Proust and America
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A Bout de Souffle

The French theory of [love] involves a great deal of killing, and the ladies who are the subject of it must ask themselves whether they do not pay dearly for this advantage of being made love to. By “killing” I allude to the exploits of the pen as well as to those of the directer weapons.

—Henry James, “The Journal of the Brothers de Goncourt”

Henry James’s view that Emerson’s life was “curiously devoid of complexity” (1987, 210) is hardly borne out by the evidence of Emerson’s essays. Certainly the radical, optimistic call to arms of Nature arose from the contradictory experience that “our age is bewailed as the age of Introversion” (EL, 68). Emerson goes on to quote Hamlet’s epitaph for his own failure of nerve – “Sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought” – and it seems that the play’s sense of modern men and women drowning in self-doubt and existential terror haunted Emerson. It is certainly a theme to which he turned repeatedly. As a result transcendentalism cannot be either explained or understood without reference to Emerson’s belief that his was an age “miserable with inaction. We perish of rest and rust” (EL, 204).

As Margaret Gilman (1943) has suggested, what Baudelaire and others in France discovered in Emerson was both an acknowledgement of, and a corrective to, often profound anxieties. Baudelaire, who diagnosed the tributary cause of his own lack of will to the fact that, as his father had been thirty-four years older than his mother, only a freak could have been born to them, must have concurred with Emerson that it was a consummation devoutly to be wished that we should not be subject to inherited traits nor our future circumscribed by the past. In this, ironically, Baudelaire, who loathed America for its democratic institutions and, as he saw it,
appointment of the masses as the arbiters of taste, was responding to an essential aspect of not only Emerson’s writings but American culture: the promotion of the modern over the inherited, and a deep-rooted belief in rationalization and progress.

“Let a Stoic open the resources of man,” Emerson wrote, “and tell men they are not leaning willows, but can and must detach themselves” (EL, 275). Such detachment, or a version of it, is taken to heart by Huysmans’s Des Esseintes. Certainly it is difficult to think of anyone who more enthusiastically pursues the “vigorously cultivated passivity” that Jonathan Levin sees as the meaning of the famous “transparent eye-ball” passage in Emerson’s Nature (1999, 37). Again, the irony of this is that while Emerson’s robust, pragmatic philosophy may indeed have offered an antidote to what Peter Gay describes as an “age of Hamlets,” during which the “English malady” of melancholia spread across continental Europe, during the latter decades of the nineteenth century it was the United States which came increasingly to be associated with the root cause of all such “disorders of self-esteem” (2006, 129). Evidence of this can be found in the fact that while such nebulous (though none the less physically and mentally debilitating) symptoms as Gay refers to had hitherto gone under the name neurasthenia, in the 1880s another diagnosis was made available: American Nervousness.

Defined by George Beard in American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences (1881) as a physical and mental condition characterized by morbid anxiety, fatigue, hypochondria, irrational fears, and compulsive or inadequate sexual behavior, American Nervousness could be triggered by any number of specifically modern conditions or inventions: excessive attention to timekeeping (clocks and watches); rapid changes in technology (steam power); new means of travel (the railway) and communication (the telegraph); the volatility of the stock market; and the mental strain placed on women entering higher education.1 Beard went on to list some eighty-one mental and physical ailments resulting from American Nervousness,

1 Here, as elsewhere, American Nervousness drew on aspects of the diagnosis of hysteria, the main difference between the two being that hysteria was thought to be the root cause rather than a side effect of the changing role of women. “Hysteria,” declared Fritz Wittels, a Viennese contemporary of Freud, “is the basis for a woman’s desire to study medicine, just as it is the basis of women’s struggle for equal rights” (cited in Showalter 1997, 50).
concluding, “The above list is not supposed to be complete, but only representative and typical” (1972, 8).

It was Beard who, in an article published in the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* in 1869, had “discovered” and promoted a series of cures for neurasthenia. The article, “Neurasthenia, or Nervous Exhaustion,” was followed in 1880 by a book-length study, *A Practical Treatise on Nervous Exhaustion (Neurasthenia): Its Symptoms, Nature, Sequences, Treatment*. With American Nervousness, however, Beard made it clear that neurasthenia was of global significance. As with American invention or agriculture, Nervousness was “peculiar and pre-eminent,” and “once we understand the causes and consequences … the problems connected with the nervousness of other lands speedily solve themselves” (1972, 8).

The reasons for American Nervousness being of worldwide concern became ever more pressing as the United States exported its business and trade practices, its industrial processes, and its mechanized agricultural system. Beard, however, derived his evidence from somewhat more “nuanced” examples. Fortunately, he commented, “but a few millions have reached that elevation where they are likely to be nervous” (1972, 97). For inasmuch as it was “developed, fostered and perpetuated with the progress of civilization, with the advance of culture and refinement,” American Nervousness was an illness of the middle and upper classes (Beard, 1972, 26). This it shared with decadence, which, stressed Paul Bourget in his *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* (1883), was limited in its sphere of influence to only “the upper ten thousand” (cited in Birkett 1986, 8). For obvious reasons, then, Beard’s theories came quickly to be regarded as being as much a cultural as clinical diagnosis. It was one that had repercussions for Proust.

*L' enfant nerveux*

Proust’s family referred to him as “un enfant nerveux.” He grew up in an environment where this was unlikely to be a casual aside. His father, Dr. Adrien Proust, was the coauthor with Gilbert Ballet of *L'Hygiène du...* 

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2 To understand how markedly different were Beard’s views from those of just a few decades earlier, we need only look at *American Progress*, a post-Civil War painting by John Gast, which shows the Goddess “Liberty” moving westward across the American landscape. Accompanying her are symbols of American progress, among them telegraph lines and steam railways. Reprinted in Maier, Roe Smith, Keyssar and Kevles 2003, 434–435.
neurasthénique (1887) in which neurasthenia is referred to as the “maladie du siècle.” The study, as William C. Carter has noted, reads like a case study of the then sixteen-year-old Marcel, warning as it does against a lifestyle that could result in a heady brew of ailments: dyspepsia, insomnia, hypochondria, a fear of drafts and germs, auditory hypersensitivity, and abusive masturbation (2000, 220). We can imagine, then, the conversations that must have taken place between father and son on the subject of the connection, as Adrien Proust saw it, between neurasthenia and “those who pursue vain pleasures rather than selecting a career suitable to their milieu and abilities” (2000, 221).

So severe were the symptoms experienced by Proust that in July 1896, at a time when he was attempting to come to terms with his own sexuality, and at the instigation of his father (whose previous suggestion, a visit to a brothel, failed to have the desired effect), he agreed to meet with Dr. Louis-Denis Brissaud whose *Hygiène des asthmatiques*, published only a month after Marcel’s consultation, was to carry a preface by Adrien Proust. Though Brissaud’s immediate impact on Proust’s asthma was negligible, the emphasis he placed on the root causes of the ailment deriving from neurosis rather than a set of purely physical symptoms had longer term repercussions. Similarly influential, given Proust’s lifelong and ultimately fatal habit of self-medication, was Brissaud’s practice of allowing patients to treat themselves, believing that they rather than doctors would instinctively know what was good for them.

Given his family background and personality, it is not surprising that references to neurasthenia and its symptoms figure so prominently in Proust’s writings. What is more, given contemporary ideas regarding the diagnosis and treatment of the illness, it is equally unsurprising that Proust should consistently be drawn toward representing neurasthenia as the harbinger of anxieties to do with sexuality, guilt, and artistic creation. References, then, to neurasthenia are necessarily inflected by the terms under which studies on the illness evolved in the late nineteenth century: moving from an illness the causes of which were to do with subjective suffering, to one bound up with sexual repression and sublimation, until finally arriving at a point where it was in effect a defining aspect of modernity. Such a movement suggests parallels with, and offers new perspectives on, recognized aspects of Proust’s development as an artist, as well as serving to remind us just how profoundly unsettling an experience reading *À la recherche* continues to be.

As we will see, characters who suffer from neurasthenia are scattered throughout Proust’s fiction. In his depiction of the condition it seems safe to
assume that Proust was drawing for reference not only on his own symptoms but on his father’s extensive library. A similar exactitude characterizes Huysmans’s *A Rebours*, which, Huysmans assured Emile Zola, was based on the documentary evidence of medical textbooks on nervous disorders (2003, xxiv, 230 n. 5). Elsewhere in his writings, Huysmans continued to see nervousness as a significant aspect of *Arte Moderne*: Berthe Morisot was a “nervous colourist”; Jean Baptiste-Antoine Guillemet a “packet of nerves”; Gauguin a “skin beneath which the nerves vibrate”; and Mary Cassatt a “whirl of feminine nerves” (cited in Weber 1986, 12). Others were equally sensitive to the correlation between nervousness and creativity. In the case of Degas, characterized as “sickly, neurotic” by Edmond de Goncourt, it was the collision between sensibility and art that made him uniquely able to represent and catch the spirit of modern life (Goncourt and Goncourt 1980, 226). For Zola, however, it was the Goncourt brothers themselves whose work was a “sort of vast neurosis” (cited in Weber 1986, 12). Henry James agreed, labeling them “two almost furious *névrosés*” and “a pair of *déliats*” (1987, 269, 279). Little wonder that Freud, while studying under Charcot in the 1880s, came to see the French as “the people of psychological epidemics, of historical mass convulsions” (Gay 1996, 48).

