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Marcel and the Medusa: The Narrator's Obfuscated Homosexuality in A la Recherche du Temps Perdu

Abstract

Although *A la recherche du temps perdu* places center stage an extraordinary number of homosexuals, the narrator resists joining their number himself and, indeed, insists on his heterosexuality throughout the novel. Certainly there are those critics who have taken the narrator at his word, and most convincing among them is Harry Levin. In a marvelous response to Justin O'Brien and his "Albertine the Ambiguous: Notes on Proust's Transposition of the Sexes," which inspired the men-in-women's-clothing cliche in Proustian scholarship, Levin points out the pitfalls of disbelief. First of all, he notes, to use Proust's own suspected homosexuality as a justification for seeing the narrator's relationship as homosexual is to elevate gossip to the level of scholarly inquiry. And to presume that the narrator's pessimism about love is typical of homosexuality is to overlook all those unlucky-in-love heterosexuals who assume the very same attitude. Levin responds to the sexual ambiguity of Proust's women by insisting on the difficulty of any author to capture precisely the other gender and by demonstrating the folly of pursuing O'Brien's transposition theory to the limit. Francoise would become Francois, an unthinkable metamorphosis for this unequivocally female character. In short, Levin finds it highly inappropriate to question a writer's intentions: Proust wishes his females to be seen as such and so they should be. Evidence of the narrator's homosexuality becomes purely circumstantial and nothing requires the reader to reject the narrator as the heterosexual he says he is.

Keywords
Homosexuality, Marcel Proust, A la Recherche du Temps Perdu

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À la recherche du temps perdu

Elizabeth Richardson Viti

Although À la recherche du temps perdu places center stage an extraordinary number of homosexuals, the narrator resists joining their number himself and, indeed, insists on his heterosexuality throughout the novel. Certainly there are those critics who have taken the narrator at his word, and most convincing among them is Harry Levin. In a marvelous response to Justin O'Brien and his "Albertine the Ambiguous: Notes on Proust's Transposition of the Sexes," which inspired the men-in-women's-clothing cliche in Proustian scholarship, Levin points out the pitfalls of disbelief. First of all, he notes, to use Proust's own suspected homosexuality as a justification for seeing the narrator's relationships as homosexual is to elevate gossip to the level of scholarly inquiry. And to presume that the narrator's pessimism about love is typical of homosexuality is to overlook all those unlucky-in-love heterosexuals who assume the very same attitude. Levin responds to the sexual ambiguity of Proust's women by insisting on the difficulty of any author to capture precisely the other gender and by demonstrating the folly of pursuing O'Brien's transposition theory to the limit. François would become François, an unthinkable metamorphosis for this unequivocally female character. In short, Levin finds it highly inappropriate to question a writer's intentions: Proust wishes his females to be seen as such and so they should be. Evidence of the narrator's homosexuality becomes purely circumstantial and nothing requires the reader to reject the narrator as the heterosexual he says he is.

Traditionally, however, critics have contradicted this claim, demonstrating from a variety of critical perspectives the virtually inevitable conflation of narrator and author, of Marcel with Marcel. Most recently Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has made a persuasive case for the narrator as closeted homosexual in a novel which simultaneously demands and forbids a violence against Marcel which would expose his closet as spectacle. J. E. Riveri builds a case around the hero's personality traits which correspond to a turn-of-the-century description of homosexual temperament: Marcel is neurasthenic, lacking in willpower and preoccupied with masturbation while, furthermore, his Tante Léonie privileges a heredity which might cause sexual perversion in another generation (208-09). Alain Buisine finds a homosexual narrator in Proust's onomastic technique. The pseudonym Charmel that Charlus, the novel's most celebrated inverted male wants to give Charles Morel, is a contraction of Marcel and Charles, in other words, a Marcel adept at "charisme" (77). And Ghislaine Florival states quite simply that the novel's meaning must be read in conjunction with an understanding of Proust's experience. The narrator cannot be disassociated from
the novelist or his fictional substitutes (247), Swann among them, of course, but also Charles.

