

# Proust's Cup of Tea

*Homoeroticism and Victorian culture*

EMILY EELLS



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## Homoeroticism and Victorian culture

Emily Eells

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# General Editors' Preface

The European dimension of research in the humanities has come into sharp focus over recent years, producing scholarship which ranges across disciplines and national boundaries. This series provides a major channel for this work and unites the fields of cultural studies and traditional scholarship. It will publish in the areas of European history and literature, art history, archaeology, language and translation studies, political, cultural and gay studies, music, psychology, sociology and philosophy. The emphasis is explicitly European and interdisciplinary, concentrating attention on the relativity of cultural perspectives, with a particular interest in issues of cultural transition.

Martin Stannard  
Greg Walker  
*University of Leicester*

# List of Plates

between pages 84 and 85

- 1 Unsigned caricature of Oscar Wilde, with caption: 'How Utter'. Published by Messrs Shrimpton at Oxford, about 1880. Reproduced as the frontispiece of *Oscar Wilde, A Study*, from the French by André Gide, ed. Stuart Mason (Oxford: The Holywell Press, 1905)
- 2 Jacques-Emile Blanche, *Le Chérubin de Mozart*, 157 × 118 cm, oil on canvas, c. 1903, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Reims. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2001. Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Reims, photo C. Devleeschauwer
- 3 Photograph, 15.5 × 11.5 cm, of Athena from a statue from Herculaneum, in Ruskin's *Works*, XIX, Plate 14
- 4 Giotto, *Infidelity* (detail), 120 × 60 cm, fresco, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, from Ruskin's *Works*, XXIV, Plate 42
- 5 John Ruskin, *Abraham parting from the Angels*, drawing, 17.5 × 10.5 cm, after Benozzo Gozzoli, in Ruskin's *Works*, IV, Plate 10
- 6 Drawing of the *Orchis mascula*, 12 × 9 cm, from Charles Darwin, *The Various contrivances by which orchids are fertilised by insects* (first published in 1862). Reproduced from the second edition (London: John Murray, 1882), Figure 1, p. 8
- 7 Drawing of the *Cattleya*, 11 × 9 cm, from Charles Darwin, *The Various contrivances by which orchids are fertilised by insects* (first published in 1862). Reproduced from the second edition (London: John Murray, 1882), Figure 22, p. 114
- 8 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Ecce Ancilla Domini*, 76.13 × 43.3 cm, oil on canvas, 1850, Tate Gallery, London. © Tate, London, 2001
- 9 Walter Deverell, *Viola and Olivia*, etching, 16.8 × 11.1 cm, from *The Germ*, May 1850, opposite p. 144. Reproduced by permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library
- 10 Andrea Mantegna, *Saint George*, 66 × 32 cm, tempera on canvas, 1467, Accademia, Venice

- 11 Edward Burne-Jones, *The Sixth Day of Creation* (detail), 101.9 × 35.6 cm, watercolour, gouache, and shell gold and platinum paint on linen, 1870–76. Reproduced courtesy of the Fogg Art Museums, Harvard University Art Museums, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop. Photograph: Katya Kallsen. © President and Fellows of Harvard College
- 12 Marcel Proust, *Ressemblance de Karlilch et d'Anatole Le Roy Beaulieu*, in *Lettres à Reynaldo Hahn* (Paris: Gallimard, 1956), p. 163. © Editions Gallimard
- 13 James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *Arrangement in Flesh Colour and Black: Portrait of Théodore Duret*, 203 × 95.33 cm, oil on canvas, 1883–84, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Fund, 1913. (13.20)
- 14 Samuel Prout, *Amiens* drawing, 10 × 17 cm, reproduced in Ruskin's *Works*, XIV, Plate 8
- 15 Quentin Metsys, *The Banker and his Wife*, 70 × 67 cm, oil on panel, 1514, The Louvre, Paris. © Photo RMN – Daniel Arnaudet
- 16 Proust's drawing of an erect phallus from manuscript notebook, N.A.Fr. 16669 f° 68 (cliché Bibliothèque nationale de France – Paris)
- 17 Engraving, 5.5 × 4.5 cm, by Charles Henry Jeens, of a sixteenth-century drawing by Agostino di Giovanni da Lodi in the Louvre, commissioned by Walter Pater for use as the frontispiece to the second edition of *The Renaissance*. Reproduced from the fourth, revised and enlarged edition of *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1888)
- 18 Aubrey Beardsley, title page for Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* (London: Elkin Mathews and John Lane and Boston: Copeland and Day, 1894). Reproduced from the 1912 edition, 12 × 9 cm