Born during the *annus terribilis* of 1871, Proust must often have been struck by the coincidence between his own constitutional nervousness and the frailties of the French body politic during his lifetime. It is therefore in the context of recent French history that we encounter those neurasthenic characters that throng the pages of *A la recherche*. Most important, of course, is Marcel, whose whole life is circumscribed by his inability to resist yielding to “une impulsion nerveuse” [a nervous impulse] (36; I:36). For the young Marcel such sensitivity is a natural phenomenon. Lying in bed, unable to sleep, listening to his family conversing with Swann, and knowing that Swann’s presence means that his mother will not come and kiss him goodnight, the Narrator describes the natural world outside Marcel’s bedroom window in terms barely distinguishable from Marcel’s own neuroses: “Ce qui avait besoin de bouger, quelque feuillage de marronnier, bougeait. Mais son frissonnement minutieux, total, exécuté jusque dans ses moindres nuances et ses dernières délicatesses, ne bavait pas sur le reste, ne se fondait pas avec lui, restait circonscrit” [What needed to move, some leaves of the chestnut tree, moved. But their minute quivering, complete, executed even in its slightest nuances and ultimate refinements, did not spill over on to the rest, did not merge with it, remained circumscribed] (35; I:36).
Even the most subtle of movements are tracked by Marcel’s hypersensitivity. It is an early indication of the link between nervous illness and a refined sensibility that prepares the way not only for Marcel’s appreciation of the natural world but also his entry into, and rapid promotion through, the ranks of Parisian society. Indeed the higher Marcel climbs, the more pronounced becomes his neurasthenia: “Quand vous arrivez à ces sites relativement élevés comme celui où nous nous trouvons en ce moment, remarquez-vous que cela augmente votre tendance aux étouffements?” [“When you come to these relatively elevated situations, such as that where we find ourselves in at the moment, have you noticed whether it increases your tendency to breathless attacks?”], asks Cottard (1453; IV:323).

The roll call of other characters referred to as being neurasthenic is extensive: Aunt Léonie, Morel, Andrée, and Mme Verdurin are all diagnosed as sufferers; while Charlus and Saint-Loup, via Morel, are associated with the condition. Even Swann does not remain untouched. In his failure to complete a long-promised study of Vermeer, he, too, is brushed by the wing of a debilitating lack of will. Doctor Boulbon, meanwhile, the physician who treats Marcel’s grandmother in her final illness, tells of visiting a clinic for neurasthenics. It is through Doctor Boulbon that we get a description of the “typical” sufferer – one that no doubt served as a self-portrait of Proust immediately recognizable to anyone who knew him:

Hier, j’ai visité une maison de santé pour neurasthéniques. Dans le jardin, un homme était debout sur un banc, immobile comme un fakir, le cou incliné dans une position qui devait être fort pénible. Comme je lui demandais ce qu’il faisait là, il me répondit sans faire un mouvement ni tourner la tête: « Docteur, je suis extrêmement rhumatisant et enrhumable, je viens de prendre trop d’exercice, et pendant que je me donnais bêtement chaud ainsi, mon cou était appuyé contre mes flanelles. Si maintenant je l’éloignais de ces flanelles avant d’avoir laissé tomber ma chaleur, je suis sûr de prendre un torticolis et peut-être une bronchite ».

[Yesterday I visited a home for neurasthenics. I saw a man standing on a bench, motionless as a fakir, his neck bent down in a position that must have been really painful. When I asked him what he was doing, he replied without moving a muscle or turning his head: “Well, Doctor, I get very bad rheumatism and I catch cold very easily.]}
I’ve been taking too much exercise and stupidly getting myself too hot, with my neck touching my flannels. If I move it away from my flannels now before I cool down, I’m bound to get a stiff neck and even catch bronchitis.”] (979; IV:301)

Further “self-portraits” occur earlier in Proust’s writings. In “Violante ou la mondanité” [Violante, or Worldly Vanities] from Les Plaisirs et les jours the eponymous heroine is a woman who, not unlike Proust’s younger self, though born of wealthy, lively, and successful parents, struggles to lead a productive and creative life. Her parents being killed in a hunting accident, she turns first to sensual pleasure, then boredom and disgust. Moreover, like Morel and Andréé her neurasthenia singles her out for homosexual attention, with the Princesses de Mien, a much older woman who accosts her in a park, providing an early incarnation of the predatory Baron de Charlus. In his essays, meanwhile, Proust was drawn to such writers as Nerval who were consumed by “une sorte de subjectivisme excessif” [a sort of excessive subjectivism] that attached greater importance to “un rêve, a un souvenir, à la qualité personnelle de la sensation” [a dream, to a memory, to the personal quality of a sensation] than to reality. Such a state is, Proust wrote, “au fond la disposition artistique” [fundamentally that of the artist] (CSB, 234; ASB, 25).

A less optimistic view of the marriage between art and neurasthenia forms the basis of a falling out between Marcel and his grandmother. The cause of the argument is a difference of opinion over the importance of “breeding” and such social graces as “tact ... shrewdness ... discretion ... self-effacement,” none of which Marcel sees as important to the kind of artist he dreams of becoming but which his grandmother regards as vital to any future happiness he might achieve:

Comme on dit que c’est l’intérêt de l’espèce qui guide en amour les préférences de chacun, et pour que l’enfant soit constitué de la façon la plus normale, fait rechercher les femmes maigres aux hommes gras et les grasses aux maigres, de même c’était obscurément les exigences de mon bonheur menacé par le nervosisme, par mon penchant maladif à la tristesse, à l’isolement, qui lui faisaient donner le premier rang aux qualités de pondération et de jugement ... esprit qui met plus de bonheur, plus de dignité dans la vie que les raffinements opposés, lesquels ont conduit un Baudelaire, un Poe, un Verlaine, un Rimbaud, à des souffrances[.]
Just as it is supposed to be a concern for the species that influences choices in love, steering fat men towards thin women and thin men towards fat women, so that the make-up of the future child may be as well-balanced as possible, so it was my grandmother’s inkling of the requirements of my happiness, under constant threat from my inclination to nerves and my unwholesome tendency towards melancholy and aloneness, which made her stress qualities such as steadiness and judgement ... a spirit bringing more happiness and dignity to life than were ever afforded by cultivation of the opposite tastes, which led the Baudelaires, the Edgar Allan Poes, the Verlaines and Rimbauds into suffering and low esteem] (575; II:306–307)

The fear that neurasthenia might, as an inherited disease rather than illness, literally have something to do with breeding was obviously one that ran deep. Proust’s Aunt Élisabeth, his model for the bedridden and neurotic Aunt Léonie, was neurasthenic, and at one point Marcel is left to confide in the reader that so abject does he feel at his inability to begin writing the novel which might establish his “life in literature” he is convinced he has become possessed by Léonie’s transmigrated soul (1661; V:67). Echoes of the grandmother’s warnings can also be found in Proust’s late essay “À propos de Baudelaire” (1921) in which, while hailing Baudelaire as “the greatest poet of the nineteenth century,” Proust comments on the tendency in his poetry to fall flat or lack stamina [tombe presque à plat ... un manque de souffle] (CSB, 624; ASB, 293).

Important in the context of Baudelaire and a hereditary lack of willpower is the grandmother’s mention of Edgar Allan Poe. Poe, who died in 1849, was writing before the advent of American Nervousness. This is not to say that those disparate forms of disquietude and their influences isolated by Beard were not already in the ascendancy. In 1836 Morse had invented the telegraph; in 1838 the first steamship sailed between England and the US; and throughout the period the American economy fluctuated wildly between boom and bust. As a result Poe’s fiction, like the eponymous bells of his poem, chimes with the words “nervous” and “nervousness.” The narrator of “MS. Found in a Bottle” confesses to “a kind of nervous restlessness which haunted me like a fiend”; the narrator

3 “Like her nephew after her, Aunt Élisabeth became an imaginary invalid, a voluntary prisoner in her bedroom, and died at last of a malady in which no one but the sufferer had quite believed” (Painter 1983, 15).
of “The Tell-Tale Heart” is “dreadfully nervous”; both in person and in his letters to the narrator of “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Roderick Usher manifests “nervous agitation”; and in “The Man of the Crowd” the narrator is convalescing in London after a long nervous illness. The connection between modernity and such nervousness is explicitly stated in “The Man that Was Used Up,” a story that voices a very particular concern: that the human will be made subject to the machine. Poe’s spokesman for “this age of mechanical invention” is Brevet Brigadier General John A. B. C. Smith, whose entire body has been replaced by mechanical parts after being torn limb from limb by the “Kickapoo,” a tribe of indigenous Americans who fought white settlers in the Florida Indian Wars of 1839. Smith, we are told, is one of the great triumphs of an age of steam, commerce, war, and electricity:

Parachutes and rail-roads – man-traps and spring-guns! Our steam boats are upon every sea, and the Nassau balloon packet is about to run regular trips ... between London and Timbuctoo [sic]. And who shall calculate the immense influence upon social life – upon arts – upon commerce – upon literature – which will be the immediate result of the great principles of electro-magnetics. (CS, 386)

That Poe’s “overrefined, overcivilized, artificial and decadent” stories (to borrow a phrase applied originally not to Poe but to France [Weber 1986, 22]) found so receptive a readership in France can be seen as reflecting very particular French anxieties. As I discussed in Chapter 1, there were concerns in the wake of Haussmann’s refashioning of the city in the 1850s and 1860s that Paris was turning into “some future American Babylon.” And as mentioned in Chapter 1, electric street lighting in the Place de la Concorde reminded Edmond de Goncourt of “a Road of Souls of which I had read a description in Poe” (1980, 314). If the supernatural locations of Poe’s fiction could so easily be mapped onto the changing topography of Paris, this was complicated by the fact that the landscape of Poe’s tales, often regarded as being archetypically Gothic, can in many ways be located within eighteenth-century French discourse concerning America. Thus “The Fall of the House of Usher” with its “dreary tract of country ... insufferable gloom ... a few rank sedges ... a few white trunks of decayed trees” (CS, 365) is less a product of Poe’s imagination than those French writers who saw America as evidence that Nature had “gotten an entire hemisphere wrong.” A “boundless swamp of a continent,” an “unending
backwater” where “men were deficient [and] silhouettes [went] roving in the
darkness of the forests” (cited in Roger 2000, 2, 7), such descriptions came
back to haunt France’s febrile imagination in descriptions such as the “black
and lurid tarn” into which the Usher house finally collapses and sinks.

