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Confessing the Self through Translation: The Evolution of Proust's Young Girl¹

NICOLE A. COSENTINO, PH.D.

Every day, I plan several funerals. I anticipate the loss of things that are either still with me or that I never had. This inclination toward the expectation of unexplained absence is, no doubt, the remanence of an earlier chapter of my own experience. So, as I started to think of Marcel Proust (1871-1922) more critically as a constructor of worlds, it was hard for me not to see him as a destroyer of selves as well. Perhaps one of the most prominent passages from *Swann's Way*² (SW; 1913)—aside from the Narrator's involuntary recollection of his past vis-à-vis the tea-dipped madeleine—is the one in which the youngest version of the Narrator anxiously awaits the arrival of his mother's goodnight kiss. This passage stands out because he is already mourning the loss of a memory that has yet to surface to a present moment. In this moment, it becomes clear that the passage of time happens before the event takes place for Proust's young Narrator, and such anxiety speaks to a deeper longing for this subject to be seen, understood, and loved without judgement. An argument can be constructed, then, that most of Proust's time is mourning time. Anticipation is birthed in agony and dragged on through wasted hours, and Proust's Narrator endures this liminal limbo for a coveted—albeit, shame-induced—ritual with his mother. But, even when his mother is with him, she is gone. Time with her is expired well before it begins, and it is for this reason that Proust must erect spaces and subjects to fill time.

There is thus a funereal essence to Marcel Proust's prose that, seemingly antithetically, proves to be the very heartbeat of it. In surveying Proust's literary repertoire, it became apparent to me that Proust's desire to live as an openly queer subject is tested through a series of iterations of the self. Literature is a play space, and Proust uses it to construct and reconstruct identities. What is especially important about this practice, though, is that for each new iteration of Proust's self to truly come into existence, so too must the iteration that preceded it die. Accordingly, time and the passage of time in Proust provides opportunities for such recreations to occur. As Leo Bersani notes, "The literary treatment of the past is . . . a constant exploration of the narrator's ability to re-create the self imaginatively . . . The story of a life whose meaning is fully realized only when that life is transformed into literature necessarily illustrates a progress from what is given in life to what is imagined and invented in art" (5). Thus, the ever-in-the-closet Proust relied on proxies or authorial surrogates to engage in the deviant acts that early 20th century individuals, inclined to a most hypocritical post-Victorian sensibility, found to be distasteful and unnatural.

In what follows, I argue that Proust utilizes the blank, imaginary space of literature as a regenerative canvas on which he creates and recreates himself via authorial proxies and surrogates. More specifically, I focus on one of Proust's earliest short stories, "A Young Girl's Confession" (AYGC; 1896) and analyze how the young girl functions to Proust's benefit on two levels. On the one hand, the anonymous young girl serves as a social and sexual martyr for

¹ *This article is an edited, abridged excerpt from the author's dissertation, *Queer Outings in Imaginary Spaces* (2022), from the chapter titled, "Proust's Split Self: The Cultivation and Evolution of His Martyrs."

² With the exception of introductory or concluding ideas, *Swann's Way* will appear as SW throughout.

Proust. On the other hand, the young girl functions as the earliest version of the Narrator in *A La Recherche Du Temps Perdu* (1913; *A La Recherche*). For the purpose of this paper, the term “martyr” should be understood as a proxy that exists *specifically* as a test subject for an author to “safely” experiment with different perspectives on and practices of vice. Additionally, a “test subject” functions as a literary persona that first emerges in one form only to resurface somewhere later in the author’s repertoire. Such is the case with Proust’s young girl. She is both the martyr *and* the test subject in Proust’s work. The essence of Proust’s young girl—who is, no doubt, a self-realized mimetic nod to Proust himself—is one that is ever-evolving; therefore, she is always dying. The processional begins at the point of the young girl and ends with the Narrator/ Albertine in *A La Recherche*. What makes Proust’s artistry that much more pronounced is the manner in which this evolution occurs. As I see it, that which makes such evolution possible in Proust is made possible by a balance of transpositions and translations. Proust provides the clues in his literature, but we cannot realize the full journey of Proust-the-Author until we see the many versions of Proust-the-character on paper. Thus, in creating and recreating various iterations of the self, Proust also creates a code that determines social variants through mediums of social acceptance, rejection, and indifference.

