoration (Carvalho 1982), some men go to these sacred spaces seeking a manifestation of the sacred in the mysteries of sex, a manifestation of the “father-hunger” which Jessica Benjamin (1995) observed in certain children whose upbringing lack same-sex love because of the father’s absence (see also Isay 1995).
As “initiates,” when gay men go cruising, they recognize each other. Something more than just a simple sense of belonging is described by none other than Proust (1981, vol. 2, Cities of the Plain, pp. 639–40), who says that homosexuals

form a freemasonry far more extensive, more effective and less suspected than that of the Lodges, for it rests upon an identity of tastes, needs, habits, dangers, apprenticeship, knowledge, traffic, vocabulary, and one in which even members who do not wish to know one another recognise one another immediately by natural or conventional, involuntary or deliberate signs which indicate one of his kind to the beggar in the person of the nobleman whose carriage door he is shutting, to the father in the person of his daughter’s suitor, to the man who has sought healing, absolution or legal defence in the doctor, the priest or the barrister to whom he has had recourse; all of them obliged to protect their own secret but sharing with others a secret which the rest of humanity does not suspect and which means that to them the most wildly improbable tales of adventure seem true, for in this life of anachronistic fiction the ambassador is a bosom friend of the felon, the prince, with a certain insolent aplomb born of his aristocratic breeding which the timorous bourgeois lacks, on leaving the duchess’s party goes off to confide in private with the ruffian; a reprobate section of the human collectivity, but an important one, suspected where it does not exist, flaunting itself, insolent and immune, where its existence is never guessed; numbering its adherents everywhere, among the people, in the army, in the church, in prison, on the throne...1

One characteristic of the sacred is that “an object becomes something else though it never ceases to be what it is in itself” (Eliade 1964): thus the young man in the studded leather jacket can be transformed into an appearance of Ares for the overwrought college professor or the husband who tells his wife he’s going to walk the dog as an excuse to do some cruising on the sly. In the sacred space of cruising spots, the worker and the factory owner, the student and the pensioner, come and go in silent procession, drawn together. In a movie theater on the outskirts of town, the poet encounters angels:

I found my little angel
In the dim balcony.
He was smoking
And his eyes shone brightly.
(Penna 1927–38, p. 50)2

Or in the bathrooms of train stations:

In the fresh air of the men’s room at the station
I came down from my passionate hill.
The dust and sweat on my skin
Made me tipsy. The sun was still singing
In my eyes. I now abandon soul and body
Here amidst the gleaming white porcelain.
(Penna 1927–38, p. 63)3

Nameless stations, on a train’s calm arrival
My sleeping body remerged.
And a world of happiness crossed the corner
Of my new soldier’s trousers.
(Penna 1927–38, p. 128)4

By pointing out all of the above, of course, I have no intention of claiming that every homosexual is an example of homo religiosus or that cruising spots are sacred spaces tout court. I do find it very evocative, however, to notice the difference between what Eliade (1957) calls the religious experience of “non-homogeneous space” and that of a “qualitatively different space,” such as the precincts of Sodom.* The sacred space is an actual place where leaving Chaos and communicating with heaven is easier. Just as the church building itself is a different order of space for the believer than the street where it stands, so, too, for some gay men do cruising spots—as a rule invisible or unknown to the uninitiated—become the place “where the world begins.” They are the closed space of the temenos, the sacred precinct within which religious observances are held, where the profane world is left behind, where one can “communicate with the gods” (Eliade 1957). On the level of our dream life, Jung sees the temenos, “a piece of land, often a grove, set apart and dedicated to the god” (CW 12, p. 54), providing a form of protection that enables one to encounter the unconscious.

We can easily translate these ideas into the concretism of Freudian theory: the temenos would then be the womb of the mother and the rite a regression to incest. But these are the neurotic misunderstandings of people who have remained partly infantile and who do not realize that such things have been practised since time immemorial by adults whose activities cannot possibly be explained as a mere regression to infantilism. (CW 12, p. 131)

Eliade notes that a sacred space of this type is usually created by way of a sign—for example, a spring or a tree—or is invoked by the
sacrifice of an animal or the construction of a sanctuary. So, how then are cruising spots created? Do the men choose them or are they discovered by way of mysterious signs? For Sergio, it seemed to be more a matter of

sheltered spaces, often on the outskirts of town or in an abandoned industrial area, near a dump or a warehouse. Or perhaps a porn theater, or a little park, or the public toilets, or the bathrooms of a train station. Sometimes, though, they are places right in the middle of town that teem at night with a steady stream of very obvious encounters which, curiously, seem to be invisible to those who don’t have the eyes to see them. Or maybe the parking lot along the highways.

