

Promiscuous Proust



The principal trait of my character: *The need to be loved and, to be more precise, the need to be caressed and spoiled even more than the need to be admired.*

Marcel Proust attended high school at the lycée Condorcet from 1882 to 1889. Among his “intimate circle” of classmates were an astonishing number of future writers. Daniel Halévy wrote biographies of Friedrich Nietzsche, Jules Michelet, and Sébastien Vauban; Louis de La Salle, who died young, published a volume of poetry and a novel; Robert Dreyfus became an important historian of the Third Republic. Two other high school friends, the poet Fernand Gregh and the playwright Robert de Flers, were elected to the Académie Française, an honor not bestowed upon Proust, whose belated achievement as a novelist was to eclipse those of his brilliant schoolmates.

Proust’s classmates did not always enjoy his company. His obvious literary gifts awed them, but his personality, especially his jealous need for their exclusive attention, often repulsed them. Jacques-Émile Blanche, who painted a famous oil portrait of Proust, recalls in his memoirs a mutual childhood friend who confided that whenever he played with the future writer, he was always “gripped with fear when I

felt Marcel seize my hand and declare to me his need for total and tyrannical possession.”¹ With the callousness common to adolescent boys, Proust’s classmates teased and snubbed their sensitive and clinging companion, curtly rejecting his offers of greater intimacy, thus wounding him deeply.

Daniel Halévy was a handsome, towheaded, freckle-faced boy with hazel eyes who, like Proust, came from a liberal, bourgeois Parisian family with a distinguished literary and musical pedigree. The two boys had a solid but difficult friendship. Halévy, who liked to be seen as domineering and tough, tormented the pining Marcel with his angry gestures and the ability to keep silent for days on end. In an interview many years later, Halévy recalled the “beastly” manner in which he and his friends treated Marcel: “He figured among us as a sort of archangel, disturbed and disturbing . . . with his great oriental eyes, his big white collar, his flying cravat. There was something about him we found unpleasant. . . . His kindnesses, his tender attentions, his caresses . . . we often labeled as mannerisms, poses, and we took occasion to tell him so to his face. . . . We were rough with him. The poor wretch!”²

In 1888, at age seventeen, brimming with literary ambition and adolescent lust, the poor wretch, impervious to earlier rebuffs, upped the ante and sent his classmates poems and letters celebrating love between boys and offering himself as an eager partner for sexual initiations. Marcel focused his attention on Halévy’s slightly younger cousin Jacques Bizet, son of the distinguished composer Georges Bizet. The elder Bizet had died in 1875, a few months after the première of *Carmen*, when Jacques was only three years old. Bizet’s widow, Geneviève, daughter of the renowned composer Fromenthal Halévy, later married the lawyer Émile Straus. Geneviève was to become Proust’s beloved Mme Straus, confidante and model for the wit of the duchesse de Guermantes in the novel. Although Bizet had inherited the Halévy family curse of mental illness, which led ultimately to drug addiction and suicide, none of this was yet apparent

in the bright, handsome, popular boy who loved the outdoors and hiking.

In a letter to Jacques, Marcel said that he needed reassurance of his friendship because of so many problems at home. Hoping to win sympathy and—above all—affection, Proust confided that his parents had threatened to send him far away to a boarding school in the provinces. He pleaded with Bizet to be his “reservoir,” the recipient of his overflowing sorrows and love: “My only consolation when I am really sad is to love and be loved.” He ended his short, desperate appeal by declaring: “I embrace you and love you with all my heart.”³

Not long afterward, between classes at school, Proust thrust a letter into Bizet’s hand, inviting him to have sex. At the next change of classes, Bizet passed his answer back to Proust, who was headed to history class. Once at his desk, Proust skimmed the letter and then, disappointed but persistent, took a sheet of paper and wrote his reply. Feigning acceptance of Bizet’s refusal, Proust praised his friend’s intellectual gifts while gently pressing his case to have sex by arguing that such behavior would prove harmless now, because they were young, innocent, and inexperienced:

My dear Jacques,

Under the stern eye of M. Choublier, I have just raced through your letter, propelled by my fear. I admire your wisdom, while at the same time deploring it. Your reasons are excellent, and I am glad to see how strong and alert, how keen and penetrating your thinking has become. Still, the heart—or the body—has its reasons that are unknown to reason, and so it is with admiration for you (that is, for your thinking, not for your refusal, for I am not fatuous enough to believe that my body is so precious a treasure that to renounce it required great strength of character) but with sadness that I accept the disdainful and cruel yoke you impose on me. Maybe you are right. Still, I always find it sad not to pluck the delicious flower that we shall soon be unable to pluck. For then it would be fruit . . . and forbidden.⁴

