

Albertine's Bicycle, or: Women and French Identity during the Belle Epoque

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Seul, je restai simplement devant le Grand-Hôtel [...] quand [...] je vis avancer cinq ou six fillettes, aussi différentes, par l'aspect et par les façons, de toutes les personnes auxquelles on était accoutumé à Balbec, qu'aurait pu l'être, débarquée on ne sait d'où, une bande de mouettes [...]. Une de ces inconnues poussait devant elle, de la main, sa bicyclette.

Marcel Proust, *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*.¹

It is often suggested that French identity was reconstructed during the early years of the Third Republic, after the trauma of the Franco-Prussian war and the gradual elimination of attempts to revive either the monarchy or the Empire. The consolidation of republican institutions, and the national and republican pride instilled in French children through the primary school under Jules Ferry in the 1880s, are convincingly portrayed by historians such as Eugen Weber, in his *Peasants into Frenchmen* (1977), as contributing to a unitary sense of nationhood.² Weber's very title, however, points to some gender trouble. This turns up again in Benedict Anderson's analysis of 'imagined communities', in which France is a constant presence.³ The collectively imagined community often turns out in Anderson's book to be male-centred, with a recurring note of 'fraternity', of violence ('dying for the nation'), and even of 'reassuring fratricide', located in previous internal civil strife. With the overtly masculine language of fraternity being so closely linked to identity, what kind of national identity, one might inquire, were women supposed to adhere to? Although during the period usually known as the *Belle Epoque*, French women were beginning to see some changes in their status,

they were still excluded from citizenship and from many civil rights taken for granted by men.

Fin-de siècle republican ideology explicitly viewed the role of women, as in the Jacobin republic a hundred years earlier, as reproductive. The French state asked them to produce citizens, not to be citizens themselves. Anticlerical politicians moreover considered women overly subject to the influence of the Catholic Church, a question which was long to bedevil their claims for the suffrage. But while historical discussion of French national identity has tended to marginalize women, they are extraordinarily present in the literary and iconographic history of *Belle Epoque* France. This was not a society without women, rather it was an age when relations between the sexes were a major and much-discussed preoccupation. This paper will argue that attempts to construct a unitary French identity were in conflict with an alien notion: that of the New Woman, ‘landed none knew whence’, as Proust described his first sight of Albertine and her friends.

Let me start with a cultural event often viewed as emblematic of *Belle Epoque* France: the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900. The entry to the site was marked by an ornamental gate (‘Porte Monumentale’) of a staggeringly lurid nature, covered with newly-invented electric light bulbs and topped by a statue described as ‘La Parisienne’. Paul Morand, a small boy at the time, later described this effigy, in *Paris 1900*, as ‘une sirène chapeauté au bateau de la Ville de Paris, à jupe plate, rejetant au vent un manteau du soir en fausse hermine’.⁴ The Parisienne departed from the familiar allegorical representations of women. Paris in the 1900s was filling up with statues, a process sometimes described as ‘la statuomanie’. They were either of fully-clothed men – politicians, scientists, heroes of the Republic – or of less than fully-clothed women, allegories of the Republic. But the Parisienne was a woman fully-clad in contemporary costume. Despite her symbolic hat, she was recognizable as a ‘real’ woman, significantly depicted as fashionable and frivolous: *Belle Epoque* iconography showed women as essentially decorative. At the same time, one of the pavilions at the Exhibition was the Palais de la Femme. This idea had originated in the United States, and had figured at the World’s Fairs of Philadelphia (1876), New Orleans (1884), and especially Chicago (1893), but it was the first time it had appeared in Paris. The French version of the Women’s Pavilion was less serious than its American counterparts: described in the official report as ‘delicately elegant’, it had a basement devoted to ‘woman’s dress, hygiene and coquetry’. A series of wax-works depicted ‘la journée d’une mondaine, depuis l’heure du thé matinal jusqu’à la parure pour le théâtre ou pour le bal, en passant par la promenade au bois dans une victoria impeccablement attelée’.⁵ There was also a library stocked with books by women authors, a theatre, art gallery, and of course a patisserie and restaurant. Meanwhile in another building in Paris, an international conference about women’s rights was taking place – one of three women’s conferences organized under the aegis of the Exhibition. There was

a strong American presence, though the American delegates complained that French issues had predominated, and pressed their French colleagues to constitute a branch of the International Council of Women – which they eventually did in 1901.⁶

