Chapter 15

Sexuality

Elisabeth Ladenson

Proust would doubtless have been somewhat horrified by his current status as an icon of gay modernism. À la recherche du temps perdu was the first major literary work in France to take on the issue of same-sex sexual relations directly and in an apparently objective manner. Its semi-autobiographical Narrator is heterosexual, just as he is non-Jewish, and his intense interest in both homosexuality and Jewishness (which he often treats as related and analogous phenomena) is presented as the product of an anthropological curiosity strictly devoid of any personal stake in these subjects. The representation of sexuality in the novel was, accordingly, greeted by critics as a courageously unflinching and objective treatment of a problematic subject, while in the later volumes, in which homosexuality takes on increasingly greater importance, the emphasis on alternative sexualities was often viewed as compromising the work’s appeal to ‘universal’ experience. Proust was at once intensely interested in depicting same-sex relations and, given the opprobrium attached to the subject at the time, unwilling to identify himself—or his ambiguously autobiographical Narrator—as homosexual.

Sexuality is present from the opening pages of Swann’s Way, in the form of a wet dream, with the mention of a woman born ‘from an awkward position of my thigh’ while the protagonist is asleep (1: 3, trans. mod.; 1, 5). Later on in ‘Combray’ masturbation is mentioned in passing, as one of the activities in which the hero indulges in the privacy of an orris-scented water-closet lockable from the inside. The protagonist’s sexuality—and Proustian sexuality in general—is largely masturbatory, and the importance of masturbation for the novel’s conception may be gauged by an early version of the opening section, in which the phrase ‘à la recherche de’ makes its inaugural appearance in the form of a reference to ‘cette exploration que je fis alors en moi-même, à la recherche d’un plaisir inconnu’ [‘that exploration into myself that I undertook at that time, in search of an unknown pleasure’]. The suppression of this overt emphasis on solitary
pleasure may have been the result not only of an effort to make the opening pages of the novel more generally acceptable, but also of the fact that masturbation was during the early years of the twentieth century still to some extent viewed as a highly pernicious activity, potentially leading to neurasthenia as well as host of other nervous ailments. Proust’s correspondence includes a letter he wrote as an adolescent to his grandfather asking for money to visit a brothel, as his father is trying to cure him of his penchant for masturbation and a first visit failed to yield the desired results (Corr, xx1, 550–1). Sexuality in the Recherche is nonetheless strongly marked by both masturbatory solipsism and a related pessimistic anxiety over the inability to ‘know’, carnally or otherwise, another person. The protagonist’s sexual relations with women are depicted as non-penetrative and tend to follow the model of the wet dream in the novel’s opening pages; notable examples of this are his orgasm while play-wrestling with the apparently complicit Gilberte on the Champs-Élysées in Swann’s Way, and, much later, his frottage-style lovemaking with (or rather on) Albertine while she is asleep in The Captive.

Although there is no indication that Swann’s sexual practices tend similarly to the non-penetrative, his first sexual encounter with Odette inaugurates a key theme in the novel’s depiction of sexual relations, as he looks forward to ‘the act of physical possession (in which, paradoxically, one possesses nothing)’ (1: 281; 1, 230). ‘Possession’ had long served as the standard acceptable term for penetrative heterosexual intercourse. Swann’s insight that the notion of physical ‘possession’ is in the end nothing more than an inaccurate euphemism resonates throughout the novel, as first he and then the protagonist, as well as various secondary characters, are repeatedly confronted with the basic Proustian truth that it is impossible fully to ‘possess’ or know another person, and least of all the object of one’s most ardent desire. This idea is explored through the hero’s vain attempts to ‘possess’ Gilberte and then Albertine, and also with reference to the theme of prostitution. Both Swann and Saint-Loup fall in love with women who are essentially whores, which is to say women who are in theory available to be ‘possessed’ in exchange for money. Odette was ‘sold’ by her mother at an early age; when Swann first encounters her she has managed to reach the upper echelons of a prostitutional gamut ranging from common streetwalker to prosperous courtesan. She is a demi-mondaine, a ‘kept woman’ whose livelihood depends on the financial support of a series of wealthy men who may or may not be married (generally to women of their own class). Saint-Loup’s girlfriend, Rachel, is an actress, a profession often linked to and concomitant with a career as a
prostitute during this period. We first encounter her in the novel when the hero is offered her services in a brothel, long before he meets her again with Saint-Loup. In both these cases, what is evident is that prostitution is in the eye of the beholder; women who would seem to be available to all comers with enough money become literally priceless when they are the object of a desire to ‘possess’ them fully, rather than merely in the conventional sense. Price rises according to demand, and ultimate demand – the desire to possess in some ‘real’ sense – depends on the idea that price is no object, that is, on the illusion that the desired object is not in fact in it for the money. Desire, in Proust’s world, both arises from and creates inaccessibility. Swann falls in love with Odette when she is not available to him, and once Odette realizes that Swann loves her, she knows that his desire will only increase the more she withholds herself. Charlie Morel offers a homosexual variant of this same theme in the later volumes when the baron de Charlus becomes obsessed with him. Swann, of course, marries Odette, but this form of ‘possession’ only occurs once he no longer desires her for herself (but rather for their daughter, Gilberte).