# Preface

Inversion begins here, as this preface is in fact an afterword. It follows the final revision of the manuscript and the compilation of the bibliography, which have both revived remembrances of research in times past. The subject of this book was taught as a graduate seminar at Indiana University, in Bloomington, and owes a great deal to the inquisitive questions raised by the students who contributed so actively to the class. Over the past few years, working versions of the chapters have been presented to the I.T.E.M. Proust research seminar run by Bernard Brun and Nathalie Mauriac Dyer in Paris, who, along with other participants, have helped me to shape my thoughts. The week-long conference on Proust organized by Bernard Brun and Françoise Leriche, which was held in the prestigious cultural centre of Cerisy-la-Salle in July 1997, offered me the opportunity to present my notion of 'Proust "Ondrogyné"'.<sup>1</sup> Members of the English department of the University of Paris at Nanterre where I teach have been unfailing in their support and indulgent in including papers on Proust and the English in their research seminars and conferences. Both my colleagues and the teaching I do at Nanterre have played a significant part in the brewing of *Proust's Cup of Tea*. Most of the research on the Victorian authors discussed in this book was done at the University Library in Cambridge, during study periods made possible by extended stays in Pinehurst and a term as a bi-fellow at Churchill College. I have fond memories of those working stages of this book, and extend warmest thanks to those who have helped me so generously along the way.

The bibliography of formally presented works fails to acknowledge the even more important inspiration received from informal discussions with friends and colleagues. Special thanks go to Alison Finch, who introduced me to Proust when I was an undergraduate at Cambridge, and to Jean Milly for supervising my doctoral thesis; to Annick Bouillaguet, Elyane Dezon-Jones, Margot Gray, Kathleen Micham and Mireille Naturel, who all share my passion for Proust; to Claire Bazin, Inger Lövkrona, Brigitte Marrec, Pascale Ogée and Gerry Raymond for stimulating incentive; to Jean-Jacques Lecercle for proof-reading the manuscript and for intellectual luminance; to my family for their constant encouragement; to the SECT series editors, and in particular to Erika Gaffney, for making a book out of the manuscript I submitted to them; and to Mark Greengrass for everything.

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<sup>1</sup> See the proceedings of the conference published in *Marcel Proust 2 : nouvelles directions de la recherche proustienne I*, ed. Bernard Brun (Paris: Minard, 2000), pp. 335–50.

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The art works included in this book have been reproduced with kind permission from the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (Henri Fantin-Latour, *White cup and saucer*), the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Reims (Jacques-Emile Blanche, *Le Chérubin de Mozart*), the Tate Gallery, London (Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Ecce Ancilla Domini*), the University Library, Cambridge (Walter Deverell, *Viola and Olivia*), the Accademia, Venice (Andrea Mantegna, *Saint George*), the Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Mass. (Edward Burne-Jones, *The Sixth Day of Creation*), the éditions Gallimard, Paris (Marcel Proust, drawing of Carlyle), the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *Arrangement in Flesh Colour and Black: Portrait of Théodore Duret*), the Réunion des Musées Nationaux (Quentin Mestys, *The Banker and his Wife*), the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Marcel Proust, drawing of an erect phallus).



# Abbreviations

Existing translations are cited and referenced using the abbreviations below. Out of respect for Proust's original version, the translations have been altered slightly in a few instances (marked as 'modified'). If there is no printed translation for a passage cited, no reference is given, and the translation proposed is mine. The jerky, unpolished aspect of the translations of the transcribed manuscript material conveys the character of the original. A line through a word or phrase indicates that it has been crossed out by Proust. Within citations, square brackets enclosing three points – [...] – indicate that a portion of the text has been elided. An ellipsis in the original text is indicated without square brackets. In embedded quotes, punctuation is placed according to whether or not it is part of the quotation. First publication dates of works cited are in parentheses following the first occurrence of the title in the text.