My argument will concentrate on the French notion of ‘woman’ as symbolized by ‘la Parisienne’, and the clash with an American concept of ‘the woman question’. The hypothesis which underlies what follows is that the turn of the century was a time when France, the fashionable destination of so many travellers and tourists, was under insistent pressure as never before from Anglo-American culture. A number of destabilizing influences found their way in, but were very strongly resisted by the dominant French culture. This was neither the first nor the last time that this happened, but the cracks and contradictions introduced then would run through French culture to the present, creating areas of conflict and resistance, or reformulation of what Frenchness was. One of the principal ‘Trojan horses’ during the *Belle Époque* was the New Woman. How much change in women’s status and identity could ‘Frenchness’ absorb?

The New Woman was a genuinely Anglo-American creation, the label itself first coined in an article by Ouida in an American journal in 1894.⁷ She was a cultural construct, but the models had been in circulation some time. Literary sources include Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* and Chernichevsky’s *What is to be done?* In George Bernard Shaw’s play *Mrs Warren’s Profession*, written in 1894 (not performed until 1902 because too immoral), Mrs Warren’s daughter, Vivie, is instantly recognizable as a new woman. Shaw’s stage directions describe her as ‘a sensible, able, highly-educated young middle-class Englishwoman. Age 22. Prompt, strong, confident, self-possessed’; she shakes hands with ‘a resolute and hearty grip’. Vivie rides a bicycle, prominently displayed on stage, has just ‘tied with the third wrangler at Cambridge’, but intends to be an actuary and make a lot of money – inspiring a male character to remark that she makes his blood run cold.⁸

Some American scholars, notably Mary-Louise Roberts and Christine Stansell, have begun looking at the New Woman in a French context, but interestingly the Anglo-American version could not be said to transfer easily to France. To take just one aspect of the New Woman, her healthy athleticism was in part the result of organized sport in girls’ schools, something which was not on the whole to be found in France. There were of course plenty of strong, forceful individual French women, but Christine Stansell suggests that ‘New Women’ often take on the characteristics of the vamp or the *femme fatale* in Europe, inspiring fear rather than respect, let alone comradeship.⁹ The term ‘femme nouvelle’ does not appear to have caught on in France during this period, and when it does it appears to be associated with foreign influence. *A Doll’s House* was not performed in France until 1895, although it had been played in English in 1879; conservative critics associated it with an alien kind of modernism. As an article in the conservative

L'Illustration put it on 10 February 1894, before Antoine's Paris production had been seen: 'Ibsen, Hauptman, Maeterlinck – Sweden, Germany, Belgium – a triple alliance against the spirit of France: it will resist them.'¹⁰ Was there any space for a new *French* woman? Putting it briefly, by the late 1890s, girls in France had started to receive a better education than ever before. The Jules Ferry laws had created not only state primary schooling for girls in every village, but also girls' *lycées* and the superstructure of *écoles normales* and *écoles normales supérieures*. The woman schoolteacher becomes a core participant in almost any political and feminist activity from this period. The very first women were entering universities – in very small numbers, true, but it was no longer impossible. Thirty-two women were attending the Paris medical faculty in 1879, most of them foreign. By 1914, there were 578. In 1900, there was a total of 624 French women students in all faculties – their number exceeded that of foreigners only in 1912–13. One should not of course exaggerate the progress made by 1900–1905; educational change took more than one generation to work through.

