

First-person writing, four-way reading

Workshop on 1st-person literature (2 Dec 2011)

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'You can say anything', he exclaimed, 'but only if you never say "I"' (Proust in Gide 1996: 1124)
'In art, don't you know, there is no such thing as the first person' (Wilde in Gide 1910: 46)

In all first-person texts, there is an 'I' but no body. Whoever 'speaks' has no material presence to speak with and carries only a residue of the body of the writer who set him/her/it in motion. Yet, as Sartre observed in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature* [*What is literature?*] (1948), the reality of the protagonist of a realist text has a kind of solidity:

The literary object has no other substance than the subjectivity of the reader: Raskolnikov's waiting is my waiting, which I lend him; without the reader's impatience he would be nothing but a collection of languishing signs. His hatred for the police magistrate interrogating him is my hatred, stimulated and captured by signs, and as for the magistrate himself, he would not exist without the hatred I feel towards him through Raskolnikov; this hatred animates him, it is his flesh [...] By a reversal intrinsic to the imaginary object, it is not [Raskolnikov's] actions that provoke my indignation or admiration but my indignation and admiration which give solidity and objectivity to his actions. (Sartre 1948: 95 & 100)

Thus, in any text, the bodiedness essential to reading is supplied by the reader at the moment of reading. In a first-person text, the reader is 'invited in' in a more powerful way, by a process loosely called 'identification. How does this allow for an excess of ambiguity?

In this workshop we will look at some sets of extracts from first-person fictions published between 1753 and the 1956. The choice is up to the group. The translations from French are my own, but all these texts exist in published translations, English & other. Topics covered are:

- **Irony & recollection:**

Abbé Prévost, *Manon Lescaut*, 1753

Marcel Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann :Ouverture* [*Swann's Way: Overture*], 1913

- **Ambiguities of the 'we':**

Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, 1857

Alain-Fournier, *Le grand Meaulnes* [*The Wanderer*], 1913

Albert Camus, *La Peste* [*The Plague*], 1947

- **Male or female body:**

Marcel Proust, *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, 1919

Rose Macaulay, *The Towers of Trebizond*, 1956

latter citations from Naomi Segal, "'Then some had rather it were *She* than *I*': sexing the textual body', in eds. Naomi Segal, Lib Taylor and Roger Cook, *Indeterminate Bodies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), pp. 93-110

Irony & recollection

... mon ami Tiberge, qui ne comprenait rien à cette scène, me suivait sans prononcer une parole. Il n'avait point entendu notre entretien. Il était demeuré à se promener dans la cour pendant que je parlais d'amour à ma belle maîtresse. Comme je redoutais sa sagesse, je me défis de lui par une commission dont je le priai de se charger. Ainsi j'eus le plaisir, en arrivant à l'auberge, d'entretenir seul la souveraine de mon cœur. Je reconnus bientôt que j'étais moins enfant que je ne le croyais. Mon cœur s'ouvrit à mille sentiments de plaisir dont je n'avais jamais eu l'idée. Une douce chaleur se répandit dans toutes mes veines. J'étais dans une espèce de transport, qui m'ôta pour quelque temps la liberté de la voix et qui ne s'exprimait que par mes yeux. Mademoiselle Manon Lescaut, c'est ainsi qu'elle me dit qu'on la nommait, parut fort satisfaite de cet effet de ses charmes. Je crus apercevoir qu'elle n'était pas moins émue que moi. Elle me confessa qu'elle me trouvait aimable et qu'elle serait ravie de m'avoir obligation de sa liberté. Elle voulut savoir qui j'étais, et cette connaissance augmenta son affection, parce qu'étant d'une naissance commune, elle se trouva flattée d'avoir fait la conquête d'un amant tel que moi.

Nous nous entretînmes des moyens d'être l'un à l'autre. Après quantité de réflexions, nous ne trouvâmes point d'autre voie que celle de la fuite. Il fallait tromper la vigilance du conducteur, qui était un homme à ménager, quoiqu'il ne fût qu'un domestique. Nous réglâmes que je ferais préparer pendant la nuit une chaise de poste, et que je reviendrais de grand matin à l'auberge avant qu'il fût éveillé ; que nous nous déroberions secrètement, et que nous irions droit à Paris, où nous nous ferions marier en arrivant. J'avais environ cinquante écus qui étaient le fruit de mes petites épargnes ; elle en avait à peu près le double. Nous nous imaginâmes, comme des enfants sans expérience, que cette somme ne finirait jamais, et nous ne comptâmes pas moins sur le succès de nos autres mesures.