Proust utilizes his captive Albertine to create both literary opportunities for non-normative sexual expression as well personal exploration; this happens through acts of translation. In doing so, Proust attempts to create a perfect test subject in Albertine, whose first iteration is an anonymous young girl from a short story published years earlier. So, to establish this concept of translating the self/ creating a new self in order to express oneself more freely in literature, it is critical that we consider a brief, but important, moment in Gide’s *Corydon* (1920) where Gide-the-Narrator and his friend Corydon are discussing Corydon’s forthcoming work, *Defense of Pederasty*. Corydon explains that in order for the book to *work*, he must find “martyrs to the cause” (Gide 10). Confused, Gide-the-Narrator asks for clarification, to which Corydon replies, “[The Martyr would be] Someone who would forestall any attack—who without bragging or showing off would bear the disapproval, the insults, or better still, who would be of such acknowledged merit—such integrity and uprightness—that disapproval would hesitate from the start” (Gide 10-11). What Gide’s Corydon is explaining happens to be exactly what Proust is doing with his characters; in order to self-preserve, Proust-the-Author uses martyrs who take the fall for their transgressions, when really those transgressions are simply expressions of the author’s truths, desires, or lived experiences. Thus, in translating different versions of himself into his fictional, narratological spaces and assigning subjects to these roles, Proust successfully engages with the “deviant” areas of his sexual desires, social anxieties, and general discomforts under the guise of fiction.

“A Young Girl’s Confession” is arguably the first literary space in which Proust directly confronts his own sexual digressions, using the sexual divergence of the young girl as his Martyr figure. Since Proust was very much tethered to his mother and yearned for her undivided attention, he put “a thousand loving kisses” out into the world for his mother, (not so) silently proclaiming her the great love of his life; and we see this connection between the young girl—a proxy for Proust—and her feelings toward her mother (*Letters* 66-71). It is this early identity that creates the precedent for future Marceles yet to emerge. The mother-boy Marcel often sought a sense of security and love, finding that only his mother could fill such a void. It is in this short story (just shy of 16 pages) that Proust utilizes an anonymous narrator who eventually becomes split into the maternally-dependent Narrator and the vice-chasing Albertine in *A La Recherche*.

“A Young Girl’s Confession” thus establishes the strong themes of maternal yearning and the need for maternal acceptance as well as the fear of—and eventual acquiescence to—engaging in deviant sexual behaviors deemed shameful during the early 20th century. The young girl about whom the story is written is nameless like our Narrator in *A La Recherche*. Though the AYGC story does not begin with an epistle about her early bedtime rituals, it does quickly elucidate the young girl’s need for her mother. In AYGC, the narrator is separated from her mother for months at a time (a situation that seems similar to a boarding school), so when the mother is near, she wants to experience all of her maternal presence. In AYGC, Proust writes:

My mother would take me to *Les Oublis*³ toward the end of April, would leave again after two days, spend two more days there in the middle of May, then, in the last week of June would come to take me away. These visits, so short, were the sweetest and the most cruel thing to me. During these two days she would be lavish of her tenderness which habitually, in order to strengthen me and mitigate my excessive susceptibility, she would avariciously withhold. On the two evenings she spent at *Les Oublis*, she would come to kiss me goodnight after I was in bed, an old custom which she had abandoned because it caused me too much pleasure and too much pain, because due to my calling her back to say goodnight again and again I could never go to sleep, not daring finally to call her any more, but feeling more than ever the passionate need, always inventing new excuses, my burning pillow to be turned, my icy feet which her hands alone could warm. (AYGC 32).