For twenty years Baudelaire’s translations fed the French appetite for
Poe’s stories. In his *Journaux Intimes*, published posthumously, Baudelaire
confessed how, addressing his morning prayers to God and, as his
intercessor in heaven, Poe, he prayed that he might be granted “the
necessary strength to fulfil all my appointed tasks” (1989, 61). Certainly the
artist as neurasthenic underscores many of Poe’s stories, most notably “The
Fall of the House of Usher” in which Roderick Usher appears as a type of
the modern artist: neurotic, hypersensitive, and given to abstract art:

> From the paintings over which his elaborate fancy brooded, and
> which grew, touch by touch, into vaguenesses at which I shuddered[
> For me at least ... there arose out of the pure abstractions which the
> hypochondriac contrived to throw upon his canvas, an intensity of
> intolerable awe. (CS, 372)

Proust would have flinched at the idea of his own writings ever being
accused of “vagueness” or “abstraction,” or accused, as he did Baudelaire, of
lacking stamina. Indeed the movement in his oeuvre from a style dependent
on symbolism to one that allied itself with realism might be regarded as a
response to anxieties about relying too heavily on the kind of subjectivity
he saw as defining writers such as Baudelaire and Nerval. Every recurrent
bout of neurasthenic symptoms, then, can only have left him in a state
akin to that described by Severin in Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs*, when,
alone in a “small Carpathian resort,” he comments:

> It was boring enough to pen an idyll. I had sufficient leisure to come
> up with a whole gallery of paintings, to furnish a theater with an entire
> season of new plays, to supply a dozen virtuosi with concertos, trios, and

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4 Inasmuch as for English critics French art was synonymous with degeneracy,
Whistler, as an “en-Frenchified American,” was discussed in terms colored by
the discourse of decadence. Thus *The (London) Times*, commenting on Whistler’s
perceived inability to “finish” a painting, put it down to his lacking “the power or
the patience” (Stephenson 2000, 142, 145).
Severin’s lack of will is associated with very particular anxieties. Firstly we are told that he lives “according to … the clock, and not only that, but also the thermometer, barometer, aerometer [and] hydrometer”; secondly, that he doubts whether his sexual fantasies can ever be realized in a world where “Venus in her unclad beauty and serenity can stroll impunitively among railroads and telegraphs” (2000, 7, 21). Severin, it appears, is afflicted by modernity itself. As such he suffers from American Nervousness avant la lettre.

The evidence, as Michael R. Finn has outlined it, is that Proust’s interest in the symptoms of “hystero-neurasthenic” behavior was prompted by doubts about his strength of will to be an artist and concerns about his sexual degeneracy. Finn further suggests that it is plausible to read A la recherche “not only as the search for an artistic vocation, but specifically as the novel of a neurasthenic’s search for a literary vocation” (1997, 295). In many ways Finn is highlighting and developing an aspect of Proustian criticism initiated by Walter Benjamin. Commenting on Proust’s psychosomatic asthma, Benjamin saw illness as a – if not the – defining aspect of Proust’s life and writing. Indeed, Benjamin suggests that it is impossible to know which created which: illness the art, or art the illness:

The doctors were powerless in the face of [neurasthenic asthma]; not so the writer, who very systematically placed it in his service … Even as a writer of letters he extracted the most singular effects from his ailment. “The wheezing of my breath is drowning out the sounds of my pen and of a bath which is being drawn on the floor below.” … This asthma became part of his art – if indeed his art did not create it[,] (1999b, 246)

Finn is assiduous and illuminating in tracking down the influence of neurasthenia on developments in Proust’s literary style, placing them alongside changes in the medical and clinical treatment of the illness. What Finn pays much less attention to, however, are the specific terms under which Beard analyzed neurasthenia as American Nervousness. In this Finn follows in the footsteps of Adrien Proust, who drew a firm distinction between “American ‘nervous exhaustion’ and the continental neurosis that stems from exhaustion” (1999, 59). The importance of this omission is twofold. Firstly, it irons out the wider political, cultural, and economic aspects of American Nervousness as opposed to the subjective experience of neurasthenia. Or, as Adorno said about Baudelaire, it
is the difference between a writer who “did not stop at the suffering of the individual but chose the modern itself” (1991, 44). Secondly, it excludes from Proust’s writings the centrality of his representation of women and female sexuality. For while Finn is right in claiming that *A la recherche* “should be read, at least on one level, as a *fin-de-siècle* moral tale in which art and aesthetics conquer medical determinism” (1991, 1), what needs also to be admitted is that within both the life of the novel and its author this only becomes possible with the deaths of a succession of women: Proust’s mother, Jeanne; Marcel’s grandmother; and Albertine Simonet, the young orphan whom Marcel first sees while on holiday with his grandmother at Balbec. These are, moreover, deaths experienced as having been the result of homicide or matricide rather than natural causes. As Leo Bersani has said, *A la recherche* testifies that “the possession of others is possible only when they are dead … Biological death accomplishes, or literalizes, the annihilation of others that Proust tirelessly proposes as the aim of our interest in others” (1998, 224). The “mortuary aesthetic” of Proust’s novel, then, is predicated on an obsessive need to control a woman’s sexual behavior and intellectual cast of mind, most notably – though not exclusively – Marcel’s confinement of Albertine. This is important for a number of reasons, not least because it shows how Albertine is in certain regards subjected to a process of scrutiny analogous to the “medical determinism” which Finn sees Marcel/Proust as having transcended. What she also personifies are the points at which key elements of Beard’s American Nervousness merge with Proust’s defense of his whole artistic enterprise.

**The ‘It’ girl**

Throughout his writings Proust engaged with those technological and social changes that Beard saw as determining influences on American Nervousness. In “Mondonalité et mélomanie de Bouvard et Pécuchet” [Ambitions and Tastes of Bouvard and Pécuchet], for example, Flaubert’s comic duo is exhumed from the literary grave in order to bemoan musical fashion “dans le siècle de la vapeur, du suffrage universel et de la bicyclette” [in this age of steam, universal suffrage and the bicycle]. Likewise they condemn the stresses and strains of the modern financier, who “est soucieux dans le bal le plus fou” [remains harassed even at the wildest ball] because “Un de ses innombrables commis vient toujours lui donner les dernières nouvelles de la Bourse, même à quatre heures du
matin” [One of his innumerable employees always comes to give him the latest news of the Stock Exchange even at four o’clock in the morning] (JS, 61; JS English, 110, 106).5

While these remain brief, somewhat ironic and flippant asides, by the time Proust came to write A la recherche such references take on a different tenor. At the height of his suffering in Albertine disparue the Narrator comments that if Marcel was to give “ces heures du martyr incessant” [these hours of unremitting torture] a graphic form, chief among them would be “la gare d’Orsay [et] Saint-Loup penché sur le pupitre incliné d’un bureau de télégraphe où il remplissait une formule de dépêche pour moi” [the Orsay railway station [and] Saint-Loup leaning over a post-office counter filling in a form to send me a telegram] (1954; V:433). What these images do, in a novel famous for its use of metaphors, is substitute for “l’image d’Albertine” a series of metonyms derived from a discourse of anxiety and nervousness.6 That there is something

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5 The lot of the French businessman in the early stages of globalized capital and information, and at a time when trade with the Americas was rapidly expanding, was bemoaned as early as 1863 by Jacques Fabien: “Our great heads of finance, industry, big business have seen fit ... to send ... their thoughts around the world, while they themselves remain at rest ... To this end, each of them has nailed up, in a corner of his office, electric wires connecting his executive desk with our colonies in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. [H]e can communicate directly over tremendous distances ... One branch-correspondent tells him, at ten in the morning, of a ship-wrecked vessel worth over a million ... ; another, at five after ten, of the unexpected sale of the most prosperous house in the two Americas; a third, at ten after ten, of the glorious entrance, into the port of Marseilles, of a freighter carrying the fruits of a Northern California harvest. All this in rapid succession. The poor brains of these men ... have simply given way” (cited in Benjamin 1999a, 567).

6 The telegram was the focus of other complications in Proust’s life. In May 1908 Proust made enquiries about a young male telegraph operator, Louis Maheux, who he wanted to get to know as “research” for something he was writing. Proust stipulated that Maheux appear in his uniform. This “something,” as Tadié says, was linked to the essay on homosexuality that Proust lists in Le Carnet de 1908 as having a mind to write (2000, 508–509). That Proust felt it necessary to use the excuse of research for satisfying what we must assume was a strong sexual attraction may owe something, as William C.Carter suggests, to the fact that in London in 1889 police inquiries discovered a male brothel at which telegraph boys could earn significant sums prostituting themselves (2000, 446). It may also reminds us of the scene in La Prisonnière where Marcel asks Françoise to send for the young bicycling errand-girl from the diary, ostensibly so that she can deliver a
essentially modern about the form Marcel’s “unremitting torture” takes is further spelled out by the Narrator:

mes relations, ma fortune, tout les moyens matériels dont tant ma situation que la civilisation de mon époque me faisaient profiter, n’avaient fait que reculer l’échéance de la lutte corps à corps avec la volonté contraire, inflexible d’Albertine, sur laquelle aucune pression n’avait agi comme dans ces guerres modernes où les préparations de l’artillerie, la formidable portée des engins, ne font que retarder le moment où l’homme se jette sur l’homme et où c’est le cœur le plus fort qui a le dessus. Sans doute j’avais pu échanger des dépêches, des communications téléphoniques avec Saint-Loup, être en rapports constants avec le bureau de Tours, mais leur attente n’avait-elle pas été inutile, leur résultat nul ? Et les filles de la campagne, sans avantages sociaux, sans relations, ou les humains avant ces perfectionnements de civilisation ne souffrent-ils pas moins, parce qu’on désire moins?]