Abbé Prévost, *Manon Lescaut*, 1753

Au pas saccadé de son cheval, Golo, plein d'un affreux dessein, sortait de la petite forêt triangulaire qui veloutait d'un vert sombre la pente d'une colline, et s'avancait en tressautant vers le château de la pauvre Geneviève de Brabant. Ce château était coupé selon une ligne courbe qui n'était autre que la limite d'un des

... my friend Tiberge, who did not understand anything of what was going on, followed me without saying a word. He had not heard our conversation. He had been walking up and down in the courtyard while I talked of love to my beautiful mistress. As I had no wish to listen to his lectures, I got rid of him by asking him to run an errand for me. Thus I had the delightful opportunity, once I was at the inn, of speaking alone with the queen of my heart. I realised at once that I was less of a child than I had thought. My heart opened up to all sorts of pleasurable feelings that I had never dreamt of before. A sweet warmth spread through all my veins. I was in a kind of ecstasy that for some time robbed me of the use of my voice, and was expressed only through my eyes. Mademoiselle Manon Lescaut – she told me this was her name – appeared most satisfied with the effect of her charms. I thought I could see that she was no less moved than I was. She confessed that she found me attractive and would be thrilled to owe her liberty to me. She wished to hear who I was, and this knowledge increased her affection for, being herself of common birth, she was flattered to have made the conquest of a lover of my quality.

We talked at length about how we could find a way to be together. After many discussions, we could find no other course of action than to run away together. We would have to deceive the driver, who was a man to be reckoned with, even though he was only a servant. We settled on the following plan: I would arrange for a post chaise to be made ready for us during the night and come back to the inn early in the morning before he was up and about; we would make our escape in secret and go straight to Paris, where we would be married immediately. I had around fifty écus, which were all of my small savings; she had about twice that amount. Like the children we were, we imagined this sum would last for ever, and had not the smallest doubt that all our other plans would work out equally well.

Riding at a jerky trot, filled with a dreadful plan, Golo was emerging from the small triangular forest that covered the slope of the hill in velvety dark green and heading fitfully towards the castle of poor Geneviève de Brabant. This castle was cut off short by a curved line which was in fact the circumference of one of the

ovales de verre ménages dans le châssis qu'on glissait entre les coulisses de la lanterne. Ce n'était qu'en pan de château et il avait devant lui une lande où rêvait Geneviève qui portait une ceinture bleue. Le château et la lande étaient jaunes et je n'avais pas attendu de les voir pour connaître leur couleur car, avant les verres du châssis, la sonorité mordorée du nom de Brabant me l'avait montrée avec évidence. Golo s'arrêtait un instant pour écouter avec tristesse le boniment lu à haute voix par ma grand-tante et qu'il avait l'air de comprendre parfaitement, conformant son attitude avec une docilité qui n'excluait pas une certaine majesté, aux indications du texte ; puis il s'éloignait du même pas saccadé. Et rien ne pouvait arrêter sa lente chevauchée. Si on bougeait la lanterne, je distinguais le cheval de Golo qui continuait à s'avancer sur les rideaux de la fenêtre, se bombant de leurs plis, descendant dans leurs fentes. Le corps de Golo lui-même, d'une essence aussi surnaturelle que celui de sa monture, s'arrangeait de tout obstacle matériel, de tout objet gênant qu'il rencontrait en le prenant comme ossature et en se le rendant intérieur, fût-ce le bouton de la porte sur lequel s'adaptait aussitôt et surnageait invinciblement sa robe rouge ou sa figure pâle toujours aussi noble et aussi mélancolique, mais qui ne laissait paraître aucun trouble de cette transvertébration.