Not so different in John Rechy’s testament to anonymous cruising in The Sexual Outlaw:

Parks, alleys, subways, tunnels, garages, streets—these are his battlefields. To the sexhunt he brings a sense of choreography, ritual and mystery—sex cruising, with an electrified instinct that sends and receives messages of orgy at any moment, at any place . . . (1977, p. 28)

In Pier Paolo Pasolini’s unfinished novel Petlio (the alchemical working title was Vat) Carlo must choose the “right place” for his sexual initiation:

The little open space that he had glimpsed further on the pit seemed to be quite fine. He managed to get there, slipping and tripping: it was a little lower than the one before but it was hidden from prying eyes by three or four piles or “dunes” of earth and gravel, mixed with the usual broken pottery and the usual garbage. The grass of this little space grew thick and dry, like stubble, only it was soft: it was probably chamomile. It had a strong fragrance . . . The whole cosmos was there, in that small field, in that sky, in the barely visible horizons of that city, in that intoxicating odor of summer grass . . . But along with these Gods, almost a sacred throne that night, could also be felt the presence of underworld Gods, Demons: that was clear; this night, so deeply shot through with the smell of dry grass and fennel, so rooted in the seemingly inexhaustible light of the moon, fallen here from the sky to establish an eternal summer (night), was full of demons: these Demons, though, did not come from a Hell where the condemned did time, but were Demons simply from Down Below, from the place where everything ends. So, poor Gods, wandering about leaving their odor of dogs, clever and rough

(sinister and companionable), having emerged from their etiologies of toto, or wood worn down by the sun and the rain, turning the whole world and the cosmos dreary and sad. Though without pain or grief: since its dreaminess consisted of the fragrant, silent, white, desolate, quiet, happy shape of the city by night, of the fields, of the sky. Naturally the Gods from Below, wandering about in this night without humidity, dry and fragrant as noontime, were above all attracted by the group of those like them on the top of the dome in the middle of the field: they had even, evidently, gone over to mingle with them, that was clear, like guardian Spirits or Genii, divine, but at the same time humble, as submissive and faithful as dogs. (1992, pp. 201-29)

In a Paris horrified by the outbreak of war, Marcel Proust writes: “One felt that poverty, dereliction, fear inhabited the whole quarter. I was all the more surprised, therefore, to see that among these abandoned houses there was one in which life seemed, on the contrary to have been victorious and terror and bankruptcy to have yielded activity and wealth.” (Proust, 1981, vol. 3, Time Regained, p. 838). After the first few lines, the reader begins to understand that Proust is writing about a meeting place for homosexuals.

Plunged into the new element, imagining that they had travelled to a distant country and were witnessing a natural phenomenon like a tidal wave or an eclipse, that they were enjoying not an artificially prepared, sedentary pleasure but a chance encounter in the unknown. The men who had come away from Jupien’s house celebrated, while the bombs mimicked the rumbling of a volcano, deep in the earth as in a Pompeian house of ill fame, their secret rites in the shadows of the catacombs. (Proust, 1981, vol. 3, Time Regained, pp. 838, 864)

Homosexuals can be possessed by the demon of cruising, which some have described to me using expressions like “when the beast rears its head.” Men who cruise have a particular way of looking at others and the world, which Proust recognizes in the daring, yet veiled glances of the Baron de Charlus,

who kept fastened upon me a pair of eyes dilated with observation. Every now and then those eyes were shot through by a look of intense activity such as the sight of a person whom they do not know excites only in men to whom, for whatever reason, it suggests thought that would not occur to anyone else—madmen, for instance, or spies. He trained upon me a supreme stare at

Chapter 9: The Sacred Precincts of Sodom

However, such unexpected eruptions and states of disorientation are also typical manifestations of mystical experiences. Indeed, mystics speak of an “eruption of the sacred” as an upsetting experience.

As with cyberspace, cruising-space can constitute a real and also virtual world, both impersonal and intimate, where the “strangeness” of the stranger contains the imprint of one’s own suspended self. The space of cruising can be a sort of mental retreat. The entrance to this retreat procures an immobile pacification, that may assume the characteristics of a trance: life comes to a halt in a state of “suspended animation,” a dissociative state of the ego. Speaking of the cruising experiences, Bolas (1992) as well as Drescher (1998) have referred to trance-like states.

