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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 cliché 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. Françoise 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.

Keywords

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

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Marcel and the Medusa: The Narrator's Obfuscated Homosexuality in *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 cliché 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. Françoise 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. Rivers 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 "charlisme" (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 Charlus.¹

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 girandole d'azur. (III, 28)

Not only does this hermaphrodite, source—as Deleuze 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 Ferenczi, his contemporary to whom he owed this analogy, the psychoanalyst adds: "[...] what is indicated in the myth is the *mother's* genitals. Athene [sic], who carries Medusa's head on her armour, becomes in consequence the unapproachable woman, the sight of whom extinguishes all thought of a sexual approach" (144, n. 3). Appropriately enough, Marcel himself points up this same equivalence by establishing throughout the novel a compellingly significant homonymy between *mer/mère* ("Au reste, ce n'était pas seulement la mer à la fin de la journée qui vivait pour moi en Albertine" [III, 577]), a technique others recognize as well. Bellemin-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 mer: chemin de bord de mère, tel que peut le parcourir toute première enfance [...]" (51). And Claudine Quémar 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 assonances" (81). Thus, the Mother inevitably bodies forth when the narrator says of *les méduses*: "Ne sont-elles pas, avec le

1. The critics mentioned here are among the most important contributors to Proustian scholarship in this decade and the last, most notably J. E. Rivers 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 Maurice Bardèche (*Marcel Proust romancier*), Gilles Deleuze (*Proust et les signes*), Serge Doubrovsky (*La place de la madeleine*), Gérard Genette (*Figures I, II, III*), and Jean-Pierre Richard (*Proust et le 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 noms*), Marcel Muller (*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 Pléiade 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.

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

I would like to suggest that the Medusa legend lends itself to interesting Proustian 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 Acrisius 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 [Bulfinch 96]) 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 *sosie*, the ideological, intellectual, and physical "identical twin" that Mme Jeanne Proust was to her son. Commenting on the author after his mother's death, Martine Sagaert observes: "Celui qui s'identifiait à sa mère et qui voulait vivre en symbiose avec elle, blotti dans ses bras, pourrait redire cette prière de 1904: 'Nous ne ferons qu'une personne comme nous ne faisons 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, she *alone* is the mirror. The child sees itself when looking into the Mother's gaze and ideally 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 Irigaray describes in *L'une ne bouge pas sans l'autre* when, profiting 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 at 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 Champi* aloud to Marcel ("[...] quand c'était maman qui me lisait à haute voix, [...] elle passait toutes les scènes d'amour [...] [I, 41]), 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-oedipal attachment will ultimately 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 comble*—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 *Méduse/Mer/Mère*. Albertine illustrates Darwin's observation that the sea, more readily than land, produces hermaphrodites (Miguet 566), 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 contains an extraordinary number of women 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 soeur [...] 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 *Andrée* 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 Montjouvain—"[...] derrière la plage de Balbec, la mer [...] je voyais, avec des mouvements de désespoir [...] la chambre de Montjouvain [...]" (III, 513-14; emphasis added)—where Albertine has taken the place of Mlle Vinteuil's partner. In this manner the narrator resigns 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-oedipal 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, disseminé 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 Xerxès, de battre pour la punir 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 tordaient dans sa chevelure ensanglantée, comme dans celle de la Méduse" (II, 630). Thus, comparable to Perseus 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 "fidèles," she is most nefarious in the maternal role played out against Charlus—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 Charlus 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 refuses the phallus.

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 Charlus 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 visually captures the hermaphrodite, 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 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 *méduse/orchidées de la mer* dichotomy, 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 Charlus/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 Charlus, 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 forgo the Mother's mediation.

Finally, like Perseus, who not only frees Seriphus 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 *Mer/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 Perseus, who knew that looking into the Medusa's gaze 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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Guy Croussy and The Text as Paraclete

David J. Bond

Guy Croussy'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 noche*. *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 noche*, *Les Bleuets* and *La tondue* are sent as children to institutions that one critic calls "sombre établissement, plus proche du pénitencier que du pensionnat" (Galey 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* 25).¹

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, emphasising man's powerlessness. The flat, "objective" style of *Le noche*, *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 noche* 172). When a woman dies, one character affirms: "On ne peut vraiment rien contre la fatalité" (*Le noche* 35), and a boxer 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 Croussy'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 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 Croussy's novels

1. For the editions of Croussy'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 Croussy's fiction.