Proust’s depiction of prostitution in its various guises owes much to nineteenth-century French literature as well as to the prominence of courtesans during the period in question. Writers such as Balzac, Flaubert, Zola and Maupassant had emphasized the full range of prostitutional activities throughout the nineteenth century. In Balzac’s La Vieille Fille (1836), a laundress named Suzanne leaves Alençon for Paris, where she eventually reappears (in this and later volumes of La Comédie humaine) as the courtesan Suzanne de Val-Noble. Rachel owes much to the mythology of the beautiful Jewish prostitute as seen in works such as Balzac’s Illusions perdues (1837–43). Odette de Crécy’s story is not much different, at least in its beginnings, from that of a variety of these characters, many of whom (e.g. Balzac’s Coralie, Flaubert’s Rosanette in L’Éducation sentimentale, and Zola’s Nana) recount similar narratives of having been sold off by their mothers at an early age to an older man in the provinces and then making their enterprising way to Paris. While Odette appears to have been based largely on Laure Hayman, a courtesan whom Proust knew in his youth (she seems to have been the mistress of both his great-uncle and father), her trajectory also recalls those of late nineteenth-century and Belle Époque courtesans such as Émilienne d’Alençon, Valtesse de la Bigne (whose bed inspired that of Nana in Zola’s novel), and Liane de Pougy. Unlike those of all the above, however, Odette de Crécy’s aristocratic name, which appears to be assumed, turns out, ironically enough, to be genuine, the product of an early brief marriage.
In terms of sexuality, though, Proust’s work is best known for its groundbreaking representation of same-sex relations. In a letter to Louis d’Albugfèra in 1908, Proust wrote about his projects — most of which ended up being included in his magnum opus — among which he lists ‘an essay on pederasty (not easy to place)’ (Corr, viii, 113). What we call homosexuality was an object of much fascination at the time and, as Proust knew, a difficult subject to write about. The vocabulary of same-sex relations was in great flux during this era. In a notebook entry, Proust can be seen grappling with the question of how to name men whose sexual preference was other men. He observes that the word which best suited his purposes, the slang term tante (‘auntie’), was unavailable to him, because he was not Balzac and could therefore not allow himself the use of this evocative ‘word that wears a skirt’ (Esquisse iv; 111, 955). The word he settled on, inverti, ‘invert’, was borrowed from the vocabulary of late nineteenth-century sexology, as was homosexuel and other terms used during this period (e.g. unisexuel). Proust preferred ‘invert’ to ‘homosexual’ both because of the latter word’s hybrid Greek-Latin provenance and, notably, because his conception of the phenomenon in question is predicated not on the idea of same-sex attraction per se but rather on the anima muliebris in corpore virili inclusa (the soul of a woman trapped in the body of a man) model first theorized in Memnon, the 1868 manifesto of the German sexologist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs. According to Ulrichs and similar subsequent accounts, the Uning (in German) or Uranien (in French) — thus termed in homage to Pausanias’s speech in Plato’s Symposium postulating love between men as the highest form of love, inspired not by Aphrodite Pandemos (‘vulgar’) but by Aphrodite Ourania (‘celestial’) — is attracted to other men because he himself is in some innate way feminine. (Here the borrowing from Plato stops, as the men animated by Aphrodite Ourania in the Symposium are in no way depicted as feminine.) Proust prefers the term inversion because the same-sex attraction displayed by the male characters in the Recherche is in fact essentially heterosexual, since they only desire men to the extent to which they are themselves in some inherent way feminine (the Narrator at one point refers to ‘what is sometimes, most ineptly, termed homosexuality’ (4: 8; iii, 9)).