It was also a time when women's economic activity began to become more statistically significant in jobs other than traditional farming or partnership in a small shop or firm. The post office for example was well on the way to being 'feminized' in 1906: 22% of its employees were women. In the same census, in 1906, 170 women per thousand were to be found in 'commercial professions', compared to 82 in 1866. Women clerks and typists were starting to appear, though not in dramatic numbers. Women worked in factories, in sweatshops and as outworkers, and in a range of fairly traditional jobs, as well as these new ones. In 1906, there were 206,000 domestic servants in Paris, 11% of the population, and 83% of these were women. They were hardly being emancipated by such work, but it meant that many were leaving their native villages to become Parisians, leading a very different life from their mothers and grandmothers.¹¹

While the *Belle Epoque* could hardly be called an age of opportunity for Frenchwomen, it was nevertheless an age when old structures were starting to creak and leak. Very schematically, we could point to the inventions of those metallic geared machines, the typewriter, the sewing-machine and the bicycle, which had all arguably made more difference to women's lives than to men's. The sewing-machine was both a boon and a shackle – it made sewing easier, but swelled the numbers of women working at home for desperately low wages sewing garments. Similarly, training in typewriting soon became a woman's passport to a white-collar office job (mainly after 1914), but it would confine most such women to subordinate positions as underpaid typists for years to come. The bicycle however really can be regarded as a symbol of liberation: it enabled women to get about in a fairly safe and rapid way, and it began to make a difference to their clothes and deportment. Otilie McLaren, a Scottish pupil of Rodin's who studied sculpture in Paris in the late 1890s, rode to the studio on her bike:

I bike à l'américaine as the nicest French people do: a short skirt about 4 or 5 inches below the knee and long gaiters which go right to meet the knickerbockers in case of one's skirt blowing up. I always strap mine down.¹²

Note the American reference.

Ottillie McLaren was an example of a phenomenon about which I have written elsewhere: the invasion of Paris by English, American and other foreign women art students in the 1890s and 1900s.¹³ These foreign students, who came to France as a land of freedom and excitement, disrupted the long-established studio tradition in which virtually the only women present were artists' models (ironically, many models were Italian immigrants). Paradoxically, neither Paris nor any other city was liberty hall for most French women: foreign women in France were literally foreign bodies, operating by different rules. French bourgeois society in particular was still strongly marked by practices and habits of the nineteenth century, and the experience of foreign women in France is one of culture clash. Shari Benstock in *Women of the Left Bank* suggests that Edith Wharton and Natalie Barney, who in their various ways frequented avant-garde and bohemian circles, were 'guests of a culture whose secret heart they never penetrated'.¹⁴

Albertine's Bicycle

Is that secret heart to be glimpsed in Proust? Yes and no. The second part of this paper suggests that the New Woman, seen as in some sense non-French, sent a shudder through his world. Proust is at once a reliable and an unreliable source for a historian of the *Belle Epoque*. He did not of course set out to paint a realistic picture of his society, still less of 'women', in the style of Zola; nevertheless, we know him to have drawn on obsessive observation of those around him, consciously and unconsciously. Proust, as the photographic evidence tends to show, frequented the rarefied society of well-to-do Paris, in which women were important players. Unlike in most history books, women are everywhere in *A la recherche*, conducting games of power and love. The emotional economy of this novel, I would argue, provides us (rather surprisingly) with some kind of context for the New Woman. To illustrate the point, let us look briefly at four of the important women who appear in it, all of them French: Françoise, the family servant, Odette de Crécy, who becomes Mme Swann, Madame Verdurin, the society hostess, and Albertine, the narrator's young lover. To give some chronological perspective, Proust himself was born in 1871. Gérard Genette's projected chronology of his novel has the narrator ('Marcel') and his exact contemporary Gilberte Swann being born rather later than that, in 1878. Françoise, Odette and Mme Verdurin are from an older generation than the narrator, being adults before he was born, while Albertine is supposed to be a little younger than him.¹⁵

