Chapter Two

No Such Things as Homosexuals: Marcel Proust and ‘La race maudite’

“The most important perversion, homosexuality, hardly deserves the name.”
– Sigmund Freud

“… what is sometimes, most ineptly, termed homosexuality.”
– Marcel Proust

Although Marcel Proust (1871–1922) never published a pseudo-scientific tract on homosexuality, as such, there is sufficient evidence to support the claim that the opening pages of the volume of Sodome et Gomorrhe – that section generally referred to as ‘La race maudite’. Several writers, including the biographer George Painter, have argued that the first chapter of Sodome et Gomorrhe, as well as the chapter in Contre Sainte-Beuve entitled ‘La race maudite’, are examples of Proust ‘recasting material originally intended for publication as a non-fiction essay’ (J.E. Rivers, Proust and the Art of Love, Columbia University Press, 1980, 153). Philip Thody groups it with several other long passages in the novel “which could without much difficulty have been published in essay form” (Marcel Proust, MacMillan, 1987, 71–2), albeit, in his view, “a kind of detachable essay in autobiographical guilt.” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has called it “a thicket of pseudo-scientific self-contradiction” (‘Tales of the Avunculate’, in Tendencies, Routledge, 1994, 59), whilst Leo Bersani dispraises it for its “banal thematization […] at once sentimental and reductive” (The Culture of Redemption: Marcel Proust and Melanie Klein, Critical Inquiry 12.2 [Winter 1986], 416). In an early study of Proust, one critic suggests it “should have been entirely cut out” (F.C. Green, The Mind of Proust, Cambridge University Press, 1949, 187). We are clearly walking in a minefield here.
to as ‘La race maudite’ – started life as a non-fictional essay, later inserted into the wider fictional structure of Proust’s long novel, *A la recherche du temps perdu*. I shall take as axiomatic this claim that ‘La race maudite’ began as a non-fictional essay and approach it as such, with a full understanding of the problematics this involves, and despite the fact that the fictional trajectories of some of the homosexual characters from Proust’s novel stand in complete contradiction to the ideas about homosexuality expounded in this essay. Indeed, I would argue that this essay capitulates to the medical status quo in a way which significantly contains and defuses any transgressive potential found elsewhere in the novel. Moreover, these few pages most probably serve to consolidate a power the novel in its entirety may wish to call into question.

Unlike most literary criticism which has focused on aspects of homosexuality in Proust’s novel, I shall not be addressing the issue of Proust’s transposition of the sexes, nor his treatment and representation of specific homosexual characters. Instead, with explicit reference to metaphor and language, I will dissect this long disquisition on the ‘men–women of Sodom’, in an attempt to delineate the ground being staked out by this reverse discourse. Does Proust’s ‘essay’ signal a slippage between the medical and the literary in ways apposite to this book? Is it reverse discourse or camouflage? How is it that a homosexual man could reject the concept of homosexuality? What does it tell us about the nature of discourse, the subtle modes of its articulation, the limits of its meanings, and the politics of its use within the hegemonic order? Doesn’t it suggest an inequality embedded in the very definition of homosexuality?

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3 See, for example, Justin O’Brien, ‘Albertine the Ambiguous: Notes on Proust’s Transposition of the Sexes’, *PMLA* 64 (1949), 933–52.
Marcel the Ambiguous

Gide called Proust “the great master of dissimulation”, accusing him of “camouflage” and calling *Sodom and Gommorrah* “this offence against truth.” Proust told Gide that one can write about anything so long as one never uses ‘I’; a tactic Gide, of course, thought unsuitable. Gide, as stated in chapter one, disclaimed Proust’s use of the Third Sex model, and Andre Maurois suggests we contrast Proust’s book with Gide’s to gain a fuller picture of inversion, the two documents complementing one another.

Whereas Gide insisted on being open about his proclivities, Proust preferred to maintain an ambiguity around his. An interesting notion which Proust never actually incorporated into his novel reads:

An author who writes about homosexuals with fairness owes it to himself never to share their pleasures, even if he considers them blameless. He is like a defrocked priest who once he has convinced people how absurd it is to impose celibacy upon the clergy, must remain chaste, so that he is not suspected of having been led into an indulgent moral position by personal interest rather than by love of the truth.

We know from biographical data that Proust did “share their pleasures”, so his disingenuity is telling. He clearly believed an openly homosexual writer to be the last person qualified to write fairly or truthfully about homosexuality, precisely because of their “personal interest”. For this reason he made his narrator, Marcel, heterosexual, transposed the gender of his own lovers, and kept quiet about his homosexuality, making “love of the truth” his guiding light. Yet how far is such disingenuity compatible with a love of the truth?