Certes je leur trouvais du charme à ces brillantes projections qui semblaient émaner d'un passé mérovingien et promenaient autour de moi des reflets d'histoire si anciens. Mais je ne peux dire quel malaise me causait pourtant cette intrusion du mystère et de la beauté dans une chambre que j'avais fini par remplir de mon moi au point de ne pas faire plus attention à elle qu'à lui-même. L'influence anesthésiante de l'habitude ayant cessé, je me mettais à penser, à sentir, choses si tristes. Ce bouton de la porte de ma chambre, qui différait pour moi de tous les autres boutons de porte du monde en ceci qu'il semblait ouvrir tout seul, sans que j'eusse besoin de le tourner, tant le maniement m'en était devenu inconscient, le voilà qui servait de corps astral à Golo. Et dès qu'on sonnait le dîner, j'avais hâte de courir à la salle à manger où la grosse lampe de la suspension, ignorante de Golo et de Barbe-Bleue, et qui connaissant mes parents et le bœuf à la casserole, donnait sa lumière de tous les soirs ; et de tomber dans les bras de maman que les malheurs de Geneviève de Brabant me rendaient plus chère, tandis que les crimes de Golo me faisaient examiner ma propre conscience avec plus de scrupules.

Marcel Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann*, 1913

oval pieces of glass that were slid into slots in the frame of the lantern. It was only a section of the castle and below it there was a moorland, where Geneviève stood dreaming, wearing a blue girdle. The castle and the moor were yellow, but I did not need to see the glass panels to know their colour, because the sonorous old-gold hue of the name Brabant had made it quite clear to me. Golo would pause a moment and listen sadly to my great-aunt reading out loud the sales information; he seemed to understand it perfectly, for he adjusted his attitude to the details of the text, in a gesture that suggested not only docility but also a certain majesty; then he set off again at the same jerky pace. And nothing could halt his slow onward progress. If the lantern was moved, I could make out Golo's horse, advancing across the window curtains, swelling with their curves or sinking into their folds. The body of Golo himself, being made of the same supernatural substance as his mount, dealt with every material obstacle, every object in his way, by taking it into his skeleton, absorbing it into himself – even the door-knob, on which, adapting themselves at once and floating invincibly, his red robe or his pale face appeared, as noble and melancholic as before, but never showing any dismay at this transvertebration.

To be sure, I was charmed by these dazzling projections, which seemed to emanate from some Merovingian past and spread around me the reflections of such ancient history. And yet I cannot express the discomfort I felt, at the same time, at this intrusion of mystery and beauty into a bedroom which I had succeeded in filling with my personality to the point where I was no more aware of it than of my own self. With the anaesthetic effect of habit suddenly cut off, I began to think and feel – such sad sensations. My bedroom door-knob, which for me was different from every other door-knob in the world because it opened by itself without my having to turn it, so unconscious had I become of the need to handle it, here it was suddenly serving as Golo's astral body. And as soon as the dinner bell rang, I would make haste to run down to the dining-room where the big hanging lamp, ignorant of Golo and Bluebeard but well acquainted with my parents and beef stew, shone down just as it did every evening; and I would throw myself into the arms of my mother, who was made still dearer by the misfortunes of Geneviève de Brabant, while Golo's crimes made me examine my own conscience with more than usual scruples.

Ambiguities of the 'we'

Nous étions à l'Étude, quand le Proviseur entra, suivi d'un *nouveau* habillé en bourgeois et d'un garçon de classe qui portait un grand pupitre. Ceux qui dormaient se réveillèrent, et chacun se leva comme surpris dans son travail.

Le Proviseur nous fit signe de nous rasseoir ; puis, se tournant vers le maître d'études :

— Monsieur Roger, lui dit-il à demi-voix, voici un élève que je vous recommande, il entre en cinquième. Si son travail et sa conduite sont méritoires, il passera *dans les grands*, où l'appelle son âge.

Resté dans l'angle, derrière la porte, si bien qu'on l'apercevait à peine, le *nouveau* était un gars de la campagne, d'une quinzaine d'années environ, et plus haut de taille qu'aucun de nous tous. Il avait les cheveux coupés droit sur le front, comme un chantre de village, l'air raisonnable et fort embarrassé. Quoiqu'il ne fût pas large des épaules, son habit-veste de drap vert à boutons noirs devait le gêner aux entournures et laissait voir, par la fente des parements, des poignets rouges habitués à être nus. Ses jambes, en bas bleus, sortaient d'un pantalon jaunâtre très tiré par les bretelles. Il était chaussé de souliers forts, mal cirés, garnis de clous.