[my connections, my wealth and all the material means from which both my position and the civilisation of the day allowed me to benefit had done no more than postpone the moment of the hand-to-hand struggle with the contradictory, inflexible will of Albertine, which had resisted all pressure. Of course I had been able to exchange telegrams and telephone calls with Saint-Loup and remain in constant touch with the telegraph office in Tours, but had these expectations not been vain, their result null? And did a country girl with no social advantages and no connections, or people who lived before these advances of civilisation, not suffer less?] (1983; V:470–471)

Albertine, then, even in her absence, becomes a focus for the shortcomings of technology to assuage Marcel’s anxieties. To make this clearer it is worth retracing aspects of Marcel’s relationship with Albertine in order to show how firmly she is embedded in elements of Beard’s American Nervousness.

The first time Marcel sees Albertine at Elstir’s studio she is “la jeune cycliste … sur ses cheveux noir, son polo abaissé vers ses grosses joues, ses
yeux gais et un peu insistants” [the young cyclist ... with her black hair, and her toque pulled down, her plump cheeks and her cheerful, rather insistent eyes] (663; II:423). Later he comments on her “belles jambes, que le premier jour j’avais imaginées avec raison avoir manœuvré pendant toute son adolescence les pédales d’une bicyclette” [fine legs, which I had marked down on the first day, rightly, as having spent their whole adolescence turning the pedals of a bicycle] (1890; V:353). This association of Albertine with speed and physical desirability, however, is double-edged. Gilberte Swann, describing Albertine to Marcel long before he meets her at Balbec, calls her “la fameuse ‘Albertine.’ Elle sera sûrement très ‘fast’” [that Albertine ... I’m sure she’ll be very “fast” one of these days] (409; II:87). Absent from James Grieve’s translation, though retained by Kilmartin and Enright, the scare quotes with which Gilberte surrounds the mere mention of Albertine creates an aura of promiscuity and deceit: is Albertine playing not only “fast” but loose; and is “Albertine” even her real name?

This unsettlement in language parallels Françoise’s comment that Albertine seems never to stay still: “Et avec une allant vite comme elle ... Ah! maintenant, mademoiselle Albertine, c’est quelqu’un” [And always on the move as she is ... Oh, now, Mademoiselle Albertine, she’s quite a one] (1342–1343; IV:178). Once at Balbec, however, the reality is even more daunting with Marcel imagining Albertine transformed into a gorgon, “rapide et penchée sur la roue mythologique de sa bicyclette ... la tête enturbannée et coiffée de serpents, elle semait la terreur dans les rues de Balbec” [bent over the swiftly turning mythological wheel of her bicycle ... her turban-helmeted head swarming with serpents as she spread terror throughout the streets of Balbec] (1971; V:455).  

Here as elsewhere Marcel proves himself a product of his age. Alongside the Mona Lisa, Judith, or Salome – female archetypes “simultaneously defiant and submissive” (Birkett 1986, 5) – the decadent imagination was drawn to the figure of Medusa as the personification of the Modern Woman. As seducer and destroyer, Albertine represents both the femme vitale and the femme fatale. Kitted out in her figure-hugging

7 According to Walter Sickert, Whistler was “a sort of gorgon’s head” as far as establishment painters such as Sir John Everett Millais and W.P.Frith were concerned (Sturgis 2005, 55). In bringing Whistler’s name within the orbit of la méduse with its connotations of lesbianism, such views can be seen as responding – unconsciously or otherwise – to those critics who, as discussed in Chapter 5, thought to question Whistler’s “virility.”
mackintosh ("la tunique guerrière de caoutchouc" (1971; V:455)), she is both destroyer (Perseus) and destroyed (Medusa). Albertine thrills and inspires Marcel. She also, as the reference to Medusa confirms, petrifies him. It is a thrill and fear he learns to experience as analogous to sex. Yet sexuality – or its consequences – is something from which Albertine herself is in need of protection. And so, inasmuch as Charles Goodyear’s invention of vulcanized rubber not only had an effect on the production of clothing and car and bicycle wheels but facilitated birth-control devices such as the cap and condom, dressed in “la tunique guerrière de caoutchouc” she becomes the personification of women’s increasing sexual independence.

Albertine is the antithesis of la Parisienne, the five-metre high effigy of a woman dressed in haute couture that met visitors as they approached the entrance to the 1900 Exposition Universelle. If la Parisienne represented the decorative and feminine, Albertine is an altogether more provocative example of femininity. Similarly, Proust’s description in La Prisonnière of a Paris seemingly run and populated solely by women – “quelque blanchisseuse portant son panier à linge, une boulangère à tablier bleu, une laitière … quelque fière jeune fille blonde suivant son institutrice” [some laundry woman carrying her linen basket, a baker’s wife in her blue apron, a dairy-woman … some proud, fair-haired young girl following her governess] (1623; V:20) – not only represents Marcel’s predatory sexuality, especially when it comes to the working class, but his concern that Albertine will herself strike up a relationship with one or all of these women.

Contemporary anxieties about the changing social roles of women are played out through Marcel’s sexual neuroses. Such neuroses still evidently exist, and if we were to look for a contemporary way of understanding the

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8 Equating post-Haussmann Paris with the capriciousness of women’s fashion, not to mention the female body, began as early as 1860. “From the viewpoint of both hygiene and artistry,” Alexandre Weill wrote, “nothing is more ghastly than the interiors of the new houses along the Boulevard Sébastopol. All these crinoline mansions are in disguise and wear hats on their heads” (cited in Lehmann 2000, 24).

9 While the fictional events of the roman d’Albertine pre-date 1914, Proust was engaged in writing it during and after the outbreak of war. Proust’s description of an all-female Paris accurately reflects, then, the reality of life in the city during the First World War, when, with so many men away at the Front, working women were more visible than had previously been the case.
link between Albertine, *la Parisienne*, and an all-female Paris, the 1997 spring–summer show of fashion designer Alexander McQueen provides a fascinating correlative. With its “terrifyingly tall amazons,” “a regiment of superwomen” that “stalked the cobbles of an old Parisian stable,” “McQueen’s runway suggested a world without men, not because men were absent from it (they were not), but because it was a world in which gender was unsettled by women who were both hyperfeminine and yet in some respects terrifyingly real.”

Such fears as are provoked by “a world without men” are also figured in Proust’s reference to the mythological Medusa. As Elizabeth Ladenson points out (and as I touched on in the previous chapter), “Proust’s insistent analogy between jellyfish (in French, *la méduse*) and homosexuality should be perhaps read as an implicit commentary on the petrifying effect of feminization” (1999, 88). There is certainly a tradition of Proust’s critics responding to him in strikingly similar terms. D.H.Lawrence, critical of his analysis and dissection of every emotional impulse, characterized Proust’s Narrator as “water jelly”; charges of effeminacy underlie George Moore’s description of Proust “ploughing a field with knitting needles”; while Aldous Huxley goes even further in equating Proust with the Female when he has a character in *Eyeless in Gaza* proclaim “that asthmatic seeker of lost time, squatting, horribly white and flabby, with breasts almost female” (cited in Peyre 1963, 28). Proust himself only complicates matters still further when, in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, his Narrator likens an invert to “une méduse stérile qui pérrira sur le sable” [a sterile jellyfish that will perish on the sand] (1228; IV:30). The male invert, Proust seems to say, is actually a lesbian.

Proust is giving voice to concerns similar to those expressed in Beard’s *Sexual Neurasthenia* (1886). Sounding more and more like Herodotus or Sir John Mandeville, Beard provides details of a form of sexual perversion allegedly experienced by men in the Caucasus, who “lose the attributes of virility before their old age; their beard falls off; their genital organs atrophy … and at last they come to a condition where they partake of feminine costume, and assimilate to women in many of their occupations” (1886, 99). Interestingly, the cause of such

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10 Evans 2003, 152–153. At one point Proust turns Paris into a catwalk by having Albertine look out of Marcel’s apartment at the passing figure of Mme de Guermantes as she “models” the latest fashions. Whatever Albertine likes, he then goes out and buys for her (1626; V:24).
masculine ossification mirrors to a remarkable degree the warnings of contemporary commentators who noted that the clothes women wore to cycle were making them indistinguishable from men. There were other concerns expressed: that “Cyclomania” was bringing about “lubricious overexcitement [and] sensual madness” (Weber 1986, 201). Little wonder that Marcel is left to ponder the significance of the “mystérieux sourire” [mysterious smile] that appears on Albertine’s face whenever she mentions going for a ride (1892; V:356).

Still more powerful forms of modern transportation exerted a fascination for Proust. The excitement provoked by Marcel anticipating the train journey to Balbec is countered by the realization that his going away only proves “qu’il était possible que mère vécût sans moi” [it was possible for my mother to live without me]. Here, then, is a vision of train travel haunted by anxieties of impotency and the fear of death: “la cruauté de ce genre d’adieux ... une séparation apparaît brusquement impossible à souffrir, alors qu’elle n’est déjà plus possible à éviter, concentrée tout entière dans un instant immense de lucidité impuissante et suprême” [the sorrow of a last-minute leave-taking ... that moment when the coming separation, which has lain concealed and possibly not inevitable among the preliminary bustle and haste, suddenly becomes unbearable and looms before us, impossible to elude now, concentrated into a stark and flagrant instant of impotent awareness] (515; II:227).

For “inevitable” we can read “timetable,” the introduction of which “imposed a precision nobody had bothered with before” and contributed to “the habit of considering not just hours but minutes.” Marcel’s obsession with train timetables results in a “palpitating heart” (311; I:389), and so profound is his excitement at the prospect of visiting Florence and Venice...
– an excitement fed by “les guides ... et, plus que les guides, l’indicateur des chemins de fer” [guidebooks ... and still more than the guidebooks, the railway time-table] (315; I:395) – that he succumbs to a fever “si tenace, que le docteur déclara qu’il fallait renoncer non seulement à me laisser partir maintenant à Florence et à Venise mais, même quand je serais entièrement rétabli, m’éviter d’ici au moins un an, tout projet de voyage et toute cause d’agitation” [so tenacious that the doctor declared they would not only have to give up the idea of allowing me to leave for Florence and Venice now but, even when I was entirely well again, spare me for a least a year any plans for traveling and any cause of excitement] (316; I:397).