However, to my mind, Marcel subtly reveals his own inversion when he admits his new-found admiration for the méduse, or jellyfish, a hermaphroditic organism where male and female sexual organs coexist separately:

Méduse Orchidée Quand je ne suivais que mon instinct, la méduse me répugnait à Balbec; mais si je savais la regarder, comme Michelet, du point de vue de l’esthétique, je voyais une délicieuse grimpole d’azur. (III, 28)

Not only does this hermaphroditic source—as Deluze observes—from which there continually proceed the two divergent homosexual series (17), suggest the narrator’s homosexuality but the very word méduse does so as well. It necessarily brings to mind the legendary gorgon whose head Freud sees as a figure for female genitals which, moreover, quash all sexual rapprochement. In a note when citing Perençez, his contemporary to whom he owed this analogy, the psychoanalyst adds: "[...] what is indicated in the myth is the mother’s genitals. Athené [sic], who carries Medusa’s head on her arm, becomes in consequence the unapproachable woman, the sight of whom extinguishes all thought of a sexual approach" (114, n. 3). Appropriately enough, Marcel himself points up this same equivalence by establishing throughout the novel a compellingly significant homonymy between mère and mère ("Au reste, ce n’était pas seulement la mère à la fin de la journée qui vivait pour moi en Albertine" [III, 577]), a technique others recognize as well. Bélémont-Noël plays on these same words in his analysis of Swann’s dream: "D’autre part, le chemin où a lieu la promenade se rapproche et s’éloigne alternativement de la mère: chemin de bord de mer, tel que peut le parcourir toute première enfance [...]" (51). And Claudine Quémere praises Genette for having "pressenti le rôle primordial que jouent, dans la formation des images nominales chez Proust, les associations verbales fondées sur des homophonies ou des assimilations" (81). Thus, the Mother inevitably bodies forth when the narrator says of les méduses: "Ne sont-elles pas, avec le"

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1. The critics mentioned here are among the most important contributors to Proustian scholarship in this decade and the last, most notably J. E. Rivière and his study Proust and the Art of Love. Certainly it is on a par with the body of Proustian scholarship from the 1960’s and 1970’s which remains highly significant today, works by M. Baudot, Marcel Proust romançier, Gilles Deluze (Proust et les signes), Serge Doubrovsky (La place de la madeleine), Gérard Genette (Figures I, II, III), and Jean-Pierre Richard (Proust et la monde sensible). I would add to the latest group as well studies by Malcolm Bowie (Freud, Proust and Lacan), Alain Roger (Proust, les plaisirs et les naus), Marcel Müller (Les voix narratives dans la Recherche du temps perdu), and the new Proust biography by Ronald Hayman. Nonetheless, the most important contribution to Proustian scholarship in the recent past has undoubtedly been the new Bélaïde edition of La recherche. Prepared by Jean-Yves Tadié and a team of Proustian scholars, the four volumes, which appeared between 1987 and 1989, provide all the textual variations, thorough explanatory notes and, consequently, a complete view of the novel’s genesis.

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Marcel Proust

velours transparent de leurs pétale, comme les mauves orchidées de la mer?" (III, 28)

I would like to suggest that the Medusa legend lends itself to interesting Proustan parallels and, supported by an object-relational reading of La recherche, reveals the text to be a cathartic confrontation with the novelist’s sexual preference, offering a plausible explanation of Marcel’s inversion which moves beyond the well-worn Oedipus complex. Greek mythology recounts that it is Perseus who slays the gorgon and presents her head to Athena. In fact, it is Athena who is responsible for this creature: when the graceful maiden that was once Medusa attempted to rival Athena’s beauty, the goddess (for whom Minerva is another name) stripped her of her charms, turning her lovely hair into hissing snakes and making the Medusa so frightening a sight that anyone who looked at her was turned to stone. Perseus assumed the task of slaying the Medusa to liberate Seriphus, a country ravaged by the monster. More significant, however, is the personal history which equips Perseus singularly well for the murder of this maternal equivalent. An oracle had told his grandfather Acisius that Perseus would some day kill him, and as a consequence, his grandfather had Perseus and his mother enclosed in a box and set adrift at sea. Certainly this claustrophobic relationship to the Mother and potential fear of the sea (personified, many scholars theorize, by the gorgons [Bullfinch 90]) coincides with that of Marcel who, object relations theory would suggest, was also (so to speak) boxed in with the Mother and an easy victim to the terrors of the sea—of the Mer/Mère.

Indeed, Marcel never appears to move beyond primary union with the Mother, a symbiotic relationship in which mother and child are indistinguishable. In his study of Proust, Leo Bersani points out that Marcel’s nightly need for the maternal presence demonstrates that "his self is with his mother and he must have her in order to have it" (49), behavior he repeats as an adult. The narrator sees the Mother as his soie, the ideological, intellectual, and physical "identical twin" that Marie Jeanne Proust was to her son. Commenting on the author after his mother’s death, Martine Sagarès observes: "Celui qui s’identifiait à sa mère et qui voyait vivre en symbiose avec elle, blotti dans ses bras, pourrait lire cette prière de 1904: ‘Nous ne ferons qu’une personne comme nous ne fusions qu’un cœur’" (126).