Here, we see a filial sense of disconnection between the parent and the child, a theme that will gain greater depth in the relationship between the Narrator and his mother in *La Recherche*. In the case of AYGC, it is the young girl’s mother’s inclination to be emotionally withholding in order to strengthen her daughter that presages the Narrator of *A La Recherche*’s anxieties about time robbed with his mother. In AYGC Proust writes: “In order to strengthen me and mitigate my excessive susceptibility, she would avariciously withhold [her affection]” (AYGC 32). The withholding parent trope is created here between mother and daughter, a seemingly “natural” connection between women, but this trope quickly translates into a mother/ son dynamic on the earliest pages of *A La Recherche*. While the discourse relative to the Narrator’s mother does not outwardly condemn her refusal to give her son the attention he wants from her, the presence of the father in *A La Recherche* complicates this.

Let us now consider some of the earliest passages in Proust’s first volume of *A La Recherche*, *Swann’s Way*, in order to track the development of the transposed self through acts of translation. Proust writes:

My sole consolation when I went upstairs for the night was that Mamma would come in and kiss me after I was in bed. But this good night lasted for so short a time, she went down again so soon that the moment in which I heard her climb the stairs, and then caught the sound of her garden dress of blue muslin, from which hung little tassels of plaited straw, rustling along the double-doored corridor, was for me a moment of the utmost pain; for it heralded the moment which was to follow it, when she would have left me and gone downstairs again . . . I longed to call her back, to say to her ‘Kiss me just once more,’ but I knew that then she would at once look displeased, for the concession

³ A surrogate for the fictional Balbec in *A La Recherche*.

which she made to my wretchedness and agitation in coming up to give me this kiss of peace always annoyed my father, who thought such rituals absurd, and she would have liked to try to induce me to outgrow the need, the habit, of having her there at all, let alone get into the habit of asking her for an additional kiss when she was already crossing the threshold. (SW 15)

Like the young girl, the Narrator also experiences anxiety about abandonment and disappointing the mother figure. In both cases, the narrators' rationales are parallel: too much affection from mother ultimately makes the child dependent, thus making proper development nearly impossible. In reading these two passages alongside each other, I see the *need* for the mother's kiss as both the root of pleasure and pain. In AYG, the Narrator says of her mother, "she would come to kiss me good night after I was in bed, an old custom she had abandoned because it caused me too much pleasure and too much pain" because the young girl would constantly call her mother back to her room for more kisses (32). It is clear that the young girl is willing and able to call her mother back several times without fear of repercussions, since there is no discernable father figure in this short story. Proust picks up on this key moment of mother-child intimacy in *A La Recherche*, though there are repercussions for the young male Narrator: "My sole consolation when I went upstairs for the night was that Mamma would come in and kiss me after I was in bed . . . I longed to call her back [but didn't because coming back] . . . to give me the kiss of peace always annoyed my father" (SW 15). In deepening the trope of maternal yearning in *A La Recherche* as an extension of the experience in AYG, Proust calls attention to the fact that a male presence—in AYG, Jacques, and in SW, the father—complicates the Narrator's ability to be close with the mother. Aside from the presence of both parents in SW, it is important to note that the mother continues to return to her daughter's room in AYG for an elongated period of time, whereas in SW, it is understood that the Narrator is allowed one kiss, and he spends his entire day and night anxious about the little time he gets to spend with his beloved mother.

The series of confessions that spring from this short story are all rooted in a socio-sexual context. The first confession is the love for her mother; the second is her sexual encounter with her male cousin; the third is her desire to be with Jacques so badly that "Spending all the time [she] was not with him thinking about him, [she] finally sank so low as to resemble him as nearly as that was possible" (AYG 38). This confession of cross-dressing presages the transvestitism yet to come in *A La Recherche*, exercised by characters like Charlus, Odette de Crécy (before she becomes Mme. Swann), and, of course, Albertine. That the moment of resembling the male for whom she thirsted is her lowest point speaks directly to Proust's feelings about his own sexual desires and fears of publicly being labeled a pederast.