When a gay man goes cruising, his identity may be suspended in a state of transitional sexuality, a point between the anguish caused by a fear of a loss of self and the quest to find a container which would enable the consolidation of self. Throughout this process, the lack of a socially recognized identity and the recurrent experience of secrecy and marginalization tied into a gay man’s sexuality in all probability play a very important role: in other words, the prejudice against homosexuals reinforces the dissociative activities (Drescher 1998).6

The concepts of the “unthought known” and of the “transformational object,” developed by Christopher Bolas (1987) provide a lens by which one can examine the psychological experience of cruising. By using such interpretive hypotheses, naturally I have no desire to put forward yet again an etiology of male homosexuality tied to maternal issues—the notion that homosexuality results from a regressive search for the reestablishment of one’s original relationship with mother—particularly after I have already criticized the limits and schematism of such a view. Instead, the compulsivity of cruising brings to light certain primary experiences, certain failures in the mother-child relationship that can be seen, though in a different form, as part of heterosexual relationships as well.

If we accept the hypothesis that an adult’s self-nurturance incorporates elements of how he was nurtured by his parents, then it is probable that there are certain permanent “self states” connected to (temporarily or permanently) unconscious childhood experiences that constitute the basic material for certain psychological conditions and experiences as an adult. Children who grew up with a family dynamic

The main character in John Rechy’s novel Numbers (1967, p. 234-44) experiences the call to go cruising.

As if a force beyond himself was pulling him physically to the Park.
And he felt:
That coldness. And:
A sadness. A heavy weariness. A breathtaking pain. A terrible
resignation. A bottomless emptiness.
And then, as he entered the Arena:
A terrified excitement, screaming.

Homosexuals can become obsessed with hanging out in such cruising spots which are “as much a place for the angry evacuation of desire, as for orgasmic intimacy” (Bolas 1992, p. 148), and there can be a compulsive aspect to cruising, which uses sex as a sedative and repetitive phallic self-assertion and as a way to attenuate the anxiety caused by an absence of “masculinity” available for veneration. One needs only cross the threshold of the park to experience a sense of relief, such that the sexual conclusion of one’s adventure becomes considerably less important. For André Green (1990, p. 132), who seems to pay attention to only one aspect of the issue, anytime a homosexual must face such anxiety,

he experiences an overwhelming, urgent need to make this latter disappear through the reassurance provided by noticing the persistence action of his penis on the body of another human being, all of which occurs in the course of a frantic, throbbers search which must issue in the realization of an immediate act, in conditions often harmful to the rest of the personality and to the realization of his own ego. What is striking, in such moments, is the unexpected eruption of what appears as a disorder of the senses or of sense.*
that they could not understand—for instance, an environment dominated by the mother’s projective identifications—often do not succeed in making sense of this experience through language or through integrated mental representations and thus, throughout their lives, remain in a “self state” determined by the unconscious situation. Such states, frequently characterized by modes of consciousness that are somatic, rather than verbal or imaginal in nature, are defined by Bollas as the “unthought known.”

The “transformational object” is the mother, that is, the first object a baby experiences. The baby, before identifying her as “other” (that is, a separate object with particular qualities of her own), lives the mother as a transformative function of both the internal and external world: “an adult’s search for transformation constitutes for some respects a memory of this early relationship” (Bollas 1987, p. 4). This early relationship with an object capable of transforming the world and ourselves continues into adult life in experiences characterized perhaps not so much by the desire to possess the beloved object but rather by the desire to—give oneself up to it “as a medium that alters the Self.” According to Bollas, the search for a transformational object can take place on even on a collective level:

In many religious faiths, for example, when the subject believes in the deity’s actual potential to transform the total environment, he sustains the terms of the earliest object tie within a mythic structure. [...] This anticipation of being transformed by an object [...] inspires the subject with a reverential attitude towards it, so that even though the transformation of the self will not take place on the scale it reached during early life, the adult subject tends to nominate such objects as sacred. (Bollas 1987, pp. 1617)

In the experience of cruising, the search for the unknown can be a search for the transformational object, a ritualized evocation of an old object relation. Its intensity, therefore, would not be due so much to the desire felt for the object but instead due to the identification with a primitive, and powerful, metamorphosis of being.

I do not ask you who you are, that is not important to me
You can do nothing and be nothing but what I will infold you
(Whitman, 1855–91, vv. 997–998)

The state of Self-suspension, so frequently characteristic of cruising, evokes the experience of the “unthought known.” The psychological meaning of cruising might well be the search for intimacy in the body of a stranger, corresponding to the image of the child as an object thing within the orbit of the caregiver: to be inside and yet distant. The attraction Sergio feels for cruising spots may be connected to the enchanting sensation of finding himself “suspended” in someone else's dream, intimate in the body of a stranger. At the same time it can reflect an infantile need to warm up a mother whose coldness and emotional distance renders her almost mechanical. In the gay bathhouse, Bollas’s (1992) patient, named Bruce, goes into a trance state.