But the appropriateness of such a seamless mother-child couple is questionable, for during the pre-oedipal period individuation/separation should succeed symbiosis, allowing ego boundaries and bounded body ego to emerge. The mirror stage marks the beginning of the process, and within object relations theory the Mother’s role is incomparable because, in contrast to Lacanian thought, the alone is the mirror. The child sees itself when looking into the Mother’s gaze and ideially sees an organized, cohesive being. However, Marcel’s Mère/Miroir is clearly the Medusa, that is to say, sight of her literally petrifies the spectator. The narrator sees a cohesive image, but it is so like that of the Mother that it is immobilizing. This is the Mother Irigary describes in L’une ne bouge pas sans l’autre when, profiling from the double meaning of glace, she portrays the Mother as mirror but also as paralyzing ice (7).

Thus, rather than freeing Marcel from his pre-oedipal attachment and readying him for an eventual oedipally marked relationship, the Mother keeps
Marcel mired in symbiosis. In my opinion this is the significance of the celebrated scène du coucher. On that momentous evening when his mother acquiesces to her husband’s request and spends the night in Marcel’s room, the narrator feels that he has forever lost all willpower: no longer will he attempt to pull apart from his mother but will remain a part of her instead. Furthermore, because the Mother systematically suppresses all the love scenes when reading François le Chanti a laud to Marcel (“[...] quand c’était maman qui me lisait à haute voix, [...] elle passait toute les scènes d’amour [...]”) (II, 411), it seems to me that the George Sand novel becomes, rather than an incest narrative, the simple story of uninterrupted union between mother and child. The Mother’s inability to push her son out of this pre-epidial attachment will eventually jeopardize his masculinity and preclude heterosexual orientation which relies heavily on the child’s identification with the parent of the same sex.

But nowhere is the nefarious impact of mothering more prominent than in the narrator’s relationship with Albertine. This second couple is simply an extension of the first in which Mother and Mistress are collapsed, and quite frequently so through the felicitous homophones mer/mère, Albertine “presque peinte sur le fond de la mer” (II, 656) is reconstructed—like a house de fond en combien—on the foundation of the Mother. While the young woman’s appearance at the Normandy beach resort of Balbec explains the constant convergence of Albertine and the Sea, more significant is how—true to Proust’s system à la Balzac—this outer landscape reflects an inner one. Simultaneously synonymous with the Sea and the Mother, Albertine uncovers the full extent of the horror of the Médisse/Mer/Mère. Albertine illustrates Darwin’s observation that the sea, more readily than land, produces hæmaphrodites (Miquet 560), and furthermore, the Mother is responsible for this separation of the sexes.

On the one hand, Marcel soon discovers that his attempt to recreate primary union with the Mother, a desire which marks adult heterosexual relations (as Dinnerstein’s The Mermaid and the Minotaur demonstrates), is to no avail. At the very least his relationship with Albertine is never one of total mutuality. But, in truth, perfect union never even existed in Combray. The Mother is never as dependent on her child’s love as the child is on hers: other siblings, other individuals or other activities risk diverting her attention (Chodorow 69), as dinners with Swann made clear. Proust himself understood this only too well. Jeanne Proust’s attentions were frequently focussed on his younger brother Robert, and this sibling’s absence from the novel bears witness to how traumatic this was. Consequently, when Marcel falls in love with Albertine, he must confront, because adult love comes second, the object relations that bind both partners to the Mother and, as a result, the notion that his partner has separate needs and a separate viewpoint never completely subject to his own.

Indeed, on the other hand, in this “I’ll-be-the-baby-you-be-the-mama” scenario the woman does not only assume the maternal role but plays the child as well. She, too, is looking for the Mother. Furthermore, because Proust’s novel consists of an extraordinary number of woman-loving women, his females appear to prefer direct access to the Mother, only available through another female body. First suggested by the well-known Andrée/Albertine waltz, Albertine’s preference for females becomes an even greater possibility in Marcel’s mind when he discovers that Mlle Vinteuil’s lesbian companion also served as a surrogate mother for his mistress:

Vous vous rappelez que je vous ai parlé d’une amie plus âgée que moi qui m’a servi de mère, de sœur (…) et que d’ailleurs je dois dans quelques semaines retrouver à Cherbourg, d’où nous voyagerons ensemble (c’est un peu baroque mais vous savez comme j’aime la mer […]). (III, 499; emphasis added)