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Moreover, can we blame Proust for taking such a stand? David Halperin, writing in relation to the posthumous disclosure of Foucault’s sadomasochistic activities and the ways in which this was used to discredit Foucault’s position as an intellectual, justifies Proust’s sentiments when he says: “to speak as a gay man about a topic that directly implicates one’s own interests is already to surrender a sizable share of one’s claims to be heard, listened to, and taken seriously.”8 In this light, it is easy to understand why Proust shied away from public disclosure; it would have instantly disqualified his writing in the eyes of a homophobic culture, as well as closing off invaluable sources of research essential for his novel. Indeed, much of the admiration and respect he received for his ‘scientific and objective approach’ was precisely because he was not known to be homosexual,9 while much of the criticism of Corydon was precisely because Gide was known to be.

It’s shocking to reflect that these procedures of objectification and subjection through which homophobic discourse works were no less dangerous for Foucault than for Proust and Gide over half a century earlier. It’s still impossible in our culture for homosexuals to wrestle from the heterosexual hegemony the authority and right to the truth of their condition. The ‘reality’ of homosexuality is never the property of homosexuals themselves, but a cultural construction under whose reign they serve: in short, a discourse. Paradoxically – and nonsensically – one’s contribution to this discourse is invalidated by one’s involvement in it. As Halperin comments, “Anyone against whom biographical description can be so deployed in the first

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8 Halperin, Saint Foucault, 138. It’s disheartening to think that this is still the case.
9 Most critics praised Proust’s treatment of inversion, and his psychological insight into the subject. Edmond Jaloux’s response in Le Bulletin de la maison du livres français, 22 April 1922, is not untypical: “Several of his observations will obviously find a place among scientific studies, on the same footing as laboratory experiments” (cited in Leighton Hodson [ed.], Marcel Proust and the Critical Heritage, 149). Gide, however, was seen as having too vested an interest in the topic: “Proust has done more for the toleration of the outcast group than did Gide, who was a confessed member himself. A confession like Gide’s arouses emotions, while a reasonable and sympathetic analysis like Proust’s appeals to the heart through the intellect” (Milton Hindus, The Proustian Vision, Columbia University Press, 1954, 242).
place already lacks the requisite cultural authority to frustrate its deployment” (*SF*, 137).

Sexuality and the claims on it are an issue of private and public knowledge – who knows and what they do with such knowledge,\(^\text{10}\) as well as know how much knowledge is acquired and circulated. The sustaining mechanism of such knowledge is discourse, and by it the category of the human sciences referred to by ‘sexuality’ obtains its meanings. The tension between Gide’s position and that of Proust dramatizes the impossibility of homosexuals to speak for and about themselves in a homophobic culture. It also emphasizes what was at stake in reversing the discourse which subjugated homosexuals as objects of analysis and disavowed their existence as speaking subjects, whilst at the same time extracting their confessions to activate that objectification.

The initial concept of an outlet for Proust’s views on homosexuality metamorphosed over a period of years from its humble beginnings as an idea for a magazine article into a short story\(^\text{11}\) (which didn’t appear in print until 1954) and finally into the opening chapter of one volume of a long novel, each manoeuvre further replacing any implied subjectivity with authorial and artistic objectivity. The ‘knowing I’ was not to be confused with the morally suspect ‘knowledgeable I’. Any knowledge about homosexuality was to be seen as coming from observation rather than first-hand experience. Perhaps for this reason Proust adopted the most scientifically validated trope of same-sex desire: the Third Sex.

Proust believed that what he had to say was both original and psychologically true. In a letter to Gide he states that in the character of Charlus he “tried to portray the homosexual in love with virility because he is a Woman without realizing it […] I by no means claim this to be the only type of homosexual. But

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it is a very interesting kind and one which, I believe, has never been described.”

Never described in literature before, perhaps, but medical discourse had been deploying such ideas for several decades; ideas which had their origins in the pseudo-scientific, quasi-literary writings of a man who lacked any formal training in the natural sciences or medicine, and whose political programme was emancipatory: Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825–1895).13

**Bodies That Natter**

In a questionnaire Proust completed at the age of fifteen, he gave as “the quality I want to see in a man” as “Feminine charm”, whilst his favourite quality in a woman was given as “the virtues of a man,”14 testifying to a strong (and precocious) intellectual interest in androgyny, or trans-gender behaviour, a desire to subvert or challenge traditional gender values. The adult Proust remained intrigued by reversals of gender roles, and his novel contains numerous examples of ‘masculine’ women and ‘feminine’ men.15

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that he advocates in ‘La race maudite’ the popular scientific explanation of homosexuality as represented by the term third sex. Indeed, an early title for the essay was ‘La race des tantes’ (‘The Race of Queens’). Barrère’s *Argot and Slang Dictionary* (1889) gives ‘queen’ as a translation of the French word ‘tante’ (lit. ‘aunt’), which we are told denotes a ‘passive sodomist.’16 In this fragment from Proust’s unpublished notebooks he indicates what he saw as the signifying potency of the word *tante*:

12 Ibid., 2.374. Emphasis added. Interestingly, Gide was beginning work on *Corydon* around the same time.
This word would be particularly appropriate to the purpose of my book in which the characters to whom it is applicable, being almost all old and worldly, appear for the most part, in social gatherings where they strut and chatter, magnificently dressed and widely ridiculed. The *aunts*! The mere word conveys to us a vision of their solemnity and their get-up. The mere word wears skirts and brings to the eye a picture of the aunts pluming themselves in that fashionable setting, and twittering like birds in all the strangeness of a different species.  

While he denied that this was “the only type of homosexual,” it is the only type with which he wants to deal. Proust is completely enamoured with the richly evocative powers of the word as a signifier for the homosexual man, but his enthusiasm belies his phobic intentions. In a letter to Gide, Proust gleefully relishes the idea that, in Gide’s novel *Les caves du Vatican*, all Lafcadio’s uncles are really aunts. He wants the metaphor to stand as a synonym for a secret, shared knowledge.  

Every last drop of misogyny implicit in this image of twittering, vain, and, perhaps most significantly, sexless womanhood could be seen to be imported into the usage of such a resonant phrase to describe a certain male homosexual, except that great affection is displayed for Marcel’s real aunts throughout *A la recherche*. Proust clearly didn’t consider *tante* to be a term of abuse or insult, but rather, a term of affection, even a compliment. As Sedgwick has pointed out, rather than having an inevitable and indisputable link with passive sodomy, the performance of actual, specific sexual behaviours is effectively excised from such an epithet, which can be applied to “any man who displays a queenly demeanor, whatever he may do with other men in bed.” Tantes are merely bodies that natter, nothing more, their behaviour indicative of a femininity not contingent on sexual activity (or, rather, passivity). “Furthermore”, Sedgwick writes:

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19 Ibid., 3.248.
‘aunt’, used about a man, alludes to a gender-transitive persona which, however, it doesn’t particularly pretend to stabilize in the dyadic terms of gender inversion: the ‘aunt’ usage long predates and surely influences, but is not adequated by, the rationalized discursive production of the invert.\(^\text{20}\)

In other words, queens/tantes were calling each other queens/tantes long before science discursively constructed the homosexual along an axis of effeminacy, or queeniness, suggesting that what science succeeded in doing, to enormous and far-reaching effect, was to establish such behaviour as an essential, identity-fixing denominator in the formation of a gender-inverted body, rather than allowing it to exist as a potent and direct challenge to normativizing concepts of gender stability. This belief in the homosexual’s innate femininity led Proust to prefer the term ‘inversion’ to ‘homosexuality’.\(^\text{21}\)

**What’s in a Name?**

Compagnon sees Proust’s rejection of the term homosexuality as a shift away from the medical establishment,\(^\text{22}\) despite the fact that he used instead the term inversion which was the more popular term in France at that time. Yet Proust’s preference for the term invert derives from its association with femininity, and has nothing to do with distancing himself from the medical establishment. Indeed, the word invert stems from sexual invers-


\(^{21}\) Compagnon claims that Proust’s most radical contribution to the scientific discourse on homosexuality is his insistence on the hereditary transference of femininity in cases of inversion from female relatives to their male homosexual offspring. There is no elaboration of the exact radicalness of this doctrine, which appears to be a straightforward adoption of Ulrichs’ ideas. Compagnon, *Proust*, 247. Proust powerfully evokes the Degeneration theories so popular in the 1890s. Indeed, despite Pierre-Quint’s claim that Proust’s account is more contemporary than Gide’s (see Eva Ahlstedt, *André Gide et le débat sur l’homosexualité*, Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1994, 74), it would be more accurate to say, as Compagnon does, that “Proust’s notions belong to the end of the nineteenth century and are anachronism by the time the novel is published” (Compagnon, *Proust*, 241). It’s worth remembering here that the encounter between Charlus and Jupien occurs, within, the chronology of the novel, in 1899, and is therefore not contemporaneous with its publication in 1921, but with the medical theories articulated within Proust’s ‘essay’.

\(^{22}\) Compagnon, *Proust*, 246.
sion, a term coined by Westphal, and could therefore be said to have much more scientific association than ‘homosexual’, which was coined by a novelist, Benkert.