[...] Il serait maintenant impossible à aucun de nous de se rien rappeler de lui.

Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (1857)

Il arriva chez nous un dimanche de novembre 189...

Je continue à dire « chez nous », bien que la maison ne nous appartienne plus. Nous avons quitté le pays depuis bientôt quinze ans et nous n'y reviendrons certainement jamais.

Nous habitons les bâtiments du *Cours supérieur* de Sainte-Agathe. Mon père, que j'appelais M. Seurel, comme les autres élèves, y dirigeait à la fois le Cours supérieur, où l'on préparait le brevet d'instituteur, et le Cours moyen. Ma mère faisait la petite classe.

Une longue maison rouge, avec cinq portes vitrées, sous des vignes vierges, à l'extrémité du bourg ; une cour immense avec préaux et buanderie, qui ouvrait en avant sur le village par un grand portail ; sur le côté nord,

We were in the study room when the headmaster came in, followed by a 'new boy' not wearing uniform and by a school servant carrying a large desk. Those of us who were asleep woke up and everyone jumped to their feet, trying to give the impression they had been interrupted in the midst of their work.

The head gestured to us to sit down; then turning to the master on duty, said in a low voice:

'Monsieur Roger, I'm putting this pupil in your charge. He will start in the fifth. If his work and conduct warrant it, he will be moved up to "the seniors", as befits his age'.

The new boy could hardly be seen; he had hung back in the corner behind the door. He was a country lad, about fifteen years old, and a lot taller than the rest of us. He wore his hair in a fringe cut straight across his forehead like a village choirboy, and looked serious and very uncomfortable. Though he was not particularly broad-shouldered, it was clear that his jacket, which was made of green cloth with black buttons, felt too tight around the armpits, and at the openings of the cuffs you could see his wrists, red and raw-looking. Clad in blue stockings, his legs emerged from yellowish trousers that were pulled up tight by his braces. He was shod in ill-polished heavy hobnailed boots.

[...] By now not one of us would be able to remember a thing about him.

He arrived at our house one Sunday in November 189...

I still say 'our house', even though it no longer belongs to us. We left the area almost fifteen years ago and we will certainly never go back there.

We live in the buildings of the Sainte-Agathe 'Upper School'. My father, whom I called Monsieur Seurel, like the other pupils, taught both the upper forms, who were studying to become teachers, and the Middle School classes. My mother taught the little ones.

A long red-brick house with five French doors, covered in Virginia creeper, set at the edge of the market town; a huge yard with a playground and laundry-room opening onto the village at the front through a big gateway; on the north side,

la route où donnait une petite grille et qui menait vers La Gare, à trois kilomètres; au sud et par derrière, des champs, des jardins et des prés qui rejoignaient les faubourgs... tel est le plan sommaire de cette demeure où s'écoulèrent les jours les plus tourmentés et les plus chers de ma vie – demeure d'où partirent et où revinrent se briser, comme des vagues sur un rocher désert, nos aventures.

[...] Mais quelqu'un est venu qui m'a enlevé à tous ces plaisirs d'enfant paisible. Quelqu'un a soufflé la bougie qui éclairait pour moi le doux visage maternel penché sur le repas du soir. Quelqu'un a éteint la lampe autour de laquelle nous étions une famille heureuse, à la nuit, lorsque mon père avait accroché les volets de bois aux portes vitrées. Et celui-là, ce fut Augustin Meaulnes, que les autres élèves appelèrent bientôt le grand Meaulnes.

Alain-Fournier, *Le grand Meaulnes* (1913)

Une manière commode de faire la connaissance d'une ville est de chercher comment on y travaille, comment on y aime et comment on y meurt. Dans notre petite ville, est-ce l'effet du climat, tout cela se fait ensemble, du même air frénétique et absent. C'est-à-dire qu'on s'y ennuie et qu'on s'y applique à prendre des habitudes. Nos concitoyens travaillent beaucoup, mais toujours pour s'enrichir. Ils s'intéressent surtout au commerce et ils s'occupent d'abord, selon leur expression, de faire des affaires. Naturellement, ils ont du goût aussi pour les joies simples, ils aiment les femmes, le cinéma et les bains de mer.