Here the Sea-Motherhood hermaphroditism (segregation of the sexes) equation is complete. The surrogate mother and known lesbian that is Mlle Vinteuil’s companion will meet in the French seaport of Cherbourg. Moreover, in the course of his inquiry into Albertine’s alleged inversion, Marcel discovers an almost systematic pattern in which these activities take place near the water, whether André and Albertine in Balbec or a laundress and Albertine in Nice. However, the most telling parallel the narrator draws occurs when he collapses the Mother and Montjouvan—"[…] derrière la plage de Balbec, la mer […] je voyais, avec des mouvements de désespoir […] la chambre de Montjouvan […]" (II, 513-14; emphasis added)—where Albertine has taken the place of Mlle Vinteuil’s partner. In this manner the narrator assigns himself to the futility of pursuing the Mother in Albertine and decides to punish the Mother for sins of exaggerated possessiveness (the suffocatingly long pre-epidial period) and selfish indifference (the asymmetry of their relationship) but, most of all, for her separation of the sexes:

Albertine […] était entrée pour moi dans cette période lamentable où un être, disséminé dans l’espace et dans le temps, n’est plus pour nous une femme, mais une suite d’événements sur lesquels nous ne pouvons faire la lumière, une suite de problèmes insolubles, une mer que nous essayons ridiculement, comme Xerès, de battre pour la purger de ce qu’elle a englouti… (III, 612; emphasis added)

Indeed, the Mother, initially an object of adoration—the charming creature that was once the Medusa herself—becomes the object of repudiation, the reptile-crowned gorgon. Fittingly then, Proust expressly compels the grandmother, the most admirable and virtually irreproachable of all his female characters, to undergo this unflattering metamorphosis. On her deathbed, appropriately enough, she submits to Cottard’s final efforts to save her, a bloodletting that requires leeches to be attached to her head. Marcel enters the grandmother’s room and sees "les petits serpents noirs [qui] se tortillaient dans sa chevelure ensanglantée, comme dans celle de la Méduse" (II, 630). Thus, comparable to Pesceus who beheaded the Medusa, Marcel cuts the Mother down to size and exposes her for what she is—source of male and female inversion.

Nothing makes maternal blame clearer than the caricature of motherhood that is Mme Verdurin. A tyrannical mother who requires veneration from her “fiddlers,” she is most nefarious in the maternal role played out against Charles—a type of réplique to Marcel’s relationship with his mother. The baron, already struggling to maintain an outward appearance of virility, is further feminized
under Mme Verdurin’s influence. Furthermore, the Mère Verdurin does not simply push Charles toward further effeminacy, she castrates him. As Swann’s dream—in which Mme Verdurin’s nose lengthens and she grows a moustache—illustrates, La Patronne is the phallic mother. In fact, in a second dream, fittingly the narrator’s, Mme Verdurin is the baron’s mother and he, for his part, acts out a child’s ambivalence toward the phallic mother who either accords or refutes the phallic.

Most significant here, though, is the equivalence of phallic mother and the pre-oedipal mother, analogous because of their perceived power. Mme Verdurin is clearly this mighty pre-oedipal mother in her most menacing form, and consequently, her reign in the Faubourg Saint-Germain at the novel’s close has more than just social significance. Rather, her triumph has sexual importance as well and underscores the pre-oedipal mother’s influence in adult sexual arrangements. Not only linked intimately to Odette and entremetteuse for Charles and Morel, Mme Verdurin, by the end of La recherche, is in some way related to all the major characters who have swerved from heterosexuality. As the Princesse de Guermantes, she herself is married to a homosexual, is aunt to both Gilberte and Saint-Loup and linked to Andrée, who eventually marries her nephew Octave. Most important, the stars of her salon are Morel and Rachel whose resemblance vis-à-vis captures the hermaphroditic sign, not of convergent, but of the divergent sexes that Proustian motherhood produces.

The result is that Marcel himself chooses homosexuality. Deceived by the Mother, the narrator reverses Freud’s formula for heterosexual relations: instead of choosing someone modeled on the Mother and opposite to himself, an anaclitic love object, he becomes the Mother himself and chooses someone like himself, a narcissistic love object. Here Marcel seems, as he did in his pre-oedipal relationship with the Mother, to follow what has been traditionally deemed a female course of development. Similar to the author, the narrator appears more interested in being loved than in loving, for this is what has been inevitably missing in his relationships beyond that with the Mother. He would like to imitate what excludes him from the lesbian world, female narcissistic self-sufficiency, for he envies her inaccessible libidinal position. She has kept her original narcissism intact while he has emptied himself of it to the advantage of the love object. Through his own inversion Marcel plans on rectifying this situation.