Françoise, a sort of compendium of *la vieille France*, with her picturesque habits of speech, her prejudices and her networks of power and communication among other servants, is a rather monstrous creation, for whom Proust probably drew on several family servants. But it is not difficult to locate her in a context where servants stayed many years with their families, becoming intimate with them and in time-honoured ways exerting the power of the powerless. J.-B. Duroselle, in his book re-titled *La France de la Belle Époque* (1972 and 1995), has a section on domestic servants in which he cites several life-stories. For example, Françoise Remeniera, born in 1864 in the Corrèze, was a sharecropper's child who watched over the sheep as a girl. After her husband's death from tuberculosis, she became a wet-nurse in a Parisian family, sending money back home to the village for her three children, who stayed with relatives, and whom she saw only in the summer. In 1899, she entered the service of another Paris household, where she stayed until her death in 1946, being completely devoted to this family and they to her. She had no real holidays or days off, apart from the three weeks in the year when she returned to the village. She reportedly ended up feeling more at home with the family she served.¹⁶ Duroselle remarks of this life-story that it is both touching and almost incomprehensible to us today – yet we can easily recognize Proust's Françoise in this biography. She has a daughter for instance, who is only infrequently mentioned. In terms of a French identity, if I can put it this way, Françoise represents a countrywoman, a woman of the people, a source of mystery and fascination to the bourgeois narrator. Brusque and kind, devious and long-suffering, she could be recruited for a Barrèsian tradition of Frenchness rooted in 'the people' or 'in the soil', her attitude to her employers being loyal yet cynical, traditional, yet in obscure ways rebellious.

Odette de Crécy is also a construct of a traditional kind, in its 1890s manifestation: the beautiful *demi-mondaine*, mistress to one or more rich and powerful men, but nevertheless received after a fashion in Parisian polite society – though not in the narrator's bourgeois family home at Combray, even after she had married Charles Swann, the family friend. Originals whom Proust is said to have had in mind are Laure Hayman and Liane de Pougy. Odette is painted in a very hostile way much of the time, and the reader is left in no doubt about the superior intelligence, sophistication and to some extent moral fibre of Swann, who ends up reflecting that he has 'gâché ma vie pour une femme qui n'était pas mon genre', ruined his life 'for a woman who wasn't even my type'. Odette is unfaithful, ungrateful, silly, snobbish and so on. Yet at the same time, both for Swann and for the narrator, Odette holds an extraordinary fascination. In terms of the novel's structure, she is located as the older sophisticated woman enchanting the narrator during his youth. In a passage at the end of *Du côté de chez Swann*, he remembers her with nostalgia in the Bois de Boulogne, either in simple elegance 'à pied, dans une polonaise de drap, sur la tête un petit toquet

agrémenté d'une aile de lophophore, un bouquet de violettes au corsage [...] traversant l'allée des Acacias', or in magnificent contrast lounging negligently in

une incomparable victoria, [...] ses cheveux maintenant blonds avec une seule mèche grise ceints d'un mince bandeau de fleurs, le plus souvent des violettes, d'où descendaient de longs voiles [...] aux lèvres un sourire ambigu [...].¹⁷

We are invited to think that this vision dates from the 1880s or 1890s, since this is one of the few passages in the novel where the narrator really steps out of the frame to look back. He has returned to the Bois de Boulogne in about 1912, trying to recall past visits, only to see in place of victorias motor-cars driven by moustachioed mechanics, and to find a horrifying transformation in women's fashions:

Mais comment ces gens qui contemplent ces horribles créatures sous leurs chapeaux couverts d'une volière ou d'un potager, pourraient-ils même sentir ce qu'il y avait de charmant à voir Mme Swann coiffée d'une simple capote mauve ou d'un petit chapeau que dépassait une seule fleur d'iris toute droite?¹⁸

The same passage, a page or two earlier, contains another precise historical reference in the form of a typical Proustian joke. The narrator recalls an older man remarking to him of Odette that he slept with her the day MacMahon resigned (that is, 30 January 1879, just after the narrator's – and Gilberte Swann's – birth, according to Genette's chronology). However the overall tone of the passage is elegiac: the elegant procession of victorias (think of the 1900 *Pavillon de la Femme*) had vanished by 1912. Perhaps a few of the old *demi-mondaines* were still there, but like wraiths or damned spirits, shadows of what they were ('vieilles et qui n'étaient plus que les ombres terribles de ce qu'elles avaient été' [I, 427]). The narrator stands forlorn; the sun's face is hidden.