Commenting on rail travel as a source of erotic experience and deep anxiety, Freud wrote, “It is a puzzling fact that boys take such an extraordinarily intense interest in things connected with railways, and, at the age at which the production of phantasies is most active (shortly before puberty), use those things as the nucleus of a symbolism that is peculiarly sexual” (1977, 121). Marcel, then, is an amalgam of Freud’s adolescent and Beard’s description of an altogether more circumspect view on letting the train take the strain:

A German physician has given the name “Fear of Railway Traveling,” to a symptom that is observed in some who have become nervously exhausted by long residence on trains; they become fearful of taking a journey on the cars, mainly from the unpleasant sensations caused by the vibrating motions of the train.14

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13 We can also link the distress experienced by Marcel after his asthma attack with what Freud says about the repression in adults of the prepubertal excitation caused by railway journeys: “A compulsive link ... between railway-travel and sexuality is clearly derived from the pleasurable character of the sensation of movement. In the event of repression, which turns so many childish preferences into their opposite, these same individuals, when they are adolescents or adults, will react to rocking or swinging with a feeling of nausea, will be terribly exhausted by a railway journey, or will be subject to attacks of anxiety on the journey and will protect themselves against a repetition of the painful experience by railway anxiety” (1977, 121).

14 Beard 1972, 113. Recognizing that the steam engine symbolized the challenge or threat of modernity, the group of artists who gathered around Whistler in the 1890s and which included Walter Sickert, Mortimer Menpes, and Théodore Roussel, had printed headed notepaper stamped with “a steam engine advancing with its red-light displayed – a warning signal to the Philistines that the reformers were on the track” (Sturgis 2005, 139).
Among the only moments of peace Marcel experiences with Albertine (during which she might be likened to Breton’s ideal image of la beauté convulsive as “a speeding locomotive abandoned for years to the delirium of the forest”) are those times when he watches her sleeping in his parents’ Paris apartment, contrasting the sound of her breath – “son haleine venant expirer sur ses lèvres, à intervalles intermittents et réguliers, comme un reflux, mais plus assoupi et plus doux” [like the sounds of waves, but softer and more subdued] – to that of traffic “passaient bruyamment dans la rue” [passing noisily in the street] (1655; V:60–61). Such need for respite is in stark contrast to Marcel’s rapture when he first sees le petite bande at Balbec: “ô rayon successif dans le tourbillon où nous palpitons de vous voir reparaître en ne vous reconnaissant qu’à peine, dans la vitesse vertigineuse de la lumière” [O successive flashes in the whirlwind where we tremble to see you reappear, barely recognizing you in the dizzying velocity of light] (1650; V:55). It is a vision of sexual attraction that summons up the Book of Job (“Then the Lord answered Job out of the Whirlwind”) and anticipates Marcel’s later fear that Albertine will prove “une lubrique Furie” [a lubricious Fury]. However, asleep, silent and apparently lifeless (“Ce fut une morte en effet que je vis quand j’entrai ensuite dans sa chambre ... ses draps, roulés comme un suaire autour de son corps” [It was a dead woman that I saw when I went into her room ... her sheets, wrapped round her body like a shroud] (1873; V:332)), Albertine ceases to be those aspects of the modern world that overstimulate Marcel.

A description such as this reminds us that several years before the French translation of Sexual Neurasthenia (Nervous Exhausation, Its Hygiene, Causes, Symptoms and Treatment) in 1895, Beard’s theories had been introduced into French medical practice by Charcot in a series of lectures. The influence of Charcot is interesting, not least because the ambiguous nature of the relationship between Albertine and Marcel coincides with contemporary speculation about relations between patients and doctors at La Salpêtrière (see Finn 1999, 39). It is certainly the case that asleep or otherwise passive, Albertine becomes readily available to participating in Marcel’s sexual fantasies, just as Charcot’s predominantly female patients were made to

15 With the passing decades, one effect of Haussmann’s modernization and his belief in an aesthetic of speed and mobility was to open Paris up to increasing numbers of motor cars. Indeed, in 1922 the Paris authorities did not renew licenses for horse-drawn cabs because their “slowness” was hindering the city’s motor traffic (Jones 2004, 421).
assume *attitudes passionelles* suggestively called “amorous supplication,” “eroticism,” or “ecstasy” (Showalter 1997, 33). This in turn anticipates the “confusion” that defined later surrealist fantasies: in Aragon’s *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926) the narrator mistakes a prostitute for a “living corpse”; while in *Nadja* (1928) the wax figure of a prostitute is seen as more provocative than a real woman.

Such associations are highlighted by Chantal Akerman in her film *La Captive* (2000), most notably in the scene where Marcel is aroused by watching the Ariane/Albertine character while she either feigns sleep or actually slips into unconsciousness because the tension between them is raised, in Akerman’s words, “to the point where the air starts to get thin, perhaps so far it becomes unbearable.” Indeed the connection between their love-making and the symptoms of neurasthenic-asthma are made further apparent when, coming to after Marcel has reached orgasm by rubbing himself against her, Ariane invites him to join her and Andrée the next day: “No, I don’t think so,” Marcel replies. “There’s too much pollen.”

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16 See the interview with Chantal Akerman included on the DVD of *The Captive* (Artificial Eye, 2000), a fascinating retransposition of Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* onto *A la recherche* to which Hitchcock’s film was itself indebted. As Marcel is introduced to Albertine by Elstir, so Scottie, Hitchcock’s protagonist, falls in love with a woman, Madeleine, to whom he is introduced by her husband, an old college friend called Gavin Elster [sic]. Like Marcel, Scottie soon finds himself in the role of both detective and analyst: on the one hand he is looking for evidence that Madeleine is having an affair; on the other, he is looking for clues to Madeleine’s past, interpreting her dreams, piecing together the fragments of her biography. After having witnessed what he thinks is Madeleine’s death in a fall from a bell-tower, Scottie has a nervous breakdown and becomes obsessed with looking for her on the streets of San Francisco. When he discovers Judy, a dead ringer for Madeleine, he makes her dress up and dye her hair so as to become Madeleine’s double. Only at the end of the film does Scottie discover that Madeleine and Judy are the same woman, and that Madeleine’s death was a hoax. At the moment he confronts her with this, Judy falls from the same tower as was used to fake Madeleine’s death – this time with fatal consequences. The story, Hitchcock told Françoise Truffaut, is about a man “who wants to go to bed with a woman who is dead; he is indulging in a form of necrophilia.” Akerman borrows a number of motifs from Hitchcock in the scenes where Marcel follows Ariane/Albertine by car through a Paris that owes more to San Francisco than Haussmann’s city, and into an art gallery that clearly refers to the parallel scene in *Vertigo*. Gertrude Stein for one would not have been surprised by the transposition. In *Paris France* she reminisces about her childhood in San Francisco, a city she calls the most French of American cities.
It doesn’t require a great leap of the imagination to see a connection between an Albertine kept indoors and under close supervision and one of George Beard’s treatment regimes for nervousness: the “rest cure.” At one point the Narrator comments that so much weight has Albertine put on that she has become virtually unrecognizable; while later this “new Albertine” [Albertine nouvelle] is referred to as “bloated” [bouffie] (1932, 2090; V:404, 608). Usually reserved for women, Beard’s regime required patients to keep to their beds for six to eight weeks while being fed a diet that aimed to promote the body’s supply of fat and blood, both of which were thought essential to vital energy. Thus the “disciplined, streamlined modernist body,” as Caroline Evans calls the female body emancipated from “the outer discipline of the corset” (2003, 172), and personified by Albertine in “la tunique guerrière de caoutchouc,” found itself restrained not by fashion but medicine.

The influence of Beard becomes all the more apparent when we remember that the condition which Marcel’s increasingly “scientific” treatment of Albertine hopes to cure is her suspected lesbianism, a tendency which the novel, via Morel and Andrée, firmly associates with neurasthenia. The irony, of course, is that this displaces the burden of nervousness from Marcel to Albertine, with the result that it is she rather than he who must be treated. The problem Marcel encounters, however, is that the more he attempts to diagnose the exact nature of Albertine’s “illness,” the more he sees her as a multiplicity of selves, each of which demands that he in turn becomes a vast array of specialists able to scrutinize her every word and gesture: a chemist, philologist, pathologist, logician, biologist, physiologist, astronomer, historian, botanist, and meteorologist. The search for Albertine becomes what Deleuze calls “the exploration of different worlds of signs that ... intersect at certain points,” and among which Marcel loses track not only of her but himself (2000, 4). Far from establishing Albertine’s innocence or guilt, such “empirical conviction” (Deleuze 2000, 133) as Marcel is able to summon to his aid only leads him into further bouts of involuntary jealousy and suspicion, the overwhelming power of which blanks rational analysis. As well as preparing us for those similarities between the investigative methods and procedures of Marcel and Poe’s Dupin that I will consider in the following chapter, this suggests that Proust may have been parodying the belief that science provides any sure way of defining the laws of desire. There may be elements here of self-parody. Proust recognized in himself the kind of writer “qui ait besoin
de connaissances précises, de savoir exactement les choses dont je parle ... Et sans doute vous écrire m’eut épargné les correspondances interminables que j’aie eues avec des horticulteurs, des couturiers, des astronomes, des héraudistes, des pharmaciens, etc.” [who needs precise information, who must have an exact knowledge of the things I’m talking about ... And doubtless writing to you would have spared me the interminable correspondence I’ve had with horticulturalists, dress-makers, astronomers, genealogists, chemists, etc.] (Corr. XII:254; SL III:198–199).