Proust makes a clear distinction between the two words:

Indeed, there is a slight difference. Homosexuals take great pride in not being invertes. According to the theory I am sketching out here – however fragmentary it might be – there are in fact no such things as homosexuals. However masculine the appearance of a fairy might be, his feelings of attraction to virile men come from an underlying femininity, although it may be hidden. If this is true, a homosexual is what an invert claims to be, what an invert believes himself in all good faith to be.\textsuperscript{23}

There are no such things as homosexuals. There is no such thing as a desire for the same because the homosexual’s desire for other men stems from an ‘underlying femininity’, which, however much he tries to hide it, is always there, threatening to break out, the motor behind his desire.

The reasons for Proust’s dissatisfaction with the term homosexual and preference for invert may be clarified somewhat if we consider that the two terms were by no means interchangeable in late nineteenth century discourse; far from being synonyms, as pointed out in recent work by Chauncey, Halperin and Sedgwick. While homosexuality merely pinpointed same-sex activity, sexual inversion implied a reversal of gender roles, and was therefore much more appealing to Proust for describing his hommes–femmes.\textsuperscript{24} The sexual unions envisaged by Proust between an invert and a virile man are, for him, clearly not examples of homosexuality, a term he describes as “inept” (SG, 8). By constructing a psychic matrix in which feminine men desire masculine men, he is reinstating a fundamental heterosexuality to these acts between people of the same anatomical sex. For

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{24} For a brief outline of these differences and their historical implications see Segwick, Epistemology of the Closet, 157–59.
him the homosexual is always an invert and therefore always in a very real sense a woman. He claims, furthermore, that it is the invert’s innate femininity that causes the homosexual man to idealize and desire manliness (SG, 17).

Proust maintains that homosexuals are invested with “the physical and moral characteristics of a race, sometimes beautiful, often hideous” (SG, 19). The deployment of such value-laden adjectives as ‘beautiful’ and ‘hideous’ threatens to disintegrate the notion of scientific objectivity the text strives to maintain. We are told that homosexuals resemble other (i.e. real) men “in appearance only” (SG, 17), suggesting that it is the interior, the soul, that is the seat of this femininity from which his desire for men emanates, placing Proust’s views in line with those of Ulrichs.

But, as with Ulrichs, a major, irreconcilable contradiction arises from this theory. For if homosexual men bear “the physiognomy of a nation”, if they quite literally constitute a separate sex, race, or species with its own set of characteristics, how can they simultaneously resemble other men? Proust has trapped himself between what Sedgwick has termed the minoritizing and universalizing views of same-sex desire. The former regards homosexuality as “an issue of active importance primarily for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority”, whilst the latter sees it as “an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities”.25

According to Proust, the majority of homosexuals shun one another to avoid detection, concealing and denying that they belong to a race “the name of which is the vilest of insults” (SG, 19). “They hate and pour scorn on others of their race, and never go near them” (SG, 167). In each other they merely inspire “the chagrin of discovering in their own bosoms the warning that the thing they believe to be a natural love is a sickly madness – as well as that womanliness which offends them” (SB, 161) That

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25 Ibid., t. Proust is clearly unaware of this contradictory aspect of his theory, for he rigidly maintains through his essay these antithetical ideas of homosexual men as a third sex and homosexual behaviour as something which can go undetected for years.
womanliness is described in the most phobic way by Proust, for whom, in tantes,

The woman is almost half-declared. Her breasts emerge from them, they seize every opportunity of fancy dress to show them off, they are as fond of dancing and dress and cosmetics as girls are, and at the most sedate gatherings break into giggling fits, or start singing. (SB, 165)

It is difficult to take such writing seriously now that this stereotype has been deconstructed and seen for what it is. But it exemplifies the way in which a particular trope conveyed discursive meaning at a time when homosexuality had little political visibility. The field of visibility was dominated by this trope and its power to signify the cultural concept of homosexuality far outweighed its bearing on reality, which leads us to ask not simply how this trope came to dominate the visual field, but also why? The cultural significance and political function of the third sex trope is suggested by one line in ‘La race maudite’ – a line taken from a poem by Vigny: “The two sexes shall die, each in a place apart!” (SG, 18). This explicit reference to the polarization of the two sexes within a discourse on the third sex foregrounds sexual dimorphism whilst at the same time creating a discursive space outside of it for the existence of a third sex as an ‘excluded middle’. Whilst this third sex is contingent upon the existence of the other two, it acts not as a bridge between them but as a wall, reinforcing the polarities in social roles and sexual behaviours. As Trumbach has argued, “in the majority of human beings, only women [desire] men. The condition of the effeminate sodomite emphasized that most men did not”. The third sex, therefore, functioned as a scapegoat for what Sedgwick calls homosexual panic in a culture that disavowed the existence of an amorphous, non-object specific human sexuality. It made available