The novel’s ‘Gomorrheans’, the female counterparts to his Sodomites, alone escape the inversion model, displaying something like a true ‘homosexuality’ in the sense that they seem to desire their like rather than their opposite. This would seem to be the product of narrative expedience more than any attempt to theorize sexual asymmetry. Since almost all the lesbian characters are also objects of male desire and (therefore) jealousy, they...
could not be truly masculine; at most they are attractively boyish (Mlle Vinteuil is something of an exception, a holdover from Proust’s early stories, in which lesbianism did duty for male homosexuality). It was not, in any case, Proust’s portrayal of lesbianism (another word he eschewed) that garnered the most attention when the volumes were first published, but his account of Sodom. French literature was replete with depictions of female homosexuality, from the lesbian mother superior who tries to seduce the heroine of Diderot’s *La Religieuse* (first published in 1796, although written some decades earlier), through Balzac’s *La Fille aux yeux d’or*, Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (both 1835), Baudelaire’s *Fleurs du mal* (1857, originally to be entitled *Les Lesbiennes*), Zola’s *Nana* (1880), and Colette’s *Claudine* series (notably *Claudine à l’école* (1900) and *Claudine en ménage* (1904)), to name but a few. Male homosexuality, however, had been treated overtly only by Balzac, in his Vautrin cycle, especially *Illusions perdues* (1836–43) and *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* (1838–47). When Proust writes that he would like to use the word *tante* to depict his Sodomites, but, ‘not being Balzac’, he will have to make do with *inverti*, he is referring to Balzac’s discussion of homosexual prison slang in *Splendeurs et misères*. He does not explain what he means by this exactly, and at first glance it might seem to indicate simply that he has neither the fame nor the reputation for heterosexuality of his illustrious predecessor, and therefore cannot afford to write about such matters in an overly familiar way with impunity. Beyond this, though, it is also relevant that in the 1830s, before same-sex relations had been theorized, Balzac was free to portray Lucien’s ardent friendship with David in the opening passages of *Illusions perdues* as explicitly analogous to heterosexual love, without any suggestion of a sexual relationship between the two, even though the beautiful Lucien will fall under the spell of the diabolical Vautrin at the end of that novel, and become his *mignon* in its sequel (*Splendeurs*). The development of sexological theories of same-sex relations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, along with the burgeoning discourse of psychoanalysis, had rendered the depiction of intimate male friendship problematic, which doubtless goes a long way towards explaining the Narrator’s austere denunciations of friendship in *À l’ombre des jeunes filles*, when the protagonist is befriended by the beautiful aristocrat Robert de Saint-Loup (who also, much later, turns out to be an invert).

Homosexuality was a fraught subject when Proust was beginning to write his magnum opus, making this aspect of his project both more urgent and more problematic. Not only had sexologists been delineating new scientifically framed conceptions of what had previously been
depicted as, alternatively, a crime or a sin, a number of scandals had brought the topic to the fore. The trials of Oscar Wilde in England in the mid 1890s had made homosexuality a much-discussed subject; convicted of ‘gross indecency’, Wilde had died in 1900 in Paris after serving two years’ hard labour. More recently still, the Eulenburg Affair in Germany, in which members of Kaiser Wilhelm’s entourage were accused of homosexual activities in a series of well-publicized trials, again brought same-sex relations to the forefront of current events in Europe in 1907–9.

As a result, when Proust was beginning his vast novel, homosexuality was at once highly visible and highly controversial. While the subject had been featured in various ways in fiction ranging from Georges Eekhoud’s Escal-Vigor (1899, the object of an obscenity trial in Belgium) to Binet-Valmer’s Lucien (1910) and Francis Carco’s Jésus-la-caille (1914), Proust’s novel was regarded as the first objective treatment of same-sex relations in a serious literary work. The Wilde affair is referred to in the Recherche, via Charlus, who speaks of Wilde’s remark that the death of Lucien de Rubempré in Balzac’s Splendeurs was one of the great traumas of his life, adding that the man in question (whom he does not name) was to learn that life reserved greater sorrows for him.