[...] Du reste, le narrateur, qu'on connaîtra toujours à temps, n'aurait guère de titre à faire valoir dans une entreprise de ce genre si le hasard ne l'avait mis à même de recueillir un certain nombre de dépositions et si la force des choses ne l'avait mêlé à tout ce qu'il prétend relater.

[...] Cette chronique touche à sa fin. Il est temps que le docteur Bernard Rieux avoue qu'il en est l'auteur. Mais avant d'en retracer les derniers événements, il voudrait au moins justifier son intervention et faire comprendre qu'il ait tenu à prendre le ton du témoin objectif. Pendant toute la durée de la peste, son métier l'a mis à même de voir la plupart de ses concitoyens, et de recueillir leur sentiment. [...] Étant appelé à témoigner, à l'occasion d'une sorte de crime, il a gardé une certaine réserve, comme il convient à un témoin de bonne volonté.

Albert Camus, *La Peste* (1947)

beyond low railings, was the road to the Station three kilometres away; to the south at the back, fields, gardens and meadows stretched away to meet the outskirts of the town... This is the rough plan of the place where I spent the most painful and best-loved times of my life – it was the place from which our adventures departed and to which they returned, like waves breaking on a deserted rock.

[...] But someone came to take me away from all the pleasures of my quiet childhood existence. Someone blew out the candle that lit up the sweet face of my mother leaning over the table to prepare the evening meal. Someone put out the lamp around which we gathered, a happy family, in the evenings after my father had locked the wooden shutters that covered the French doors. That person was Augustin Meaulnes, whom the other pupils soon nicknamed 'big Meaulnes'.

Perhaps the easiest way of getting to know a town is to find out how the people in it work, how they love and how they die. In our little town – maybe this has something to do with the climate – all three are done in the same way, with the same frenetic yet casual air. The truth is that everyone is bored; they just spend their time acquiring habits. Our fellow citizens work hard, but only in order to get rich. They are really only interested in commerce and their chief pastime is, as they put it, 'doing business'. Of course they also enjoy the simple pleasures of life: they love women, going to the pictures and swimming in the sea.

[...] In any case, the narrator (whose identity will be revealed in due course) would have little claim to get involved in a task like this if chance had not put him in a position where he was able to gather a lot of evidence and if he had not been, in the course of things, closely involved in all the things he is about to relate.

[...] This chronicle is drawing to an end, and now is the time for Dr Bernard Rieux to confess that he is its author. But, before describing the closing scenes, he would at least wish to justify his undertaking and make clear that he tried at all times to adopt the tone of an objective observer. Throughout the course of the plague, his profession enabled him to see what was going on with most of his fellow citizens and hear how they were feeling. [...] Summoned to give evidence regarding what was a sort of crime, he has exercised the restraint that behoves a conscientious witness.

Male or female body

Seul, je restai simplement devant le Grand-Hôtel à attendre le moment d'aller retrouver ma grand-mère, quand, presque encore à l'extrémité de la digue où elles faisaient mouvoir une tache singulière, je vis s'avancer cinq ou six fillettes, [aussi] différentes, par l'aspect et par les façons, de toutes les personnes auxquelles on était accoutumé à Balbec

[...] Une de ces inconnues poussait devant elle, de la main, sa bicyclette ; deux autres tenaient des « clubs » de golf ; et leur accoutrement tranchait sur celui des autres jeunes filles de Balbec, parmi lesquelles quelques-unes, il est vrai, se livraient aux sports, mais sans adopter pour cela une tenue spéciale.