27 On homosexual panic see Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet, 19–20; 182–7; and Between Men, 83–96.
a visible, discursively inscribed portrait of the kind of man who desired other men, with the result that men who wished to avoid the social stigma attached to such behaviour need only avoid appearing to belong to such a minority by avoiding any form of effeminacy. It was a policing of gender identity much more than it was a policing of sexual activity. Trumbach writes: “Human biology was now supposed to be so structured that the majority of persons did not know what it was like to desire persons of the same gender.”28 And the minority who did know were just that: a minority, a race apart, a third sex whose function was to ensure the maintenance of a dyadic gender system; a socially marginalized but culturally central imago of the homosexual male: what Jeffrey Weeks describes as a labeling process “of the most explicit kind, drawing an impassable border between acceptable and abhorrent behaviour”.29

Hideous Visibilities
With enormous subtlety and finesse, Proust’s narrator slips in the occasional line which undermines the dominant theme of disgust and disease which dominates the text. For example, homosexuals are described as “a reprobate section of the human collectivity but an important one” (SG, 20, emphasis added). In what way important? Could Proust be hinting at what Lynn Segal explicitly pinpoints when she writes that “the maintenance and stability of contemporary heterosexual masculinity is deeply dependent upon its distance from, and obsessive denunciation of, an opposing category – that of the homosexual”?30

This distance is achieved by constructing the homosexual as a race apart, a race so distinct from so-called normal men that there can be no confusion between the two. The denunciation Segal mentions is articulated, primarily, through violence, both discursive and physical. Within the terms of this double bind, homosexual man is an oxymoron, a contradiction. The

28 Trumbach, ‘Gender and the Homosexual Role in Modern Western Culture’, 161.
29 Jeffrey Weeks, Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present, Quartet, 1977, 21.
30 Lynn Segal, Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities Changing Men, Virago, 1990, 137.
constitution in our culture of desire, sexuality and gender along separate axes of interpretation allows for a crossing-point where we might locate the figure of the Third Sex. Marjorie Garber acknowledges the disruptive potential of a third term to the fixity of binary thought:

The ‘third’ is that which questions binary thinking and introduces a crisis […]. But what is crucial here – and I can hardly underscore this strongly enough – is that the ‘third term’ is not a term. Much less is it a sex, certainly not an instantiated ‘blurred’ sex as signified by a term like ‘androgyne’ or ‘hermaphrodite’, although these words have culturally specific significance at certain historical moments. The ‘third’ is a mode of articulation, a way of describing a space of possibility.31

Garber refutes the notion of a third sex because it’s too easy and fails to disrupt the primacy of the other two sexes. For her the third term is “something that challenges the possibility of harmonious and stable binary symmetry”. Within the Western gender system, however, the male/female binary is hardly one of symmetry, but rather dissymmetry. Likewise, Proust refers to the ‘perfect symmetry’ between Jupien’s movements and those of Charlus (sg, 5), although, again, dissymmetry is more apparent. As Laqueur has shown, the two sex model is of relatively recent invention,32 and if women are the second sex, then homosexuals come in at third place, a warning against blurring the gender boundaries. The invention of homosexuality as representative of a third sex is contemporaneous with the implementation of the two sex model. Garber is right, there is no third sex, but there is a cultural third term in the field of sexuality and gender represented by homosexuality.

Through such gestures as ‘a hysterical spasm’, or ‘a shrill laugh’, the homosexual can be rendered ‘hideously visible’ (SG, 23), making him look “no more like the common run of men than those apes with melancholy ringed eyes and prehensile feet who dress up in dinner-jackets and black ties” (SG, 23). For Proust, the effeminate homosexual is quite explicitly presented as a figure of fun, a ridiculous creature who, by virtue of being so visibly homosexual, is perceived by his (non-effeminate) fellow inverters as a “compromising associate”, and by society as an unacceptable threat to the maintenance of stable gender roles, even as it shores them up. In the Contre Saint-Beuve version, effeminate homosexuals are described as the “dregs of their race, the braceleted sect”, from whom non-effeminate homosexuals recoil as if from “some intolerable stink” (SB, 168). Strong words of disgust. Quite clearly, it is not sexual acts so much as gender performances that are being subjected to such heavy policing.

The ape simile provides, however paradoxically, a useful example of gender as performative, masculinity as an aping – and reinscription – of certain gestures associated with the socially constructed figure of that gendered category: man. Rather than being the natural expression of an innate and fixed gender core, these gestures generate the very identity from which they are understood to originate. As Judith Butler writes, “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results”.