Slaughterhouses of love

For all that American Nervousness now reminds us of other nineteenth-century “sciences,” such as phrenology, mesmerism, and magnetism, Beard’s ideas were for a while influential, not least among the nascent practitioners of psychotherapy, where he assumed the role of bête noir. While Beard came to identify the origins of neurasthenia with environment, Freud, in “On the Psychotherapy of Hysteria” (1895), was to stress its psycho-sexual causes and symptoms. Neurasthenia, he concluded, corresponds to “a monotonous clinical picture in which ... ‘psychical mechanisms’ play no part.” What was required, Freud countered, was a distinction between the neurasthenic/physical axis and that of psychical symptoms which admit “the far-reaching possibility of reducing it by psychotherapy.” These neurotic symptoms Freud termed “anxiety neurosis,” defining them as “sexual in origin” and coinciding with “the neurosis that in so many accounts is acknowledged alongside hysteria and neurasthenia under the name ‘hypochondria’” (2004, 259, 260). Freud returned to the relationship between the repression and sublimation of sexual behavior and anxiety in 1908. “A person’s sexual behaviour,” he wrote,

often sets the pattern for all his other ways of reacting to the world. Any man who energetically conquers his sex object is credited with the same ruthless energy in the pursuit of other goals too. Yet if, for a variety of reasons, he refrains from satisfying his strong sex drives, his behavior in other spheres of life will be conciliatory and resigned, rather than energetic[.] (2002a, 99–100)

Though Freud agreed with other nerve specialists of his day that neurasthenia (neurosis) was attributable to the stresses and strains of modern urban life, unlike Beard he saw the cause as less to do with “the
tireless unbridled pursuit of money and possessions [or] with the immense advances in applied sciences” than excessive sexual restriction. Where they agreed was on the contribution to this of the United States: “The present state of American civilization,” Freud commented, “would provide a good opportunity to study the cultural damage that is to be feared” (2002a, 88, 52). Beard, as I say, was generally loath to give much credence to sex. Even he had to admit, however, that sexual repression was a contributing factor to American Nervousness:

> Love, even when gratified, is a costly emotion; when disappointed, as it is so often likely to be, it costs still more, drawing largely, in the growing years of both sexes, on the margin of nerve-force, and thus becomes the channel through which not a few are carried on to neurasthenia, hysteria, epilepsy, or insanity.[.] (1972, 119)

The “disappointment” against which Beard warns comes close to personifying Freud’s model of the suppression of “normal” sexual activity:

> The stern demands of civilization and the difficult task of abstinence have combined to make avoidance of the union of the male and female genitals the essential feature of abstinence and to favor other forms of sexual activity that amount, one might say, to a kind of semi-obedience. Since normal sexual intercourse is so relentlessly persecuted on grounds of morality – and of hygiene, too, in view of the possibilities of infection – the so-called perverse forms of heterosexual intercourse, in which other parts of the body take over the role of the genitals, have undoubtedly increased in social importance. (2002a, 101)

Albertine, however, refuses to fully comply with such self censorship, hence Marcel’s irresolvable fears about her lesbianism. Furthermore, the facility to express verbally what she and Marcel share in common, erotomania – “a delirious pursuit of the beloved, rather than ... a delirious illusion of being loved” (Deleuze 2000, 179) – means that Marcel is in a permanent nervous twitch.

Albertine’s longest speech in the novel, the passage in *La Prisonière* where she becomes rhapsodic on the pleasures of eating ice cream from the Ritz (a diet that would meet with the approval of Beard’s “rest cure”),
unsettles Marcel precisely because “ces paroles du genre de celles qu’elle prétendait dues uniquement à mon influence, à la constante cohabitation avec moi, ces paroles que pourtant je n’aurais jamais dites, comme si quelque défense m’était faite par quelqu’un d’inconnu de jamais user dans la conversation de formes littéraires” [her words were of a kind that she maintained were owed solely to my influence, to her living permanently with me, but they were words that I myself would never have used, constrained as I felt by some unknown influence never to use literary forms in conversation] (1699; V:114). Thus Albertine’s verbal, emotional and intellectual assurance makes him nervous because her sudden improvisations on the theme of desire and pleasure challenge his own repressed energies, sexual and artistic. What her talking does not do, pace Derrida’s “[s]peaking in order not to say anything is always the best technique for keeping a secret” (1995, 59), is reveal the nature of her sexuality. Marcel, then, is left to eroticize, even fetishize, this absence. As a result their relationship reminds us of what Foucault says about repression being “the fundamental link between power, knowledge, and sexuality,” and how nothing less than “an irruption of speech, a reinstating of pleasure within reality” can free us from such structures (1998, 5).

In Albertine’s case, the culmination of such verbal “irruptions” is her expression of a desire to be sodomized (Freud’s “so-called perverse forms of heterosexual intercourse”) which marks the crisis in her affair with Marcel. That shortly after saying these words she “disappears” from the novel only further links her to Foucault’s analysis:

If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, non-existence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets the established law; he somehow anticipates the coming freedom. (1998, 5)

There is a section of the narrative from which Marcel, too, is condemned to “non-existence.” Or rather, there is a period of his life about which the Narrator remains silent. Between Marcel’s returning from Venice to find that Gilberte has married Saint-Loup, given birth to a daughter, and discovered that her husband is homosexual, and his visits to wartime Paris, he retreats to a sanatorium. He returns there after the war, before re-entering the novel and paying a visit to the Princess de Guermantes
during which he discovers the significance of mémoire involontaire. In other words, some fourteen or fifteen years go uncommented on. A clue as to why is provided in the first of Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), in which Freud describes how illness provides the male hysterics a way of escape from “the pressure of the [sexual] instinct and his antagonism to sexuality.” The passage continues: “It does not solve his conflict, but seeks to evade it by transforming his libidinal impulses into symptoms” (1977, 79).

It is certainly the case that the precise nature of Proust’s sexuality remains something of a mystery. This has unfortunately led to the “fact” of his homosexuality resulting in that most reductive of readings of *A la recherche*, with each of Marcel’s female lovers understood to represent one of Proust’s male acquaintances. In this game of literary drag, Albertine is “really” Alfred Agostinelli, Proust’s chauffeur, with her death while horse riding paralleling Agostinelli’s sudden loss in a plane crash in May 1914. And though it is entirely plausible, as Elizabeth Ladenson comments, “that the portrait of Albertine owes much to Proust’s relationship with Agostinelli, at the level of the text the transposition theory breaks down.” It cannot account for Gomorrah, for if Albertine is ‘really’ a man, what are we to make of her suspected lesbianism” (1999, 13–18). For my own part, I would simply want to expand on what Ladenson says by opening up her argument to the influence of American Nervousness. For the medium other than sexual desire that joins Proust/Marcel to Agostinelli/Albertine is speed and travel, with the attendant anxieties and pleasures inexorably bound up in Proust’s imagination with the axis of art, nervousness, and homosexuality. What we have, therefore, is less a transposition than a modulation: both deaths occurred while the “victim” was in flight from their own Marcel; and both fall under the influence of a desire that can only be satisfied by a craving for speed. Thus Proust offered to buy Agostinelli an aeroplane and a Rolls-Royce (*Corr.* XIII:217–223; *SL* III:256–259), while Marcel offers Albertine a Rolls-Royce and a yacht. Furthermore, the inscription from Mallarmé’s sonnet, “Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd’hui [The virginal, vibrant, and beautiful dawn] which ends with the words “l’exil inutile le Cygne” [the useless exile of the Swan], and which Proust wanted to have

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17 The transposition theory (i.e. that each of Marcel’s female lovers is actually based on one of Proust’s homosexual relationships) was put forward in 1949 by Justin O’Brien in his essay “Albertine the Ambiguous: Notes on Proust’s Transposition of the Sexes” (see Ladenson 1999, 13–18).
inscribed on the fuselage of Agostinelli’s plane becomes, in one of the letters Marcel sends Albertine after she has fled Paris, a yacht “s’appelle, selon votre désir exprimé à Balbec, le Cygne” [called, in accordance with the wish you expressed at Balbec, le Cygne] (1946; V:423). The parallels between Agostinelli’s death in a plane crash and Albertine’s while horse riding are further cruelly underlined by the grotesque irony of the fact that, in the only letter from Proust to Agostinelli to have survived, and written on the day on which Agostinelli drowned, Proust informs him that “if I keep [the plane] (which I rather doubt) … it will probably remain in the stable.”

Keeping mum

The “type” of femininity represented by Albertine locates A la recherche within a tradition in post-1800 French literature that dealt with the “unvirile” man. Chateaubriand’s René, Stendhal’s Julien Sorel, and Flaubert’s Frédéric Moreau all share, writes Alison Finch, the “physical susceptibility and introspectiveness of Proust’s Narrator.” Such characteristics influence their choice of a particular kind of partner: “robust, unintellectual.”

With regard to the latter, Finch might have added Baudelaire, who expressed a fascination with Woman as “idol, stupid perhaps, but dazzling and bewitching” and who, not unlike the vision of Albertine as Medusa, “holds wills and destinies suspended on her glance” (1964c, 30). Marcel is equally in thrall to Woman. It is difficult, though, to credit Baudelaire, as Marcel does Albertine, acting out scenes from Racine’s Esther, or discussing Dostoevsky with his “idol.” Neither is Albertine anyone’s fool. She proves a shrewd literary critic, and her comments on Dostoyevsky take us to the heart of Marcel’s barely conscious fear that to love is to commit the ultimate crime: “Mais est-ce qu’il a jamais assassiné quelqu’un, Dostoïevski? Les romans que je connais de lui pourraient tous s’appeler l’Histoire d’un Crime. C’est une obsession chez lui, ce n’est pas naturel qu’il parle toujours de ça” [But did he murder anyone, Dostoevsky? All of his novels that I’ve read could be called The Story of a Crime. He’s obsessed with the subject, it’s not natural always to be talking about it] (1888; V:350).