Proust’s depiction of ‘inversion’ was generally greeted as a courageous and even-handed treatment of a difficult subject. Not everyone, however, was happy with it, André Gide being a particularly virulent critic. Gide, who was open about his own ‘pederasty’, preferring the Greek term for relations between men and adolescent boys or young men, objected to Proust’s portrayal of ‘inversion’, on the grounds that his depiction emphasized what Gide felt to be the worst aspects of same-sex love, notably the idea that homosexual men are necessarily feminine. Gide’s own ideas, drawing on ‘Greek love’, rigorously eschewed femininity, and indeed seem to have been based in a profound misogyny. He delineated his approach in Corydon, a Platonic dialogue between a pederast and a heterosexual, which includes an explicit refutation of Proust’s account of inversion. Although Gide had written earlier versions which he circulated among his circle of friends, he did not publish it until 1924, two years after Sodome et Gomorrhe appeared, and after Proust’s death.

Proust’s often-quoted assertion about the depiction of homosexuality that ‘you can tell anything, but on condition that you never say: “I”’ comes from an entry in Gide’s Journal from 1922. 4 Having recorded this observation from a conversation between the two, Gide adds: ‘ce qui ne fait pas mon affaire’ [‘but that won’t suit me’]. This reported moment is remarkable for several reasons: first, that one of Proust’s most famous pronouncements on
the subject comes not from anything he himself wrote but rather from the
diary of someone with whom he entertained lengthily charged and prob-
lematic relations (Gide had initially rejected Swann for the Nouvelle Revue
française, before realizing the error and convincing Proust to allow the NRF
to bring out the entire work; he was also, while appalled by Proust’s
account of homosexuality, reluctant to publish his own treatments of the
subject until after publication of Sodome et Gomorrhe, following which he
expressed great frustration at not having been first). Perhaps most notably,
though, the observation that Gide records emphasizes an important aspect
of Proust’s depiction of homosexuality that has been relatively little
remarked upon. The idea that one may say anything on condition of not
saying ‘I’ is in fact explored in the pages of the novel itself, in the form of
Charlus’s manifestly erroneous conviction that he can talk about inversion
with impunity as long as he does so in the third person. He thus becomes
the laughing-stock of the Verdurin clan, who encourage him to deliver
expansive lectures on the subject without his ever realizing that his per-
sonal investment in it has not gone unperceived by his interlocutors.
(This phenomenon is deftly analysed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as ‘the
glass closet’ in the chapter on Proust in Epistemology of the Closet (1990).)
Proust’s apparently naïve stance as reported by Gide has thus been pre-
deconstructed, as it were, by the author himself in his work. Charlus is
there to let us know Proust is aware that even the most rigorously
‘objective’ account of homosexuality cannot guarantee impunity.

Ironically enough, it was not Sodome et Gomorrhe, with its lengthy
taxonomy of same-sex practices, that led the general audience to under-
stand that Proust himself was implicated in his examination of homosexu-
ality. This did not occur until after his death, when La Prisonnière was
published, depicting the protagonist’s sequestration of Albertine in his
parents’ apartment while they are away. Readers were bothered by the
lack of verisimilitude in the story of a young bourgeois boy whose parents
would have allowed him to keep a girl in their apartment. It was this
violation of bourgeois mores, rather than the Narrator’s ethnography of
homosexuality in the earlier volume, that finally ‘outed’ Proust among the
general public.

Notes

1 Onanophobia, or fear of masturbation as a highly dangerous and even deadly
activity that could lead to a panoply of ills including syphilis, madness and
death, was an idea that gained currency during the eighteenth century, con-
tinued throughout the nineteenth, and only began to wane in the twentieth
with the popularization of sexology and psychoanalysis. See Thomas Laqueur’s

2 ‘Memnon’: *Die Geschlechtsnatur des mannliebenden Urnings. Eine naturwissensc
haftliche Darstellung*. Vol. 11 (Schleiz, 1868).

3 See Elisabeth Ladenson, *Proust’s Lesbianism* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell
University Press, 1999) for a full discussion of this topic.

4 *The Journals of André Gide*, trans. and ed. by Justin O’Brien (New York:
1951), vol. 1, p. 692. For an extensive discussion of this see Michael Lucey,
*Never Say I: Sexuality and the First Person in Colette, Gide, and Proust* (Durham,