Likewise, Proust seems to be saying that masculine and feminine behaviours are not so much the inevitable results of a pre-social or ‘natural’ sexual identity, but rather the socially contingent marks of gender. Effeminacy is the signifier

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33 Butler, Gender Trouble, 25.
34 This seems to me a much more satisfactory explanation of Proust’s fascination with androgyny than that offered by Rivers, who resorts to Aristophanes’ tale in the Symposium of an origin human race consisting of three forms: male–female, male–male, and female–female. Since Zeus split them down the middle to weaken them, they have forever been in search of their original ‘other half’; hence heterosexuality, homosexuality and lesbianism. Rivers writes, “Sodom corresponds to Aristophanes’ divided and dispersed male body, and Gomorrah to Aristophanes’ divided and dispersed female body. And love, in both accounts, is an attempt to reunify what once was whole” (Riv-
of the ‘woman within’, only ever connoting a (passive) homosexual identity. In this way, homosexuality itself emerges as a third gender, a performative category construed as the consequence of a core femininity while in truth being “constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.” Butler’s analysis offers an insight into the workings of the third sex/inversion trope which has haunted same-sex desire for over a century. An identity, an essence, an interiority has been constructed as the foundation for and cause of particular sexual expressions, when in fact the identity is constructed by those particular sexual acts, not \textit{vice versa}. There are only homosexual acts. The surface has been read as depth, when in fact it is only surface. Proust foregrounds the aesthetics of homosexual behaviour, placing great emphasis on the surface, on what is visible, even if he reads this surface as indicative of a depth characterized by an innate femininity. Through analogies with the virtual impossibility of fertilization in certain botanical species, the narrator establishes a strong link between homosexual congress and the procreative imperative in nature.\footnote{In the 1909 version in \textit{Contre Saint-Beuve}, Proust argues that, societal persecution notwithstanding, homosexuals would face enormous difficulties finding partners due to their scarcity (\textit{SB}, 164). This contradicts the later version, in which he claims “these exceptional creatures with whom we commiserate are a vast crowd […] and commiserate themselves for being too many rather than too few” (\textit{SG}, 36).}

\textit{It Takes One to Know One}

Nature plays a complex and curious role in Proust’s theory. A lacunae in the 1909 version is filled by its translator, Sylvia Townsend Warner, with an evocative phrase which echoes Krafft-Ebing, who described the homosexual as “the stepchild of Nature.” Proust calls the homosexual “this being towards whom nature was so [and here Warner inserts: step-motherly]” (\textit{SB}, 164). Warner offers no explanation for this very plausible choice of adjective to describe the relationship between homo-

\footnote{Mario Miele, \textit{Homosexuality and Liberation: Elements of a Gay Critique} [1977], trans. David Fernbach, GMP, 1980, 31. Miele maintains that homosexuality and femininity are linked.}
sexuality and nature. Yet, as with Krafft-Ebing’s phrase, this explicitly places the homosexual outside the traditional zone of nature – not nature’s direct offspring – whilst at the same time acknowledging a tortuous and indirect lineage between the two. Mother Nature is usurped by Step-mother Nature and the progenitive link is displaced.

Culturally, the figure of the stepmother is characterized by cruelty and sadism, as in the fairytale of Cinderella. But Proust’s nature would seem to be both “fiendish and beneficent” (SG, 53), playing the trick of inversion whilst at the same time furnishing the invert with a sixth sense enabling him to recognize those beings with whom he can achieve union, as witnessed in the pick-up between Charlus and Jupien. In other words, it takes one to know one.

Proust’s narrator, Marcel, credits homosexuality with beauty and harmony and importance. Proust’s fascination with sexual duality directs him to examples of hermaphroditism in natural history. What the hermaphroditic organism is in the animal kingdom, the third sex is in humans. When he talks of an “initial hermaphroditism of which certain rudiments of male organs in the anatomy of women and female organs in that of men seem still to preserve a trace”, it is a biological rather than a mythological originality to which he is referring: an originality that predates “the age of Greece” (SG, 34–35). Any resistance to the sickness model must be located here, where his usage of words such as “miracle”, “marvelous”, “beauty” and “harmony”

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37 This contrasts strongly with the figure of the aunt, which is maternal and caring. Both, however, are symbolically childless, or at least signify a non-procreative relation.

38 Whilst nature clearly provides signs and ways of reading them, Proust also sites examples of groups of homosexual men socializing in a café and casting yearning glances at the young ‘lions’ at a neighbouring table, only to discover years later, by which time the young men have become stout and grizzled Charluses, that they too were homosexual, but with a different set of codes, “other external symbols” (SG, 22) unrecognizable by those from another clique. What’s interesting here is the juxtaposition of nature and culture. The homosexual, whom one would imagine possessed of experiential knowledge of the superficiality of ‘true nature’, is seen here accepting the behaviour of others as indicative of an essential self: the young men’s bragging about mistresses is taken at face value, when we have already been told that nature has ways of rendering homosexuals recognizable to one another. Nature is here duped by culture. Proust seems to be enjoying contradicting the commonism of ‘it takes one to know one’ which he has already established as in some sense true.
(SG, 32–3) encourages the reader to alter their perception of this accursed race; where, despite its inevitable sterility, sex between men is seen as having its place within nature rather than outside it; a place the importance of which is only discernable once instinctive aversion has been cast aside:

When I followed my instinct only, the jellyfish used to revolt me at Balbec; but if I had the eyes to regard them, like Michelet, from the standpoint of natural history and aesthetics, I saw an exquisite blue girandole. (SG, 31)

The narrator seems to be suggesting a radical conjoining of natural history with aesthetics when viewing homosexuality too; only then can the true significance and exquisite natural beauty of such a phenomenon be appreciated. Aesthetics, arts-for-arts’-sake, would not only remove the need for moral judgement, but would in fact suggest a positive amorality. If nature provides invertsw with the propensitv to seek out sexual partners, we must therefore acknowledge their rightful place in the natural order: a conjunction the miraculous possibility of which is as providential as the bee (“a very rare insect”) fertilizing the orchid (“a captive flower”). But more than this, we must eradicate moral judgement and observe from a purely aesthetic perspective if we are to proceed beyond an initial (and, he suggests are, inevitable) revulsion. This is a radical insertion of the aesthetic into the naturalistic, and, like Wilde before him, Proust would seem to favour the aesthetic over the naturalistic as a standpoint from which to view any action or behaviour. Unlike Gide, who saw the haphazardness of nature as occasioning same-sex behaviour almost as a by-product of the pursuit of pleasure, Proust sees a very precise order to nature; an order which facilitates the satisfaction of homosexual desire by something he considers nothing short of a miracle. But a miracle the very occurrence of which signals a biological intention.

The pick-up between Jupien and Charlus, for example, is described as “not, however, positively comic, it was stamped with a strangeness, or if you like a naturalness, the beauty of which
steadily increased” (SG, 5). Not only does this foreground the ocular, the aesthetics of the scene, but, as Sedgwick points out, it equates strangeness with naturalness. Moreover,

To let l’étrangeté equal le naturel […] is not simply to equate opposites but to collapse a domino chain of pairings, each with its different, historical gay involvements: natural/un-natural, natural/artifical, habitual/de-familiarized, common/rare, native/foreign.39

For the strange to be natural, or the natural to be strange, is to confuse existing categories and the ways in which we make sense of the world. This inversion of meanings is Proust’s biggest challenge to taxonomics, for, much more than Gide’s polemics, it stakes out a place in nature for the strange and a beauty for those things commonly perceived as hideous. He avoids the question of morality by addressing the question of aesthetics, a field in which the strange and natural beauty of homosexuality has a value.

The Symbolic Behind

Despite his emphasis on the beauty of homosexuality, Proust was well aware that Sodome & Gomorrhe would offend homosexuals with its negative insistence on sickness and effeminacy, but he seemed unconcerned. In a letter to Natalie Barney, he states almost proudly: “My sodomites are all horrible.”40 According to Gide, Proust confessed to having put all the “attractive, affectionate and charming elements contained in his homosexual recollections” into the heterosexual characters of his novel, a move which left him only the “grotesque and the abject” for the homosexual ones.41 This suggests a deliberate decision to avoid any attractive representation of same-sex relationships, a conscious refusal to challenge the dominant fiction. Certainly,

39 Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet, 229.
41 Gide, Journals, 2.267
“Proust knew personally some of the men who developed the idea that homosexuality was a congenital pathology.”\textsuperscript{42} Could this explain why he preferred the sickness model? As Rivers states, “The idea of a guilt-free, nonpathological homosexuality was available to Proust, had he chosen to take advantage of it.”\textsuperscript{43} But the fact is, he didn’t. Perhaps his own ill-health predisposed him to find in the sickness model a sense of self-justification, rendering the figure of the homosexual as sick and psychologically crippled actually attractive to him. Gide suggests this: “What we consider vile, an object of laughter and disgust, does not seem so repulsive to [Proust].”\textsuperscript{44} Or was he augmenting a political programme which can be subsequently traced through writers such as Genet and Dennis Cooper to the recent celebration of perversity under the banner of Queer? What we might call celebrating abjection. This would certainly allow us to map the disparity between Gide and Proust onto the current antagonism between the old school gay movement and the nascent queer movement. Gide’s insistence on the naturalness of homo-love contradicts Proust’s avowal and celebration of its perversity in much the same way. Proust was clearly seduced by the notion of sickness abetting genius and raised his own suffering to the level of martyrdom. Towards the end of his life, as he worked on the novel despite doctor’s warnings to rest, he seems to be actively seeking death through the redemption of his art.\textsuperscript{45} There is a definite sense in him of how death drives life.\textsuperscript{46}