ASB	Proust, Marcel, <i>Against Sainte-Beuve and Other Essays</i> , trans. John Sturrock (London: Penguin Classics, 1988)
By Way of Ste-B	Proust, Marcel, <i>By Way of Sainte-Beuve</i> , trans. Sylvia Townsend Warner (London: Chatto & Windus, 1958)
Corres	Proust, Marcel, <i>Correspondance</i> , ed. Philip Kolb, 21 vols (Paris: Plon, 1970–93). The volume number in Roman numerals is followed by the page number
CSB	Proust, Marcel, <i>Contre Sainte-Beuve</i> , eds Pierre Clarac and Yves Sandre (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 1971)
GBA	<i>Gazette des Beaux-Arts</i>
JS	Proust, Marcel, <i>Jean Santeuil</i> , preceded by <i>Les Plaisirs et les jours</i> , eds Pierre Clarac and Yves Sandre (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 1971)
JS English	Proust, Marcel, <i>Jean Santeuil</i> , trans. Gerard Hopkins (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1955)
N.A.Fr.	'Nouvelles Acquisitions françaises'. This abbreviation is used in the classmarks of manuscript material in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. All of the unpublished Proust material cited is from that source. The abbreviation is followed by the appropriate folio numbers and, where relevant, it is preceded by the 'cahier', meaning notebook, number.

- Reading Ruskin Proust, Marcel, *On Reading Ruskin* – Prefaces to *La Bible d'Amiens* and *Sésame et les Lys*, with selections from the notes to the translated texts. Translated and edited by Jean Autret, William Burford and Phillip J. Wolfe, with an introduction by Richard Macksey (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987)
- RTP Proust, Marcel, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. Jean-Yves Tadié, 4 vols (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 1987–89). The volume number in Roman numerals is followed by the page number
- Ruskin Ruskin, John, *The Works of John Ruskin*, eds E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 volumes (London: The Library Edition, 1903–12). The volume number in Roman numerals is followed by the page number
- SL Proust, Marcel, *Selected Letters*, ed. Philip Kolb, trans. Joanna Kilmartin, Terence Kilmartin and Ralph Manheim, 4 vols (London: HarperCollins, 1983–2000)
- SLT Proust, Marcel, *In Search of Lost Time*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, revised by D. J. Enright, 6 vols (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992). The volume number in Roman numerals is followed by the page number

# Contents

General Editors' Preface	vi
List of Plates	vii
Preface	ix
Acknowledgements	x
Abbreviations	xi
Introducing Anglosexuality	1
1 A Gay English Tea Party	11
2 Departures from Ruskin	34
3 A Closeted Reading of the Victorians	62
4 Writing Double	89
5 Elstir the 'Modern Painter'	113
6 The Visual Revolution	143
7 Proust's <i>Phrase-Type</i>	172
Concluding Insights	199
Select Bibliography	207
Index	217

# Introducing Anglosexuality

The dual focus of this study of Marcel Proust's work is defined by its subtitle: homoeroticism and Victorian culture. The term 'Victorian' is used here as a loose definition of the corpus analysed, which extends both backwards to include some discussion of the father of Victorian novelists Walter Scott, and forwards in its concluding remarks about the work of their rebellious daughter Virginia Woolf. Proust was one of the first French translators of the eminent Victorian John Ruskin, whose work permeates his multi-volumed novel *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–27),<sup>1</sup> most perceptibly in the section of *Albertine disparue* devoted to a stay in Venice. Ruskin's influence transpires in the numerous references Proust makes to Renaissance painting and to such nineteenth-century British artists as J. M. W. Turner and members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. But Proust's knowledge of Victorian works in English went beyond Ruskin, and he admitted to spending time in bed with the essayist who wrote on *English Traits* and *Representative Men*: 'je suis encore couché lisant Emerson avec ivresse'/'I am still in bed, drunk with reading Emerson.'<sup>2</sup> He heartily recommended Stevenson's adventure tales to a friend, and went so far as to claim that George Eliot and Thomas Hardy were among his favourite novelists.