That Albertine is reading Dostoyevsky in the first place is down to a desire to satisfy Marcel’s wish to educate her. This in turn adds a further significance to the fact that it is scenes from Esther which they act out. Written to be performed at a school for young noblewomen at Saint-Cyr, Racine’s great play of female self-sacrifice and bravery “tells much about the ambivalence of an educational system straining between a closed ideal
world ... and the practical needs of modern life and openness to social
reality” (Lyons 1994, 369). And just as the “concept of enclosure and
control of the scholastic space” were central to the regime at Saint-Cyr, so
Marcel strives in vain to impose similar limitations on Albertine’s errant
sexuality.

Beard was convinced that “the mental activity of women” (by which
he was referring to the increase in women taking their place among
America’s “brain workers”) was a contributory factor to Nervousness. Some
indication of contemporary sensitivity to the issue of women’s education
is demonstrated by the pen-and-ink drawing by Walter Sickert included
in the first edition of the notorious Yellow Book in 1894, copies of which
were sold in Britain, on the continent, and in the United States. Already
infamous for his paintings of London’s music halls, a theme he adapted
from Degas’ depiction of Parisian café concerts, Sickert’s sketch of a young
woman in a hat reading a book was “an image that, with its suggestions
of female independence, education, and emancipation, was calculated to
unsettle, if not shock, a contemporary audience” (Sturgis 2005, 213). Similar
charges had been made exactly a decade earlier when Sickert’s teacher
and some-time confidant, Whistler, exhibited Pink Note: The Novelette
(see Plate 3). The watercolor was described in the London Standard as
portraying a “grisette” (a term indicating a young working-class woman,
with the added implication of sexual immorality) and “delightful devourer
of penny sentimentals” (MacDonald et al. 2003, 143). The assumptions
here are telling. That a woman engrossed in reading some cheap novel of
the day – and we should note that there is no suggestion that she might
be studying Hebrew, Euclid, or, for that matter, reading Dostoyevsky
– should arouse such associations (working-class sexuality, whatever the
effects of the patronizing adjective “delightful,” is imagined as a kind of
vagina dentata) parallels Albertine’s own ambiguous social origins and
wayward lifestyle.

Marcel’s need to police Albertine’s “orality” becomes figured not
simply in a desire to “strip away” the surface and read what he finds there
– “j’aurais voulu non pas arracher sa robe pour voir son corps, mais à travers
son corps voir tout ce bloc-notes de ses souvenirs” [I longed not to tear
her dress off and see her body, but to see through her body to the whole
note-book of her memories] (1672; V:82) – but to turn her into literature.
Thus he experiences her imagined seduction by Léa as if it were “une
flambée brûler d’un seul coup un roman que j’avais mis des millions de
minutes à écrire” [flames tearing through a novel I had spent ten million
minutes composing] (1866; V:323). The antithesis to this are those moments when her behavior is “confusée, effacée, autant dire indéchiffrable, dans ma mémoire” [confused, half erased, unreadable in my memory] (1667; V:75). Albertine, then, must be interpreted, deciphered, and explicated (Deleuze 2000, 17). Brought home to him at such moments, and showing just how important Albertine is to the novel’s structure as a whole, is a recognition of “celle du néant ... analogues à celui que j’avais éprouvé en goûtant la madeleine trempée dans la tasse de thé” [nothingness ... analogous to the one I had experienced on tasting the madeleine soaked in tea]. What these momentary insights prove is that in “nothingness” may lie not “vagueness” but that profundity on which la recherche is founded. Or they may simply mean that nothing comes of nothing: “rien ne m’assurait que le vague de tels états fût une marque de leur profondeur, mais seulement de ce que nous n’avons pas encore su les analyser, qu’il n’y aurait donc rien de plus réel en eux que dans d’autres” [nothing proved that the vagueness of these states was a sign of their profundity, rather than of our inability, so far, to analyze them: there would therefore be nothing more real in them than in others] (1890; V:352).

Albertine embodies Marcel’s inability to write the novel he feels himself capable of, yet lacking the will to start. Some similar fascination moved and troubled Proust during the immediate years following his mother’s death, and which evidently came to a head on January 24, 1907, when Le Figaro printed on its front page news of “An Act of Madness.” The report described the killing of one Mme Van Blarenberghe at the hands of her son, Henri, and how, with her last breath, Mme Van Blarenberhe had accused him of her murder. He, meanwhile, having stabbed and shot himself, was interrogated by police as he lay dying.

Jeanne Proust died in September 1905. Her son’s sense of guilt at his own imagined part in her final illness clearly fused with reports of Mme Van Blarenberhe’s death, and resulted in an article Proust wrote at the suggestion of Gaston Calmette, editor of Le Figaro. “Sentiments filiaux d’un parricide” [Filial Sentiments of a Parricide] was published on February 1. It marked, as Proust wrote to Lucien Daudet, a thawing of the writer’s block that had gripped him since the publication in May 1906 of his translation of Ruskin’s Sesame and Lilies, on which he had collaborated so extensively with his mother (Corr. VII:58–61; SL II:251–252). With his mother firmly in mind, he wrote somewhat apocalyptically in the article that “il n’y a peut-être pas une mère vraiment aimante qui ne pourrait, à son dernier jour, souvent bien avant, adresser ce reproche à son fils” [perhaps there is
no truly loving mother who would not be able, on her last day and often
long before, to reproach her son]. Read in these terms, Proust's sublimated
feelings for his mother become “staged” in the character of Albertine,
with Marcel’s guilt at having “murdered” her mirroring Proust’s own
deep-rooted terror that his degenerate, neurasthenic lifestyle contributed
to his mother’s final illness. As he concluded in “Sentiments filiaux d’un
paricide”: “Au fond, nous vieillisons, nous tuons tout ce qui nous aime
par les soucis que nous lui donnons, par l’inquiète tendresse elle-même que
nous inspirons et mettons sans cesse en alarme” [At bottom, we make old,
we kill all those who love us, by the anxiety we cause them, by that kind
of uneasy tenderness we inspire and ceaselessly put in a state of alarm]
(CSB, 158; FSP, 354). The transference of his own repressed feelings to his
fiction becomes even more compelling in light of the fact that, in a preface
to Contre Sainte-Beuve, it is the mother with whom Proust’s narrator acts
out scenes from Esther (CSB, 217; ASB, 8).

In the summer of 1907, still grieving his mother’s death, Proust traveled
to Cabourg in Normandy, where he went out almost daily in a red taxi
driven by Alfred Agostinelli. Proust likened being driven by Agostinelli to
“la vie de boulet de canon lancé” [the life of a flying cannon-ball]. Clearly
the automobile had replaced the train engine in its capacity to provoke:
“une sorte de tremblement pareil à celui du moteur continue à ronfler en
moi et à frémir quand je suis descendu de la voiture et empêche ma main
de se poser et de m’obéir” [a sort of trembling like that of the engine
continues to purr and vibrate in me when I’ve got out of the car and won’t
let my hand come to rest and obey me] (Corr. VII:263; SL II:325). When
he returned to Paris, Proust wrote an article about the experience for Le
Figaro, “Impressions de route en automobile.” Two things are important
here. Firstly, that with very few changes Proust reused the article when it
came to providing the prose-poem the young Marcel writes in Du côté de
chez Swann about seeing the steeples of Martinville from a horse-drawn
carriage. Secondly, Proust describes in the article how he returned home
from the drive with Agostinelli and saw his parents, both of whom were in
fact dead by that time. In Contre Sainte-Beuve and “Impressions de route en
automobile,” then, Proust carries on an imaginary conversation with a dead
mother. It seems reasonable to draw the conclusion that this imagining
himself as being able to speak to his mother allowed Proust to discover the
narrative voice and structure that would make the writing of a novel finally
possible. The deaths of Jeanne Proust, Mme Van Blarenberghe, Albertine,
and the grandmother fulfill aspects of literary discourse surrounding male
artistic creativity and representations of the female body (a female corpse transformed into the male corpus). Furthermore, if we apply Barbara Johnson’s words on the trope of the death of women in French literature to Albertine, the ultimate truth of her life, her death, becomes a form of “poetic self-reflexiveness: woman equals beauty equals [the novel] itself, which is killed into art” (Johnson 1994, 629). I would go further, and say that in so much as she remains an enigma, Albertine has much in common with Proust’s justification of his novel as an aesthetic and moral whole.

Repeatedly in his letters Proust felt compelled to defend his frank depiction of degeneracy. Only when his novel had been published in its entirety, he argued, would readers recognize that what seemed perverse and sensational in a scene such as the lesbian seduction at Montjouvain (132–137; I:159–166) would be revealed as germane to the overall structure. Writing to Paul Souday in November 1919, Proust disclosed:

Ma composition est voilée et d’autant moins rapidement perceptible qu’elle se développe sur une large échelle … mais pour voir combien elle est rigoureuse, je n’ai qu’à me rappeler une critique de vous, mal fondée selon moi, où vous blâmiez certaines scènes troubles et inutiles de Swann. S’il s’agissait, dans votre esprit, d’une scène entre deux jeunes filles … elle était, en effet, «inutile» pour le premier volume. Mais son ressouvenir est le soutien des tomes IV et V (par la jalousie quelle inspire, etc.). En la supprimant, je n’aurais pas changé grand’chose au premier volume; j’aurais, en revanche, par la solidarité des parties, fait tomber deux volumes entiers, dont elle est la pierre angulaire, sur la tête du lecteur.