[...] Au milieu de tous ces gens dont quelques-uns poursuivaient une pensée, mais en trahissant alors la mobilité par un saccade de gestes, une divagation de regards, aussi peu harmonieuses que la circonspecte titubation de leurs voisins, les fillettes que j'avais aperçues, avec la maîtrise de gestes que donne un parfait assouplissement de son propre corps et un mépris sincère du reste de l'humanité, venaient tout droit devant elles, sans hésitation ni raideur, exécutant exactement les mouvements qu'elles voulaient, dans une pleine indépendance de chacun de leurs membres par rapport aux autres, la plus grande partie de leurs corps gardant cette immobilité si remarquable chez les bonnes valseuses.

[...] Ce n'était peut-être pas, dans la vie, le hasard seul qui, pour réunir ces amies, les avait toutes choisies si belles ; peut-être ces filles (dont l'attitude suffisait à révéler la nature hardie, frivole et dure), extrêmement sensibles à tout ridicule et à toute laideur, incapables de subir un attrait d'ordre intellectuel ou moral, s'étaient-elles naturellement trouvées, parmi les camarades de leur âge, éprouver de la répulsion pour toutes celles chez qui des dispositions pensives ou sensibles se trahissaient par de la timidité, de la gêne, de la gaucherie, par ce qu'elles devaient appeler « un genre antipathique » et les avaient-elles tenues à l'écart ;

Marcel Proust, *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* (1919)

Left by myself, I was just hanging about in front of the Grand Hotel until it was time for me to join my grandmother, when I saw coming towards me, still almost at the far end of the 'front', along which they projected a strange patch of colour, five or six young girls, [as] different in appearance and manner from all the other people one usually saw at Balbec

[...] one of these strangers was pushing her bicycle with one hand; two others were carrying golf-clubs; and their general attire was in stark contrast to that of all the other girls of Balbec – even though some of them did go in for sport, but without wearing any special outfit.

[...] Among all these people, some of whom may have been in the middle of a train of thought but, if they were, betrayed a wandering mind by spasmodic gestures, their eyes moving about in just as inharmonious a way as the more careful titubation of their neighbours, those girls I had glimpsed – with that mastery of movement which comes from a perfect suppleness of limb and a sincere contempt for the rest of humankind – strode straight ahead, with neither hesitation nor stiffness, executing exactly the motions they wanted, each one in total independence of the others, and most of their bodies keeping the extraordinary stillness that is typical of the greatest female waltzers.

[...] It was perhaps not pure chance in life that had chosen, among this group of friends, so many beauties; perhaps these girls (whose bold, frivolous, hard nature was easy to see from their every gesture) had simply found themselves, excessively sensitive to anything ridiculous or ugly, incapable of giving in to any moral or intellectual attraction, repelled by all the other girls of their own age, especially those whose thoughtful or sensitive disposition was betrayed by shyness, awkwardness or modesty – by what they called their 'unattractive style' – and kept well away from them;

What then can I do with a statement like this: 'He told me that the Imam was saying that I must hold no services in Trabzon, or he would call the police. I said I would hold no services, since I was not, as he could see, a priest' (Macaulay 1956: 115). The speaker is the narrator of Rose Macaulay's (1881-1958) *The Towers of Trebizond*, whom other characters occasionally address by the indeterminate name of Laurie. Laurie goes 'bathing' in waters where local women are not allowed to swim, but I do not know whether this is because s/he is a man or simply not a local woman. In the same way I do not know why s/he cannot possibly be a priest. In order to read these lines I need to know what it is in the visible appearance of this character that makes secularity so obvious. Not knowing how to 'see' the speaker of the text is both a bar and a stimulus to entry into it.

There are a number of ways in which I may try to resolve the issue. 1950s readers would have known what few will nowadays: that Macaulay was, like Laurie, a traveller and writer, had been to Cambridge, and wrote books in which sex-role surprises are by no means exceptional, though never in quite this form. Her novels open with such phrases as 'Johnny was at Balliol and Jane at Somerville [...] Jane had always been just a shade cleverer' (Macaulay 1920: 3-5), or 'Mrs Richard Aubrey, [...] a Cambridge classical don' (Macaulay 1948: 7), and she carefully starts a feminist discussion by inviting her reader to 'consider some of the problems incidental to belonging, *as we nearly all must*, to one of the two sexes commonly found upon this planet' (Macaulay 1926: 95, italics mine). As Jeanette Passty points out, she specialises in refined male and robust female characters, and was very insistent that the blurb and publicity material of all her novels 'must not reveal the sex of the chief figure' (Passty 1988: 143).

