

Review of Graham Robb's *Strangers: Homosexual Love in the Nineteenth Century*
W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003, 342 pages

Other Citations:

- Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, Modern Library, 2003
- Rictor Norton (Ed.), *Class-based Erotics*. 21 Dec. 1999; updated 24 January 2003 <http://www.infopt.demon.co.uk/class.htm>
- Emily Eells, *Proust's Cup of Tea: Homoeroticism and Victorian Culture*, Ashgate Publishing Co., 2002.

By Summer Block

In a recent *New Yorker* magazine article on the modern notion of parenthood, Joan Acocella cleverly summarizes the evolution of an idea this way: "First, a French person, with great brilliance and little regard for standards of evidence, promulgates a theory overturning dearly held beliefs. Second, many academics, especially the young, seize on the theory and run with it, in the process loading it with far more emotional and political freight than the French thinker—who, after all, was just 'doing theory'—had in mind." If there is one example that proves her point, it is surely Foucault's theory of homosexuality, often oversimplified to say that homosexuals didn't exist before there was a name for them. Once quite revolutionary, this idea is now such a commonplace that when I mentioned to various friends that I was reviewing a book on homosexuality in the Victorian era, more than half sagely remarked, "You know, there wasn't really a concept of homosexuals as distinct persons in that era."

Now Graham Robb, author of acclaimed biographies of Rimbaud and Balzac, has come along to rock the boat. In his chatty new survey of Victorian homosexuality, *Strangers: Homosexual Love in 19th-Century Europe and America*, he argues that homosexuals in the 19th-century were neither uniformly oppressed nor anonymously unnamed. Many gay men and women led open, fulfilling lives, identifying themselves as homosexual in a modern sense and living in thriving gay communities.

Robb's work is divided into three sections. In the first, he discusses the legal and medical response to homosexuality, including anti-sodomy laws and codification of gay "symptoms" and "cures." In the second, he investigates the personal lives of gay men and women and their communities, including their meaningful responses to persecution and misunderstanding. Lastly, in a somewhat piecemeal final section, he offers examples of the ways in which homosexuals influenced dominant culture, through such disparate means as detective novels, fairy tales, and christology.

Despite a healthy bibliography and an appendix of not-particularly-useful graphs, Robb's work is more conversation than scholarship. It is with no disrespect that I call it "literary": many of his examples are drawn from literature or the lives of writers, and much of his evidence is delivered in the form of lively anecdotes. Even when not rigorous, the collection is a pleasure to

read, eye-opening and smart. While other critics have suggested that Robb gives short shrift to lesbian history or to the history of the working classes, I was struck more by the bias of his literary references. A biographer's natural bias aside, Robb still gives Balzac (and many other writers) more time than Proust. Yet reading *Strangers*, I was reminded again and again of *In Search of Lost Time*, in which many of the topics raised by Robb are given a more full and complex treatment.

Robb makes the wise and humane decision to situate his discussion of homosexuality in large part around loving relationships, unlike many queer histories that focus primarily on sexual identity and politics. Placing homosexual relationships in this broad human context deepens and elucidates them. It also gives them a history and a perspective outside of the purely political. As Proust knew well, love leads to powerlessness for many, gay or straight. Closeted gays experience a more cruel and extreme form of the loneliness that marks the entire romantic experience: for Proust, all love is a secret tragedy, a hidden suffering. The terrible alienation that Charlus feels because of Morel is a close cousin of that the narrator feels because of Albertine, or Swann because of Odette. As Robb says, "Any celebration of specifically gay forms of communication runs the risk of making love itself look like an accessory."

Moreover, for Proust as for many other Victorian writers (Forster and Wilde among them) homosexuality was to be understood alongside other forms of difference, including those of class and ethnicity. Surely Proust's own treatment of homosexuality must be understood in this varied context of difference. The Dreyfus affair, mention of which saturates *In Search of Lost Time*, serves the same function in many respects as the "inversion" of Charlus or Albertine—Jewishness is an identity part organic, part socially constructed, around which all manner of communities cluster.

Class is central not only to Proust, but to homosexual erotics in the Victorian era and later. Jupien's dependence on Charlus, Charlus' menagerie of working men in his whorehouse and his love for the middle-class Morel, Albertine's social climbing. This sort of social upheaval was not exclusively homosexual in nature—Odette and Swann's heterosexual relationship parallels Charlus and Morel's in many respects. The loss of social clout is only part of a larger picture of sacrifice, as are the professional and personal contacts the narrator throws over for the imprisoned Albertine: desire causes you to sacrifice all that are, your ethnicity, your sexual and class identity, and your morals and your intellect.

In a series of fascinating anecdotes drawn from letters and diaries, Robb discusses the importance of hidden symbols to Victorian gay culture, an arcane web of references that changed as often as fashions while safeguarding a community. These secret signs and symbols (green carnations, poodles, red neckties and handkerchiefs) were part of a ritual of performance and display that allowed homosexuals to identify one another and to exist "openly" in front of the eyes of a larger culture. Proust, too, delights in these symbols, hidden languages, and codes of fashion: in her book *Proust's Cup of Tea: Homoeroticism and Victorian Culture*, Emily Eells discusses his use of the English language as a form of coded language.

Though the closeted individual often led a somewhat solitary life, significant gay communities existed throughout Europe and America, including those in Paris, Berlin, San

Francisco, New York, and Amsterdam. Like the insular world of the Verdurin's salon, these worlds were formed around differences, bound together by desires and complicated emotional alliances. Again, these communities were not formed around purely sexual identities—Robb discusses the social ramifications of the Wilde trials, for instance, in which “Wilde’s sexual habits were shocking, but so was the blatant disregard for class divisions that seemed to go with them,” and his Irishness was equally damning.

Perhaps Robb's greatest contribution in his worthy endeavor is to bring the Victorian homosexual out of the darkness of misunderstanding and suffering, and show him in the many ways he was healthy, well-adjusted, even triumphant. In his sympathetic and balanced portrayal, Robb argues that “It may seem flippant or callous to play down the perils of homosexual life in the Victorian age . . . The point is that the criminal statistics distort and darken the lives of real people.”