The following analyses of Proust's reading of the English are intersected by some reflections on the literary representation of homosexuality in *La Recherche*. Homosexuality takes centre stage in *Sodome et Gomorrhe I*, with a performance of a pantomime of exchanged glances between the imperious Baron de Charlus and the tailor Jupien, which is inquisitively eyed by the hidden narrator. Proust describes the scene as 'empreinte d'une étrangeté, ou si l'on veut d'un naturel, dont la beauté allait croissant'/'stamped with a strangeness, or if you like a naturalness, whose beauty was steadily increasing.'<sup>3</sup> Homosexuals are seen as strange both in the sense that they are different and in the sense that they are foreign,

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<sup>1</sup> References in French are made to Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. Jean-Yves Tadié, 4 vols (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 1987–89). The abbreviation RTP is used, followed by the volume number in Roman numerals, then the page number. It was first translated into English by Charles K. Scott Moncrieff, under the collective title of *Remembrance of Things Past*, and published by Chatto & Windus in 12 volumes, between 1922 and 1931. The final volume was translated by Stephen Hudson, following Scott Moncrieff's death. Cited here in D. J. Enright's revision of that translation, *In Search of Lost Time*, 6 vols (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992). It is abbreviated as SLT, followed by the volume number in Roman numerals, then the page number.

<sup>2</sup> Corres I 363/ SL I 87. Reference to Proust's *Correspondance* is made to the 21 volumes edited in French by Philip Kolb (Paris: Plon, 1970–93). The abbreviation 'Corres' is followed by the volume number in Roman numerals, then the page number. For the English translation, the four volumes of *Selected Letters* published by HarperCollins (1989–2000) is referred to as 'SL', followed by the volume number in Roman numerals, then the page number.

<sup>3</sup> RTP III 7/ SLT IV 7 – modified.

and, through insistent comparison with the Jewish religion, *Sodome et Gomorrhe I* takes pains to present homosexuality as an ethnicity, a race. Proust develops the notion that inversion is exotic by repeatedly associating it with the oriental world of hidden charms and dark sensuality. By integrating homosexuality into his novel, one could say he 'naturalizes' the foreign citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah, making the unknown recognizable and familiar. He legitimizes the homosexual encounter by advocating its naturalness, as well as aestheticizing it with a panoply of cultural references to the arts. This study highlights the foreign, visual and artistic aspects of Proustian homoeroticism, presenting the argument that they are all expressed by the English intertextuality in *La Recherche*.

Proust uses English references to bring out the otherness of homosexuality, which is a territory unknown to the narrator for the first half of the novel. His discovery that it exists in *Sodome et Gomorrhe I* is like a return to Genesis and the creation of a new world. Proust faced the Adamic challenge of finding a language which could express what Oscar Wilde's lover Lord Alfred Douglas termed 'the love that dare not speak its name'.<sup>4</sup> The problem confronted is articulated by the unpunctuated, truncated caption to the nineteenth-century caricature depicting Oscar Wilde as an effete aesthete sniffing a fragrant lily: 'How Utter'. That caption could be punctuated with either an exclamation mark, making it into praise of the flower's ineffable beauty, or a question mark, to denote that Wilde is at a loss for words when it comes to writing about the unutterable (see Plate 1). Proust's answer to the question 'How utter?' was to treat homosexuality less as a biological category, and more as an artistic genre. To a certain extent, he skirts the problem of finding an adequate language to convey the unutterable by associating homosexuality with music. One of the first versions of the episode revealing Charlus's homosexuality takes place against a backdrop of music: the narrator catches a glimpse of M. de Gurcy, the character who will later be named the Baron de Charlus, asleep during the performance of a Wagner opera. Caught off guard, he looks so feminine that the narrator realizes that his masculine body houses a woman's soul.<sup>5</sup> Setting this scene during one of Wagner's operas is particularly resonant, given the androgynous associations of his music, and his own artistic tenet that 'La perfection culturelle ou artistique elle-même ne pourra être atteinte que lorsqu'on aura supprimé la division qui sépare le masculin du féminin'.<sup>6</sup> 'Cultural or artistic perfection itself can only be attained when the division separating the masculine from the feminine has been abolished.' Although Proust changed the setting of this epiphany, staging it in the courtyard of the Hôtel de Guermantes, redolent with various floral species studied by Charles Darwin, he orchestrated it as a sonorous musical composition. He aestheticized homosexuality by describing the silent, seductive glances Charlus