But let's assume I discover this text in 2001, and am entirely ignorant of its author, now dropped from the canon. How do I situate Laurie in the following adverbial comment? The benighted Father Chantry-Pigg is describing the shock of Arab missionaries in London at

'our bare-headed and bare-armed women in the streets. They said it led to unbridled temptation among men.'

'Men must learn to bridle their temptations,' said Aunt Dot, always an optimist.

(Macaulay 1956: 21)

or in the following chain of pairs: '[Love] had submerged Anthony and Cleopatra, and Abelard and Heloise, and Lancelot and Guinevere, and Paolo and Francesca, and Romeo and Juliet, and Charles Parnell and Faust, and Oscar Wilde and me' (84).

When s/he buys a love-potion from a magician or offers a lift to a man whose wife is slogging along with the bags several yards behind, or takes a dip a mile down the coast from the boys' bathing-place, or on the other hand goes swimming with the male student Xenophon with whom s/he also shares the job of putting up the tent, I want to know if these gestures must be measured from the polar norms of male or female behaviour. And yet as soon as I make my assumptions I observe other possible causes of deviance: the alienation of the traveller, the upper-class dilettante, the non-Muslim or lapsed Anglican... Or again I might pursue a vaguely gendered discourse-theory. But do the characters who exclaim 'my poor Laurie' (100) or 'my dear sweet child' (156) feminise their addressee or themselves (the speakers are both women)? And is the *faux-naïf* tone of Laurie's narrative, with its endless strings - 'The Byzantines [...] had had no dull moments, they had babbled and built and painted and quarrelled and murdered and tortured and prayed and formed heresies and doctrines and creeds and sacramentaries' (118-9) - a sign of native simplicity, feminine ignorance or a parody of theological and historical one-trackmindedness?

All these ways of trying to form a protagonist 'belonging, as we nearly all must, to one of the two sexes' prove to have less to do with sex than with gender. But the key to the undecidability of this text lies in the third possible direction, that of desire. Laurie is in love with a second cousin called Vere. While Laurie rides a camel through testing terrain, Vere luxuriates on a rich friend's yacht. When they rendezvous after a long time apart: 'what I saw [...] was Vere standing at the reception desk and giving a note to the reception clerk, and so we met, and then nothing else seemed to matter' (148). It matters to us. At the instant of recognition, the reader is excluded from the erotics of the first-/second-person encounter, kept out by the impossibility of visualising the two lovers. Usually in fiction we are allowed all the voyeurism we wish, if not by direct representation then by the stimulation of hints and winks. Here there is neither circumlocution nor reification. Eventually - but only after he has been killed in a car crash - the reader learns that the beloved was a man. Laurie, who is partially to blame for the accident, reflects:

I had come between Vere and his wife for ten years; he had given me his love, mental and physical, and I had taken it; to that extent I was a thief. His wife knew it, but we had never spoken of it; indeed, I barely knew her. We had none of us wanted divorce, because of the children; I liked it better as it was, love and no ties. I suppose I had ruined the wife's life, because she had adored him. Vere always said that he was fonder of her because of me; men are given to saying this. But really she bored him; if she had not bored him, he would not have fallen in love with me. If I had refused to be his lover he would no doubt, sooner or later, have found someone else. (219)

To derive from this whether Laurie is a woman or a man I need to have a narrow assumption of sexual practice which the text does little to encourage. Earlier in the text I have seen the two partners in another presumably sexual couple part and complain about each other; one is eaten by a shark and the other plagiarises his notebooks. These two characters have the unproblematically male names of David and Charles. It is clear that Laurie's and Vere's names are sexually unspecific - but not perhaps clear why. Compare the names of shady Clare Quilty and anagrammatic Vivian Darkbloom that haunt the doubly-named Humbert Humbert desperate to guess which of them might be the man who will steal his beloved. What difference would it make, after all: it is polymorphous perversity that is taking Lolita away from his excessive heterosexuality, and the fizzing names are merely the symptom. This is not what is going on with Laurie and Vere.