These transpositions of Albertine's character and subjectivity qualify her as a kind of literary chameleon, similar to her creator, whose visage, physiognomy, and entire being can shift based on the perception of the observer.⁴ In a later scene following a visit to Elstir's studio, the Narrator sees Albertine and declares, "Albertine had not seemed to me that day to be the same Albertine as on previous days, and that each time I saw her she was to appear different . . . certain modifications in the appearance, the importance, the stature of a person may also be due

⁴ This is a trait that is not limited to Albertine, but is true of nearly every fully-developed character in the book.

to the variability of certain states of consciousness interposed between that person and ourselves” (WABG 595). Albertine continues to shift based on the needs, anxieties, and suspicions of the Narrator—all of which are extensions of Proust’s own emotional and psychological apprehensions and misgivings. Interestingly, the Narrator declares how little he knows about Albertine, recognizing perhaps how little Proust truly knows about himself, since forcible repression led him to a somewhat secluded and lonely life. The Narrator pointedly asks himself (therefore, Proust pointedly asks himself): “What did I know of Albertine? One or two glimpses of a profile against the sea, less beautiful, assuredly, than those of Veronese’s women whom I ought, had I been guided purely by aesthetic reasons, to have preferred her” (WABG 597). Though Albertine is not the desired “type” for the Narrator—since the Narrator knows to whom he “ought” to be attracted—he “had thought about her endlessly . . . [carrying on with what he] called by her name an interminable inner dialogue in which I made her question and answer . . .” (WABG 597). In the imaginary space where Albertine is already under the control of the Narrator, we get a clear sense that the “interminable dialogue” in which the two subjects are engaged has to do with Proust’s inner desires, those which are acted out by Albertine because Proust is too suspicious of public backlash to do the same. Within this suspicious space, the Narrator’s “various strategies become the causes of new feelings and new behavior . . . [and he] analyzes in great detail how both his need of Albertine and his slow detachment from her develop because of what he does to keep her with him” (Bersani 123). As Proust writes, the Narrator’s Albertine is both question and answer—she is the mirror into which Proust looks and engages in dialogue; such moments bring with them feelings of triumph, curiosity, and disgust.

The last images we “see” of Albertine are death images. As Carson assesses, Albertine is seen quite frequently in a sleep-like state, a state often likened to death. Once the Narrator and Albertine make the decision to end their tryst, the Narrator, once again, observes the sleeping Albertine: “It was indeed a dead woman that I saw when, presently, I entered her room . . . her sheets, wrapped around her body like a shroud . . . the head alone was emerging from the tomb, awaiting in its sleep the Archangel’s trumpet” (TC 485). Not only does this moment foreground Albertine’s death, but it also provides the avenue by which Proust-the-Author contradicts the discourse of Proust-the-Narrator with regard to Albertine’s wish to be killed than to be outed, which brings us back to the plight of the young girl’s failed suicide in Proust’s short story.

In this work, I have considered how the sexual transposition of Proust-the-Author into different versions of his narrators afforded the closeted writer the opportunity to utilize Gide’s approach to creating fictional, literary martyrs as a way to explore the self. Proust’s deviant self is first manifested in the form of an anonymous young girl AYG. That young girl is a translation of Proust’s innermost fear: disappointing mother. Once the young girl ceases to exist, she evolves into a fuller, male version of Proust-the-Author in *A La Recherche*, where the young girl’s plight is translated onto the male Narrator whose anxieties mirror his literary predecessor. From these characters emerges Albertine, a decidedly unknowable character, who, like Gide’s fictional Corydon is both the question and the answer, the truth and the lie, the real and the imaginary.

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