<sup>4</sup> See the concluding line of his poem 'Two Loves' published in *The Chameleon* I: 1 (London: Gay and Bird, 1894), p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> See Cahier 49, N.A.Fr. 16689 42 r-46 r.

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Wagner Androgyne, essai sur l'interprétation* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1990). The epigraph to the book is quoted here.

and Jupien exchange as interrogative phrases composed by Beethoven,<sup>7</sup> and by harmonizing the shrieks of their lovemaking into parallel octaves,<sup>8</sup> thereby producing a 'verbal fig-leaf bulging with phallic reality.'<sup>9</sup> Music is a motif which is also associated with female homosexuality, as the daughter of the fictitious composer Vinteuil is a practising sapphist, whose lover engages in the amorous rites of transcribing her father's musical scores.

As if to take refuge in an established tradition, Proust punctuated his audaciously salacious text with intertextual references to those who had ventured into the transgressive realm of homosexuality before him. Although Proust's literary French forefathers figure in the sections of his novel devoted to homosexuality, the numerous references to British culture in *Sodome et Gomorrhe I* strike a keynote which reverberates throughout the rest of the novel.<sup>10</sup> The homosexual seduction scene is recounted in terms of a metaphor based on Darwin's theories of the fertilization of hermaphrodite flowers. The homosexual couple are cast in the roles of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, the young homosexual's infatuations are with a hero from Walter Scott's adventures and the homosexual banned from society is compared to Oscar Wilde. The association established between British art and homosexuality is recurrent – though unobtrusive – in other passages of Proust's novel: the discussion on Thomas Hardy's novels in *La Prisonnière* is interrupted by the tormented narrator's fear that Albertine had indulged in a lesbian relationship with Gilberte; a passing reference informs the reader that Albertine's female lover – Andrée – is translating George Eliot; the password to a male homosexual brothel echoes the title of one of Ruskin's works.

The high incidence of British references embedded in a homosexual context suggests that the relationship carries some unacknowledged significance. *Proust's Cup of Tea* contends that in addition to significant other cultural references – Judaic, Greek and French being the three most important – Proust used Victorian culture as one of the sustained referents in his construction of the aesthetics of homosexuality. He conveys the foreignness of homosexuality, which possesses a sign system of its own requiring initiation, by associating it with things English, even making English a kind of coded language spoken by his homosexual characters. Within the complex, catholic network of his references, Proust transposed the arts of prudish, puritanical Victorian England into an aesthetic language of subtle, suggestive allusions. He found a source of creative energy in

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<sup>7</sup> RTP III 7/ SLT IV 6.

<sup>8</sup> RTP III 11/ SLT IV 10.

<sup>9</sup> The phrase comes from Lawrence Danson, *Wilde's Intentions: The Artist in his Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 106.

<sup>10</sup> Throughout this work, I have chosen for the sake of brevity to use the word 'British' to encompass references to the authors discussed. I am fully aware of Oscar Wilde's Irish origins, and Walter Scott's Scottish heritage, and in no way intend to undermine their cultural identities when I refer to 'British' authors, rather than using the ponderous formulation 'English, Scottish and Irish' authors.

the tensions of late Victorian culture, which pitched the aestheticism of art for art's sake against John Ruskin's proselytizing writings on ecclesiastical art, and saw its repressive sexual mores flouted by the likes of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, George Eliot and Oscar Wilde.

