

Julius Edwin Rivers

*PROUST AND THE ART OF LOVE: THE AESTHETICS  
OF SEXUALITY IN THE LIFE, TIMES, & ART OF  
MARCEL PROUST*

New York: Columbia University Press, 1980. Pp. xii + 327.

Reviewed by Patrick Brady

This work begins excellently by asserting that “the multiplicity of Proust requires a multiplicity of approach” (p. ix). This does not necessarily imply forfeiting the right to criticize certain approaches, of course, and in fact the author promptly begins to dismantle very convincingly the Freudian view(s) of homosexuality. Referring to “the fact that homosexuality is a perennial adjunct of mammalian sexuality” (14), Rivers wittily asks: “Are we to assume the existence of close-binding-intimate porcupine mothers and detached-hostile porpoise fathers?” (p. ix). Actually, the author is quite restrained when he writes: “And perhaps these characters are not the *pis aller* of a writer incapable of creating or understanding women” (p. 9); indeed, it is very arguable that a homosexual man, especially if effeminate, may understand women much more deeply than a heterosexual, through identification.

However, Rivers soon begins to get into hot water. Thus he counters an argument developed by Jocelyn Brooke with the sentence: “This is a statement with which Proust would have strongly disagreed” (p. 23)—as if a critic who disagrees with the author is automatically wrong (and this in spite of the fact that Rivers himself disagrees with Proust, as we shall see in a moment). He argues that it is “naive to suppose that a writer’s life and art are not related to each other” (p. 30), thus attacking an extreme and quite imaginary thesis apparently confused with the view that they should be studied separately (which Proust demanded in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*—but Rivers claims he didn’t really mean it: “Proust probably overstated his arguments”; p. 30).

All of this prepares us for the blunt statement that “in order to discuss the question of love in *A la recherche*, a firm grasp on the relevant facts of Proust’s life is indispensable” (p. 30). So it turns out that, in spite of the repeated criticism of George Painter’s Freudian interpretations, we are back to the fallacious attitude towards the relationship between author and work adopted years ago by that writer. Rivers quotes in support of this position a sentence from Maurice Bardèche: “How can we account for the genius of Marcel Proust without beginning with the sensibility of Marcel Proust, in order to show how it became thought?” (p. 30). This statement, however, both is distressingly naive in itself and furthermore provides little real support for Rivers. The phrase “account for the genius of” can scarcely be interpreted to mean “appreciate the literary art of”. Are we to believe that, if *A la recherche* were anonymous, its brilliance would be quite undetectable? Such a notion is ludicrous, and would not be espoused by any genuine admirer of this consummate masterpiece. On the other hand, if “account for” means “explain,” the goal is absurd because it is unattainable. No-one can *explain* genius.

Later Rivers seems to return to an acceptance of the immanent perspective: “There are special kinds of meaning that inhere in the text itself—its language, its structures, its theories, its myths... The remainder of the study will examine [the] evolution [of sexuality] as a theme in Proust’s work” (p. 107). And yet the chapter that begins on this promising note returns to external, historical information. It is not until halfway through the volume that internal analysis is carried out consistently. This analysis is interesting, however, in spite of its rather special focus (namely, homosexuality); and the biographical and historical information of the first half is also valuable and convincingly discussed and, when necessary, argued. The only major flaw is the old-fashioned obsession with biography that has always plagued Proust criticism. (This problem also troubles the reader of Alain Buisine’s study *Proust et ses lettres* [Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1983]. More subtle and more rigorous is the position adopted by Patrizia Oppici in her volume *Proust e il movimento immobile* [Pisa: Goliardica, 1983].

In spite of these reservations, this is a volume full of feisty polemics, both historical and anti-Freudian, and well worth reading for all those interested in Marcel Proust.