[My method of composition is veiled, and all the less immediately apparent for taking shape on a wide scale … but to remind myself of its rigour, I need only turn to your review, ill-founded, in my opinion, in which you condemn certain scenes in Swann as obscure and unnecessary. If what you had in mind was a scene between two young women … it’s true that it was “unnecessary” to the first volume. But its recall is the mainstay of volumes IV and V (because of the jealousy it inspires etc). By suppressing it, I wouldn’t have materially altered the first volume; on the other hand, because of the interdependence of the parts, I would have brought two entire volumes of which it is the cornerstone crashing down about the reader’s head.] (Corr. XVIII: 464; SL 4:98–99)
Marcel’s desire to make the truth about Albertine visible through turning her into literature has similarities to Rousseau’s comment at the end of Book 4 of the *Confessions* about wanting to make his own mind “transparent to the reader” (2000, 170). Albertine, however, proves opaque. She is too great a subject matter for Marcel. She leaves him breathless, unable to pronounce the words that might free him from the spell cast by his own neuroses. Even should he succeed in writing the truth, there is the danger that he may be misinterpreted, thereby creating a false Albertine who, like the real one, would escapes his “authorial” intention. For as Rousseau said regarding the differences between the life which is written and that which is lived, it becomes the task of the reader to “assemble all these elements and to determine the being that they constitute; the result must be his own work, so that if he is mistaken, all the error is on his side.”

Albertine’s disappearance plunges Marcel into a Proustian inferno of guilt and terror. News of her fatal accident when it arrives in the form of a telegram (another of Beard’s triggers for American Nervousness) represents the loss of all the habits on which Marcel has grown to depend for a secure sense of himself: “J’aurais été incapable de ressusciter Albertine parce que je l’étais de me ressusciter moi-même, de ressusciter mon moi d’alors” [I would have been incapable of reviving Albertine because I was incapable of reviving myself, of reviving my former life] (2089; V:606). To lose her is to lose everything, returning him to the feeling of being torn in two when, separated from his mother in the novel’s primal scene of neurasthenic anxiety, he isn’t allowed to give her one last kiss before being led to bed (31; I:31). The telegram also reminds us of Marcel’s experience in *A l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* when he receives a letter from Gilberte. It is a moment in which the seeds of his affair with Albertine, the manner of her death, and his subsequent mistake of misreading Albertine’s signature for Gilberte’s, thus momentarily reviving Albertine from the dead, already lie dormant. What unites these otherwise disparate events, together with the mention of Albertine being “fast,” is an overwhelming sense of vertiginous speed: “Pendant un instant [la lettre] ne fit que frapper d’irréalité tout ce qui m’entourait. Avec une vitesse vertigineuse, cette signature sans vraisemblance jouait aux quatre coins avec mon lit, ma cheminée, mon mur. Je voyais tout vaciller comme quelqu’un qui tombe de cheval” [For a moment, all [the letter] did was cast an unreal light on everything around me. At dizzying speed, the improbable signature jumbled the things in my room, the bed, the fireplace, the walls. Everything I looked at was
wobbling, as though I had had a fall from a horse] (399; II:74–75).

The compulsion to repeat, particularly his repressed desire for the mother, coupled with the resulting lack of will and other neurasthenic symptoms, is nowhere so explicitly and uncannily described as when Marcel, trying to imagine Albertine’s return from the dead, begins to touch himself:

Instinctivement je passai ma main sur mon cou, sur mes lèvres qui se voyaient embrassés par elle depuis qu’elle était partie, et qui ne le seraient jamais plus; je passai ma main sur eux, comme maman m’avait caressé à la mort de ma grand-mère en me disant: « Mon pauvre petit, ta grand-mère qui t’aimait tant ne t’embrassera plus. »

[Instinctively I stroked my neck and my lips, which had imagined themselves being kissed by her since she had left, yet which would never be kissed by her again; I stroked them as mama had caressed me on my grandmother’s death, saying to me, “My poor child, your grandmother who loved you so much will never kiss you again.”] (1962; V:444)

Marcel’s auto-eroticism, verging on masturbation, and the extraordinarily morbid thoughts it gives rise to are clear examples of the kinds of physical and mental states adduced first by Beard, and later Adrien Proust and Gilberte Ballet, as prime examples of neurasthenic neurosis. Above all, it is a version of reality – paranoid, obsessive, irrational, overwhelmed by guilt, morbid, and hypochondriacal – that contributes to the essential modernity of Proust’s writings. At the heart of the labyrinth into which Marcel’s desire leads him is not Albertine but his own self. The pursuit of the truth Marcel thinks she represents actually corresponds to the truths hidden within his own life. The crime Marcel uncovers is less the fact of her lesbianism than Proust’s unwritten but far from silent guilt for the death of his own mother. As Deleuze says, “We search for truth only when we are determined to … undergo a kind of violence that impels us to such a search” (2000, 15). What the novel records, then, is a form of lacerating, sado-masochistic self-disgust. Or, as Irigaray recounts a male friend as having told her: “It’s true, I have always thought that all women were mad … No doubt I wanted to avoid the question of my own madness” (2000, 415).
Male hysteria

Jean Santeuil promises the reader that it will be “une étude historique sur la société à la fin du xixe siècle” [an historical study of the last years of the nineteenth century] (JS, 426; JS English, 167). It has as both its theme and eponymous hero a nervous subject. At no point, however, is Jean’s “énervements prolongés” [prolonged nervous crisis] (JS, 205; JS English, 27) referred to in terms of neurasthenia. Neither is Jean as overtly concerned by the march of modernity as is Marcel. Rather, it is Jean’s father who is anxious about rail travel, and only then because his official position means that “Nul plus que lui n’était sollicité par les personnes ambitieuses de voyager seules en chemin de fer” [no one was more frequently asked to exert his influence for persons anxious to have reserved carriages on the railways] (JS, 212; JS English, 36). America is present in the novel but more in the form of financial chicanery than the all-pervading psychological upheavals of A la recherche. There is certainly no figure comparable to that of Albertine. Nor, for that matter, Morel.

As shown by Alison Winton in her research into Proust’s additions to his novel from 1914 onward, Morel’s inclusion in A la recherche, and his increasing importance, cannot be divorced from Proust’s inclination to include more specific references to neurasthenia than exist in Jean Santeuil. Similarly, the attention Proust paid to modernity and sexual repression as the root cause of deep-rooted anxieties. As Winton says, prior to Proust’s expansion of the novel, Morel, or Bobby Santois as the character was first called, “in as much as he had a character … was empty-headed, temperamentally unartistic … and coquettish: he was, in fact, a mediocre, even a simple, good-looking young man” (1977, 184–185). What Morel subsequently became was not only, as Proust explained, the “liaison” between Baudelaire’s Lesbos and his own Sodom and Gomorrah (CSB, 633; ASB, 302), but a focal point for the novel’s neurasthenic characters. If Marcel is the “innocent” eye through which the reader only gradually sees the shifting sands of sexuality and how it in turn shapes our perception of character, it is Morel to whom he is indebted. Morel is both the lover of Charlus (a relationship that counterpoints that of Marcel and Albertine) and Saint-Loup (his affair with whom provides the means by which Saint-Loup is finally “outed”). There is also some indication that he has slept with Albertine in the course of first seducing and then handing over to her a succession of young girls (2056; V:564). This Marcel learns while himself engaged in a semi-carnal relationship (“demi-relations charnelles”)
with Andrée which provides him with the only “hard evidence” he has as to the facts of Albertine’s lesbianism. Morel, then, becomes a kind of trigonometric point for the sexual lives of the novel’s various decadents and neurasthenics. He also makes visible the novel’s male hysteria. This is literally so in Le Temps retrouvé, where he is implicitly compared to Charcot’s female patients at Salpêtrière (2133; VI:6). He also provides Marcel with an alter ego that counters the earlier influence of Swann. It is surely no coincidence that Morel shares a Christian name with Charles Swann (an echo of which we find in “Charlus”), nor that his surname is strikingly similar to the Narrator’s own Christian name – Marcel. Indeed, we can easily imagine “Morel” being misread as “Marcel” in precisely the same way as “Albertine” becomes “Gilberte.”

As with Albertine, Morel’s increased significance to the structure and thematic material of A la recherche tells us that neurasthenia and its development as American Nervousness became as important to Proust as mémoire involontaire. If involuntary memory provides Marcel with the content of his future novel, the Muse who inspires him is Albertine. Part lubricious fury, part vulcanized “It” girl, she represents the spirit of modernity: the troubling and ultimately unfathomable sense that who we are, and what we would make of ourselves, lies in a complex of guilts and omissions, historical circumstances and cultural influences experienced by those of Proust’s generation as recognizable but impenetrable. Albertine stands from the outset as a fleeting figure of speed and sexual ambiguity. She enlivens and petrifies. She is Marcel’s apprehension of the heart of sexual darkness, representing both those “primitive” influences that contributed to some of Modernity’s greatest achievements in the field of art: Le sacre du printemps (1913), with its depiction in music and dance of the sacrifice of a young woman, or the prostitutes of Picasso’s Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (1907), with their faces set in mask-like gestures of sexual provocation. Similarly she stands for aspects of the modern that are to do with mass-production, hence Marcel’s impulse to demodernize her by dressing her in the exclusive and anachronistic designs of Fortuny rather than the gender-bending fashions of the day. Above all, she locates the novel in the urban. For as Walter Benjamin recognized, Albertine is “the object of a love which only a city dweller experiences.” Benjamin associates Albertine with Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd,” a story that, like American Nervousness, reveals “aspects of social forces of such power and hidden depth that we may include them among the only ones that are capable of exerting both a subtle and profound effect upon artistic production”
Proust, meanwhile, has Albertine emerge from the Balbec twilight as though she were Mephistopheles surprising Faust. She is, the Narrator says, “comme une simple objectivation irréelle et diabolique du tempérament oppose au mien, de la vitalité quasi barbare et cruelle dont était si dépourvue ma faiblesse” [the simple objectification, unreal and diabolical, of the temperament opposite to my own, of the almost barbaric and cruel vitality ... which I lacked] (671; II.433). The significance of this description is that Marcel has just been looking at Elstir’s painting of the fictional Carquethuit, a picture that re-imagines the Brittany coast as the “curious” and “savage” Florida coastline. This association of an “unreal” and “diabolical” Albertine with a “curieux,” and “extrêmement sauvage” America prepares us for the wider influence of Poe on A la recherche.