In nineteenth-century Britain, of course, homosexuality was illegal, which explains why Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas fled to the sanctuary of Proust's Paris. For André Gide, however, England was inextricably linked with the consummation of same-sex desire. He spoke of his plans to go to Cambridge with his lover, Marc Allégret, in terms of an irresistible impulse, writing that 'Un immense désir de revoir l'Angleterre [...] me tourmente depuis longtemps'/'I have been tormented for some time now by a compulsive desire to see England again' which he rephrases: 'Tu sais le *besoin* que j'ai depuis longtemps de l'Angleterre'/'You know the *need* of England I have felt for a long time.' Their trip gave free rein to their homosexual affair:

Aller à Cambridge avec Marc, dans les circonstances que l'on sait, c'était faire une embarquée de côté du Diable, abandonner Madeleine, larguer le passé, délier les amarres catholiques et réactionnaires de la guerre, c'était aller outre-Manche, passer outre, donner enfin une expression géographique [...] à la coupure définitive qu'avait représentée [...] la publication des *Caves du Vatican*.<sup>11</sup>

Going to Cambridge with Mark, given the circumstances you know about, was like swerving towards the Devil, abandoning Madeleine, throwing the past overboard, unfastening the reactionary, Catholic moorings of the war. It meant crossing the Channel to the other side, expressing at last in geographical terms the break which the publication of *The Vatican Cellars* had brought about.

Gide's wife refers to his 'violent désir' to go to England, endorsing the interpretation that for him it signified a rupture with convention, a crossing of repressive boundaries, in short a sexual liberation. Though Proust never crossed the Channel, knowledge of English art and literature had a similarly liberating effect on him in the aesthetic sphere, issuing him with a passport to write freely and openly on homosexuality. As ironic as it might seem, Gide escaped to reputedly strait-laced England as a place to indulge his homosexual desire and Proust had recourse to Victorian culture in his discourse on homoeroticism.

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*Sodome et Gomorrhe I* is a visual revolution for Proust's narrator, which profoundly changes his way of seeing. The knowledge of homosexuality refocuses his sight, deepens his vision and opens up new vistas for him. Homosexuality is frequently

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<sup>11</sup> These quotations are from D. A. Steel, 'Jacques Raverat et André Gide', in *André Gide et l'Angleterre – Actes du Colloque de Londres, 22–24 novembre 1985*, ed. Patrick Pollard (London: Le Colloque Gide, Birkbeck College, 1986), p. 85.

associated with voyeurism in *La Recherche*, which merges the erotics and aesthetics of looking. Proust's frequent references to painting illustrate how he relies on the visual arts to depict what he dare not put into words. His debut as a creative writer includes an inscription for the frame of a painting: his prose complements the homoerotically charged visual depiction of the Greek figure, lolling in the sun, almost naked: 'presque nu'.<sup>12</sup> André Gide, in a defensive attempt to make up for his responsibility in the publishing house Gallimard's initial rejection of Proust's manuscript, praised his gift of picturing the unmentionable: 'L'écriture de Proust est [...] la plus *artiste* que je connaisse. Par elle il ne se sent jamais empêché. Si, pour informer l'indicible, le mot lui manque, il recourt à l'image'<sup>13</sup>/ 'Proust's writing is the most *artistic* I know. Thanks to it, he never feels constrained. If there isn't an appropriate word to give shape to the unutterable, he turns to an image.' To quote Malcolm Bowie on Proust's recourse to artistic references:

works of art – quoted, alluded to or described – have a particularly prominent role. And they offer the novelist handling what was still a shameful theme an opportunity for obliqueness and discretion: in the absence of a full-scale theory of sexual origins, works of art suggest that the modes of desire proscribed by modern Europe have a long, dignified and thoroughly European prehistory.<sup>14</sup>

Proust's use of the visual arts to convey the homoerotic is an application of the aesthetic theories of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. These late Victorians were not only preoccupied with representing the homoerotic, they also emphasized the role of the spectator, and the impression a work of art made on the receiver. Proust owed much of his knowledge of painting and architecture to Ruskin, whom he revered as his master, and would venture forth idolatrously on what he called Ruskinian pilgrimages to admire the Gothic cathedrals of Northern France and the Renaissance painting of Venice. *Proust's Cup of Tea* looks at the art works studied by Ruskin, including the Italian paintings of Giotto, Carpaccio and Botticelli, in order to show how the play of word and image in *La Recherche* mixes artistic genres to represent mixed sexual gender. Proust's fictitious painter, Elstir, is of English descent: his invented name hints at his Englishness, both because it is a near anagram of Whistler's and because its last syllable is homophonous with the name of the British impressionist painter Philip Wilson Steer.