Throughout his childhood and early adulthood, illness had been a mode of communication between Proust and his mother, a way of wrestling her affections away from his brother. As an older man, as he battled for breath to correct galley proofs, there is a strong sense that not simply illness, but creative genius through illness, has become the dying writer’s \textit{raison d’être}. Given Proust’s belief in the creative potential, even superiority, of ill-

\textsuperscript{43} Rivers, \textit{Proust and the Art of Love}, 166.
\textsuperscript{44} Gide, \textit{Journals}, 2.216.
\textsuperscript{45} See Leo Bersani, \textit{The Culture of Redemption}, Harvard University Press, 1990.
ness, it was perhaps inevitable that he would reject the notion of healthy uranism promoted by Gide. For Proust, the taint of femininity was one that discoloured all members of the accursed race, whereas for Gide there was some hope in those who had managed to avoid such a taint. In Proust’s model, therefore, there is no such thing as homosexuality, only inversion, the result of an atavistic femininity which positioned male homosexuals in a feminine paradigm; indeed, made of them (symbolic) women.

Silverman’s reading of the femininity trope in Proust as a challenge to phallic primacy is enacted through seeing the primary erotic modality in the novel as lesbianism. Certainly, there is a strong sense in which the Phallus loses importance in the Proustian libidinal economy. But this is achieved mainly through a symbolic castration of the invert: “the unconscious visible woman in him seeks the masculine organ” (SG, 25). There is never any sense of a male desire for a male. Even an invert “so enamoured of, who so prided himself upon, his virility, to whom all other men seemed odiously effeminate” such as Charlus is a woman (SG, 4), because in Proust’s world it is desire for men which feminizes. Even if Charlus plays the ‘male’ role with Jupien, such positionality is no antidote against an all-pervasive feminization. For if desire is lack and you desire men, then maleness must be what you lack, and having sex with other men is a ceaselessly repetitive quest to acquire it, whether you are a top or a bottom.

Whether Charlus is a top with all his partners we don’t know, obviously, but his backside is certainly a salient feature and crude synecdoche throughout the novel. Jupien comments: “What a big bum you have!” (SG, 11), whilst elsewhere he is described as having an “almost symbolic behind” (SG, 890). For the homosexual, the behind will always be symbolic, in a way, as a site of both pleasure and anxiety, whether he takes pleasure there or not, because the assumption will always be that he does. When Marcel overhears Jupien and Charlus having anal sex, he thinks that a murder is taking place, and concludes “that there is

another thing as noisy as pain, namely pleasure, especially when there is added to it – in the absence of fear of pregnancy which could not be the case here… – an immediate concern about cleanliness” (SG, 10).

This concern with cleanliness is something about which Freud also wrote: “The excremental is all too intimately and inseparably bound up with the sexual; the position of the genitals – inter urinas et faeces – remains the decisive and unchangeable factor.” 48 In Three Essays on Sexuality, however, he dismisses this disgust as purely conventional:

I hope I shall not be accused of partisanship when I assert that people who try to account for this disgust by saying that the organ in question serves the function of excretion and comes in contact with excrement […] are not much more to the point than hysterical girls who account for their disgust at the male genital by saying that it serves to void urine. 49

The reference to hysterical girls makes us wince, but for the rest, it’s almost revolutionary. Interesting, too, how Freud is concerned, like Proust, not to be seen as sharing the pleasures referred to. Scientific knowledge must be based on observation alone, not participation (see chapter four).

More recently, Richard Davenport-Hines has written about the added anxiety over anal sex since AIDS, and the way in which the virus is presented in the media as punishment on homosexuals for “abusing their arses”. He writes:

Objectively the discrimination between penises and rectums is nonsense; given the greater horror that shit commands over urine in our culture, the distinction is understandable;

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but nonsense is still nonsense, whether acculturated, atavistic or adopted as an excuse for journalistic bullying.\footnote{Richard Davenport-Hines, \textit{Sex, Death and Punishment: Attitudes to Sex and Sexuality in Britain Since the Renaissance}, Fontana Press, 1991, 336.}

Proust relates the fear of cleanliness conversely to a fear of pregnancy, suggesting that all sexual intercourse has its anxieties, just as pleasure is akin to pain. The anxieties for the passive homosexual are intimately linked with the threat of emasculation and feminization – a feminization culturally encoded into the act of receptivity itself. By insisting that such feminization is attached also to the active partner, Proust goes some way to deconstructing the violent hierarchy of the active/passive binarism; yet he does so at the risk of colluding with the dominant fiction which perceives homosexuality as always and necessarily opposed to what it means to be male. As such, Proust ultimately reinforces the normative scientific assumption that male homosexual desire is never anything other than an expression of an essential femininity, a belief which has been the basis of both homophobic and homosexual discourses in this century.