Moreover, while Marcel juxtaposes the desired male and the repugnant female sex in his mélusine/orchidées de la mer déchâtelée, the orchidées de la mer alone capture this opposition and reinforce his preference for a same-sex love object. Not only do they resonate with the estranged male and female orchids of the Guermantes courtyard that need an intermediary for fertilization, but the possessive de la mer suggests that the Mother is the third party in this triangle. It is she who, through the power of her possessiveness, seals their fate.

However, as Sedgwick points out in Epistemology of the Closet, there is a curious contradiction in the analogy drawn between these flowers and the Charles/Jupien coupling. The reader is meant to understand "how unlikely fulfillment is, [...] how absurdly, impossibly specialized and difficult is the need of each," and yet this is evidently not the case. This male couple is "the single exception to every Proustian law of desire, jealousy, triangulation, and radical epistemological instability" (220). While Sedgwick sees the botanical hermaphroditism as a red herring that does nothing to clarify or deepen the model of sexual inversion, I find it an essential key to understanding Jupien and Charles, and ultimately the narrator. By placing the male couple alongside the hermaphroditic plant, Proust contrasts rather than compares the two, demonstrating how the choice of a same sex love object allows men to eliminate the go-between, to forge the Mother’s mediation.

Finally, like Péreze, who not only frees Seraphin but himself as well with the Medusa’s death, Marcel sees repudiation of the Mother as his own liberation. In writing his novel—an activity that the author does not begin until the Mother’s death—he extricates himself from the omnipotent pre-oedipal mother and moves into the masculine economy of culture and society. By transforming the Mother into the Medusa, the narrator reveals the potential horrors of the Mère/Mère, the original non-self which threatens formation of the I and who can always lure others back into non-being—"to engulf, dissolve, drown, suffocate them as autonomous persons" (Dinnerstein 112). Thus, again like Péreze, who knew that looking into the Medusa’s gazo would turn him to stone, Marcel ultimately turns away from the Mother to avoid petrification, for a return to oneness with the Mother is a menace to selfhood.

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REFERENCES


Guy Croussey and The Text as Paraclete

David F. Bond

Guy Croussey’s fiction is a catalogue of suffering, violence and cruelty. The Algerian War is the subject of Ceux du Djebel and Ne pleure pas, la guerre est bonne, and it takes up one section of Le noce. Le loup-cervier, La concession de la providence, Le sphinx and Le chasseur de têtes deal with the exploitation of workers by large companies, and with the success of individuals who ruthlessly displace others in the corporate hierarchy. The narrators of several novels are from poverty-stricken rural backgrounds, and the ones in Le noce, Les Bleuets and La tondue are “sent as children to institutions that one critic calls “sombre établissement, plus proche du pénitencier que du pensionnat” (Galay 27). La tondue begins with an incident that also occurs in Les Bleuets: the narrator’s mother is accused of collaboration with the Germans during the occupation of France, and is humiliated before her son by having her head shaved. There are so many other such incidents of cruelty that the reader feels compelled to agree with the character who exclaims: “Jésus-mon-cul, la vie est immonde” (Le chasseur 52).

Misery of this kind appears at first to be the result of a blind, impersonal fate. War, economic conditions, natural disasters and other forces over which man has no control seem to be the cause of suffering. This impression is created from the beginning of several novels, which start with descriptions of nature underlining the rhythms of the seasons that take no account of man. Drought, torrential rain and snow are other natural phenomena that occur in these novels, emphasizing man’s powerlessness. The flat, “objective” style of Le noce, Le loup-cervier, and Ne pleure pas recalls Camus’s L’étranger, suggesting that we are dealing with a vision of man as the victim of fate or of the absurd. There are also open references to fate, as when a soldier describes death as “la Destinée” (Le noce 172). When a woman dies, one character affirms: “On ne peut vraiment rien contre la fatalité” (Le noce 35), and a boyer who loses a fight is told that this is “dans la fatalité de son destin” (Le loup-cervier 121). The Providence that is alluded to in the title of La concession de la providence is clearly not a benign one, and Croussey’s comment on Beckett’s work applies equally to his own: “Nous avons l’impression presque physique de nous retrouver en face de la vieille fatalité où l’être innocent ne suffit pas pour échapper à la malédiction” (Beckett 42).

It is undeniably true that many of the disasters in these texts are, indeed, the result of impersonal forces. However, a closer reading of Croussey’s novels

1. For the editions of Croussey’s works used in this article, see the list of references. I would like to acknowledge the assistance of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which provided a grant that enabled me to carry out research on Croussey’s fiction.

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