Bollas uses the word “arena” to describe what I have called the temenos, and, whereas I have been examining this state of trance in relationship to “spiritual initiation,” and at the same time to suspension/loss of identity, Bollas ties such trance states to the experience of a return to the mother: no longer in her womb, however, but instead now, in her mind. Following this point of view, we could say that Sergio’s trances reproduce the cumulative experience of all the moments in which he felt himself cancelled out by a mother who, absorbed in her own world of fantasy, treated him simply as a self-object. Like the strangers he met while cruising, his mother was simultaneously intimate and distant: very close, particularly physically, and yet very distant, forced by her psychological needs to use her son as an extension of herself. This situation her son experienced as a disorienting feeling of being loved while being invaded and depleted by the person closest to him. So, too, the man who is cruising, contained by an object who holds him but who is at the same time unknown to him (as in the dark rooms of gay baths and clubs), living in the very same moment the paradox of the “trance” mixed in with a state of vigilant sexuality, “on pins and needles.”

And darkness, which envelops all things like a new element, has the effect, irresistibly tempting for certain people, of suppressing the first halt on the road to pleasure—it permits us to enter without impediment into a region of caresses to which normally we gain access only after a certain delay. . . . In the darkness. . . . hands, lips, bodies may go into action at once. . . . Plunged into the new element [Jupien’s clients imagined] that they had traveled to a distant country. (Proust 1981, vol. 3, Time Regained, p. 864)
On the threshold of the arena, there is always a state of sexual excitement. As Sergio says to me,

Before getting to my place, I begin to notice the signs that tell me I am getting close: a street sign, the tobacco shop on the corner. My state of mind changes. A strange euphoria gets mixed in with a secret, distant fear. I cannot go back. Even though it’s late and foggy, and I may not find anyone.

Cruising spots can be an impersonal world of alienated sexuality, where the identity of the stranger becomes a source of excitement, as if the thrill of cruising might hold the impression of one’s own suspended self. The ritual of cruising locates the subject in a situation of an intermittent auras, in which the search for a chance, anonymous encounter alternates with the search for an idealized transformational object to love for ever, leading to a reestablishment of one’s self: “Little wonder that he wandered in these ghostly places late summer nights: he was half waiting to be born. Having vanished from his former life... he was a ghost, in fact, waiting to come to life through love. He fell in love with people he did not know how to meet” (Merrick 1971, p. 73).

From this perspective, cruising spots become islands where various suspended, muted identities gather and encounter each other in a search for erotic salvation. The feelings of some gay men cruising are thus not so much those of sexual excitement in anticipation of an encounter but rather a sort of trembling panic, a “sated excitement” connected to the place itself and to a wish to return to the past in an attempt to find something new within a ritualized framework. As in the case of aesthetic enchantment, time becomes suspended in a space where subject and object live out an experience of rapt, unmoving attention “which hold self and other in symmetry and solitude.”10 The encounter that takes place within the temenos can feel like the experience of déjà vu, “a non-representational recollection conveyed through a sense of the uncanny.” The encounters and memories brought by cruising are simultaneously “familiar, sacred and revocational.” They belong to the “unthought known” and arc registered “through an experience in being, rather than mind, because they express that part of us where the experience of rapport with the other was the essence of life before words existed.”

Baron de Charlus, after his first meeting with Jupien, changes the time of his visits to Madame de Villeparisis, so that he can always meet his doublet-maker at the same place and in the same way: “not that he could not see Jupien elsewhere and with greater convenience, but because to him... the afternoon sunshine and the blossoming plant were no doubt linked with his memories” (Proust 1981, vol. 2, Cities of the Plain, p. 653). His desire is thus fed in his own theater of action and repetition, until a sacred space is created, a necessary place where the rite must be performed.11 Charlus will take up the image of the young musician Morel in a bold, religious allegory that now for us seems quite explicit:

Then, smiling with a benevolent ecstacy, his eyes gazing into the distance, his voice reinforced by an exaltation which seemed now to be not merely aesthetic but religious: “It is so beautiful at the Orfatory when Michael stands erect by the altar, in a white robe, swinging a golden censer heaped so high with perfumes that the fragrance then mounts up to God.” (Proust 1981, vol. 2, Cities of the Plain, p. 989)