Proust's highly aestheticized portrayal of what is popularly known as the English disease complements his view that homosexuality is not only a sexual preference but also a privileged appreciation of the arts. As he wrote to André Gide, who shared his ambition to portray homosexuality in literature:

<sup>12</sup> Marcel Proust, *Écrits de jeunesse 1887–1895*, ed. Anne Borrel (Institut Marcel Proust international, 1991), pp. 121–2.

<sup>13</sup> 'A propos de Marcel Proust: Billet à Angèle' in André Gide, *Essais critiques*, ed. Pierre Masson (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 1999), p. 290.

<sup>14</sup> Malcolm Bowie, *Freud, Proust and Lacan: Theory as Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 82.



De même qu'on peut dire : 'Il y a un certain rapport entre le tempérament arthritique ou nerveux de telle personne et ses dons de sensibilité, etc.', je suis convaincu que c'est à son homosexualité que Monsieur de Charlus doit de comprendre tant de choses qui sont fermées à son frère le Duc de Guermantes, d'être tellement plus fin, plus sensible.

Just as one may say: 'There is a certain connection between the nervous or arthritic condition of such and such a person and his gifts of sensibility etc.', I'm convinced that it's because of his homosexuality that Monsieur de Charlus understands so many things which are a closed book to his brother the Duc de Guermantes, that he is so much more subtle and sensitive.<sup>15</sup>

Proust transposes this notion of an aesthetic homosensitivity into his novel: for the Duc de Guermantes, art appreciation marks social status. Asked whether he had seen Vermeer's *View of Delft* during his stay in The Hague, he replies: 'Si c'est à voir, je l'ai vu !'/'If it's to be seen, I saw it!'<sup>16</sup> His homosexual brother, however, is a connoisseur:

On tremble au rapport que le physique peut avoir avec [un affinement des qualités morales] quand on songe au petit déplacement de goût purement physique, à la tare légère d'un sens, qui expliquent que l'univers des poètes et des musiciens, si fermé au duc de Guermantes, s'entrouvre pour M. de Charlus. Que ce dernier ait du goût dans son intérieur, qui est d'une ménagère bibeloteuse, cela ne surprend pas ; mais l'étroite brèche qui donne jour sur Beethoven et sur Véronèse !

One is dismayed at the relationship that can exist between [refined intellectual qualities] and a person's bodily attributes when one thinks of the tiny dislocation of a purely physical taste, the slight blemish in one of the senses, that explains why the world of poets and musicians, so firmly barred against the Duc de Guermantes, opens its portals to M. de Charlus. That the latter should show taste in the furnishing of his home, which is that of a housewife with a taste for curios, need not surprise us; but the narrow loophole that opens upon Beethoven and Veronese!<sup>17</sup>

The Duc de Guermantes's social *morgue* is thus paralleled by the Baron de Charlus's artistic snobbery.

The two mainstays of the following discussion of Proust's work – homoeroticism and Victorian culture – become entangled in a form of sexuality which I propose to call Anglosexuality. His 30-page narrative essay – *Sodome et Gomorrhe I* – presents homosexuality as a kind of inter or third sex, the man-woman or woman-man combining the masculine and the feminine. Male and female homosexualities are confused in what Proust prefers to call *inversion*, a notion which complies with Foucault's definition of homosexuality in *The History of Sexuality*. Foucault dates its emergence as during the nineteenth century and writes that it is characterized:

<sup>15</sup> Corres XIII 246/ SL III 268.

<sup>16</sup> RTP II 813/ SLT III 606.

<sup>17</sup> RTP III 710–11/ SLT V 229–30.