Bizet again shrugged off the invitation. From the secure vantage of his own exclusively heterosexual yearnings, he apparently found Proust's seductive overtures harmless fun. Fellow classmate Robert Dreyfus recorded that Bizet "liked only women who also found him very attractive and so did not see himself at all compromised by Marcel's bizarre behavior; on the contrary, it flattered him."⁵

That spring Proust informed Bizet in a letter that his parents, having discovered the nature of his sexual desires and his obsessive need to masturbate, had prohibited him from seeing Bizet.⁶ Bizet, who was perplexed, wrote back that he did not understand why they could not continue to play together. Proust replied that perhaps his mother feared that his "somewhat excessive affection" for Bizet might "degenerate" into "*sensual* love" because she feared that the two boys shared "the same faults . . . independent spirit, nervousness, a disordered mind, and perhaps even masturbation."⁷

Bizet gave the letter to Halévy, already the historian, who recorded it in his diary, noting as he did so, "Poor Proust is absolutely crazy."⁸ Halévy, as he continued to read the letter, saw that Mme Proust had reason to be concerned. Dr. Proust had caught Marcel masturbating: "This morning, dearest, when my father saw me . . . he begged me to stop masturbating for at least four days." Proust swore to Bizet that, if necessary, he would defy his parents by fleeing the family prison to find his friend and love him "outside the walls" in a nearby café.

Like all adolescents, Proust felt isolated and misunderstood. In his early writings and later in the novel, he described the feeling of being alone, plotted against, made a prisoner by his family, all of which provoked "that old desire to rebel against an imaginary plot woven against me by my parents, who imagined that I would be forced to obey them, that defiant spirit which drove me in the past to impose my will brutally upon the people I loved best in the world, though finally conforming to theirs after I had succeeded in making them yield."⁹ In *Jean Santeuil*, his first attempt at novel writing, Proust, whom his classmates considered spoiled, wrote, in words that closely echo the

letter to Bizet, that Jean's childhood resembled a prison, that his "parental home had seemed to him a place of slavery."¹⁰

In *Swann's Way*, Proust's young Narrator, while engaging in onanistic practices, dreams of finding someone to love, a heterosexual someone. When he first sees Gilberte, the daughter of Swann and Odette, she makes a gesture that he interprets as obscene and insulting, but whose true meaning is the opposite. Transfixed by what he assumes to be her unattainable beauty, he continues to stare at her. Gilberte's gesture is so ambiguous and he so innocent that it leaves him bewildered and humiliated. His only recourse is to continue his solitary, sensual practices, which he does by secluding himself in "the only room whose door I was allowed to lock, whenever my occupation was such as required an inviolable solitude: reading or day-dreaming, tears or sensual pleasure." As he explores and seeks to relieve his sexual urges, he gazes at the distant tower of Roussainville:

Alas, it was in vain that I implored the castle-keep of Roussainville, that I begged it to send out to meet me some daughter of its village, appealing to it as to the sole confidant of my earliest desires when, at the top of our house in Combray, in the little room that smelt of orris-root, I could see nothing but its tower framed in the half-opened window as, with the heroic misgivings of a traveller setting out on a voyage of exploration or of a desperate wretch hesitating on the verge of self-destruction, faint with emotion, I explored, across the bounds of my own experience, an untrodden path which for all I knew was deadly—until the moment when a natural trail like that left by a snail smeared the leaves of the flowering currant that drooped around me.¹¹

The tower of Roussainville is indeed phallic, not only because the protagonist gazes at it from the window while masturbating and yearning for a girl but also because years later he learns that the tower had been the scene of sexual experimentations by the young people of the village and that what he had mistaken for Gilberte's obscene

gesture of repulsion on first seeing him had in fact been intended as an invitation to join her in the games at the tower.¹² Many years later, when Gilberte is married to Robert de Saint-Loup, the Narrator visits her at Combray. One evening when they are out for a walk, she reminisces about her sexual awakenings: “I was in the habit . . . of going to play with little boys I knew in the ruins of the keep of Roussainville. And you will tell me that I was a very naughty girl, for there were girls and boys there of all sorts who took advantage of the darkness.”¹³

As an adolescent, Proust enjoyed flirting and playing innocent games of tag with the two Benardaky sisters, Marie and Nelly, the primary models for Gilberte Swann. He wrote about their games, using the sisters’ real names, in *Jean Santeuil*. Proust later claimed that Marie was “the intoxication and despair” of his youth.¹⁴ The Narrator’s late adolescence corresponds to that period in Proust’s own life when he, with his ideals and illusions firmly intact, believed, like his young hero “in love with Gilberte . . . that Love did really exist outside ourselves.”¹⁵ At play with Gilberte in the gardens of the Champs-Élysées, the Narrator unexpectedly experiences the fulfillment of those “baser” needs, much more easily satisfied than the desire for reciprocated passionate devotion.¹⁶ As he wrestles with her in a lighthearted tussle over a letter, the struggle quickly becomes a simulation of coitus, leading to an unanticipated ejaculation that the circumstances leave him no time to appreciate. Equally aroused, Gilberte is reluctant to stop the contest:

[Gilberte] thrust [the letter] behind her back; I put my arms round her neck, raising the plaits of hair which she wore over her shoulders . . . and we wrestled, locked together. I tried to pull her towards me, and she resisted; her cheeks, inflamed by the effort, were as red and round as two cherries; she laughed as though I were tickling her; I held her gripped between my legs like a young tree which I was trying to climb; and, in the middle of my gymnastics, when I was already out of breath with the muscular exercise and the heat of the game, I felt, like a few drops of sweat wrung from me by the effort, my pleasure

express itself in a form which I could not even pause for a moment to analyze; immediately I snatched the letter from her. Whereupon Gilberte said good-naturedly: “You know, if you like, we might go on wrestling a bit longer.”¹⁷

This premature and unanticipated ejaculation during a puerile game is charming in its innocence and bears no guilt or shame, unlike many of the adult characters’ sexual games, some of which involve sadism and masochism and are homosexual in nature.

The letter to Jacques Bizet about running away together astounded Halévy not only because of its revelations about Proust’s private life at home but also as a piece of writing that made him envious. Halévy knew something about literary production. His father, Ludovic, was a dramatist who also wrote, with Henri Meilhac, the libretto for Bizet’s *Carmen*, as well as libretti for many of Jacques Offenbach’s wildly popular operettas. As Halévy reread Proust’s letter, his awe increased; his schoolmate had dashed off this remarkable letter without crossing out a single word, an amazing feat, which led Halévy to conclude: “This deranged creature is extremely talented, and I know NOTHING that is sadder and more marvelously written than these two pages.” Halévy expressed his belief that the excesses of genius should be tolerated, but worried that his friend’s sensual obsessions might destroy his gifts. “More talented than anyone else. He overexerts himself. Weak, young, he fornicates, he masturbates, he engages, perhaps, in pederasty! He will perhaps show in his life flashes of genius that will be wasted.”¹⁸

Amazingly enough, Halévy thus anticipated the major plotline of Proust’s future novel: Will the Narrator discover his vocation and learn his craft as a writer in time to transform the experiences of his wasted years into the material of a novel? Decades later, when asked whether any of Proust’s schoolmates had a premonition of his genius, Halévy replied that while they all recognized Marcel’s talent, no one believed that he had “the willpower to achieve a masterpiece.”¹⁹

Proust’s parents agonized over the threat to his future success, a

threat linked in their minds and in Dr. Proust's scientific writings to neurasthenia and a lack of willpower: masturbation. This practice, widely viewed in Proust's day as one of the gravest dangers to a young man's health and morality, became, for that reason, a "prime obsession" of parents and teachers. Masturbation was also suspected of being a significant contributing factor in causing homosexuality. Given the inevitably high rate of masturbation among adolescents, it is not surprising that family-sanctioned visits to prostitutes began in high school. Business in the brothels boomed during "holidays and the Thursday half-days" when the houses "swarmed with school boys" seeking cures for the bane of self-abuse.²⁰ "Some doctors . . . prescribed frequent visits to the brothel, preceded by large doses of alcohol. The idea was that an experienced prostitute would know how to generate the correct response, even in a nervous, drunken invert."²¹

Edmond de Goncourt's famous diary relates the description of one such "successful" treatment conducted by Dr. Jean-Martin Charcot, perhaps the most distinguished French physician of the era. Charcot had taught Sigmund Freud and steered him in "a direction in which he had already shown some telling signs of going: psychology."²² Charcot had prescribed a visit to a prostitute for a patient of his, a thirty-two-year-old Belgian law professor. At age seven, the Belgian had seen a statue of Hercules, which "had given him a preference for men and a kind of horror of women. As a young man, he never made love, all the while struggling to resist his unnatural penchants. After undergoing Charcot's prescribed treatment in a Parisian house of prostitution, the man exited the brothel and shouted to the world: 'I can do it! Yes, I can!'" When last heard from, he was preparing "to marry one of his cousins."²³ Such testimony from an authority like Charcot provided additional incentive for desperate parents to try the brothel cure. It was the best remedy that science and lore had to offer.

Proust's sexual proclivities truly alarmed his parents, who felt that something must be done. Dr. Proust, who, like Charcot, believed that excessive masturbation and homosexuality were linked, gave his son