Proust here tells us quite directly that Odette is from the old world. She belongs with a society which would be completely swept away by the Great War, but which was already fading. In that world, the 'pattern in the carpet' of French urban society was a double standard for men and women, a kind of sexual tapestry which was not exactly prostitution, but a set of relationships between men and women based on money, adultery and hypocrisy. 14% of deaths in the 1900s were due to syphilis. It was a world of sex, lies and victorias, if you will; a world in which the Duc de Guermantes could boast of sending a telegram reading 'Impossible venir, mensonge suit'. (This untranslatably brief formula could be decoded as: 'Can't make it: transparent excuse follows.') It was still a world in which, as Charlotte Perkins

Gilman reminded her readers in 1911, La Rochefoucauld had said there were thirty good stories in the world and twenty-nine of them could not be told to a woman. Proust was caught, like many of his generation, between nostalgia for this world and a reluctant attraction towards the new – his narrator treats both Françoise and Odette with wistful affection, but also with a critical eye. Indeed, he provides a transparently scornful narrative about Odette and her traditional feminine wiles. He shows even less sympathy for a tougher, and in a way more successfully modern character, Mme Verdurin; but he falls in love with an ‘thoroughly modern girl’, Albertine.

Mme Verdurin is a monstrous creation, combining details from a number of society hostesses of the *Belle Epoque*. She likes to think she is of advanced views, particularly in art, and collects painters, writers and musicians, who are coded references to people like Whistler, Franck and so on, representing the modern. She is a bundle of contradictions, but after an initial wobble (‘she was ferociously antisemitic’), Proust decided that he would make her salon a Dreyfusard one, while Odette’s would be nationalistic. One of the models for Mme Verdurin’s salon was that of Mme Arman de Caillavet, whose ‘great man’ was Anatole France. She really was a Dreyfus supporter, like Proust himself, and suffered socially to some extent as a result, since the Faubourg Saint-Germain remained anti-Dreyfusard with only very rare exceptions (represented, rather unconvincingly, in the novel by the Prince and Princesse de Guermantes. It is not then so very strange – though the narrator expresses dismay at this ending – that Mme Verdurin should end up as the second Princesse de Guermantes in *Le Temps retrouvé*.)

The point I would make about Mme Verdurin, however, is that it was from exactly this kind of person, and this pro-Dreyfus milieu – though predominantly from the Jewish and Protestant women of the upper bourgeoisie – that some of the leaders of the French feminist movement also came. Cécile Brunschvig, for instance, who later became the *grande dame* of French feminism, though younger, came into this category. It is a nice irony that her husband, Léon Brunschvig, was a schoolfriend of Proust’s and one of the originals for the narrator’s annoying friend Bloch.¹⁹ Feminism is a particular aspect of the Verdurin type of modernism, but it never ruffles the surface in *A la recherche* – and one dreads to think what Proust would have done with it had he troubled to notice it. We shall return to feminism after looking at the last Proustian woman, Albertine.

The story of the narrator’s agonizing relations with Albertine, in *La Fugitive*, *La Prisonnière*, etc., are to some extent marked by Proust’s relations with Monsieur Agostinelli, his chauffeur, and other young men. But it is as a particular kind of young *woman* that Albertine appears in the novel, in *A l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*. The narrator first meets her at the seaside resort of Balbec, as one of a ‘petite bande’ of frightening girls, full of energy, who jump over old gentlemen in deck chairs and thoroughly intimidate the asthmatic young Marcel. The girl later identified as Albertine is provided with a bicycle.

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 jeunes filles de Balbec, parmi lesquelles quelques-unes, il est vrai, se livraient aux sports mais sans adopter pour cela une tenue spéciale.²⁰

The reader is given several glimpses of this bicycle-pusher:

une fille aux yeux brillants, sous un 'polo' noir, qui poussait une bicyclette avec un dandinement de hanches si dégingandé, en employant des termes d'argot si voyou et criés si fort quand je passais auprès d'elle (parmi lesquels je distinguai cependant cette phrase fâcheuse de 'vivre sa vie' [que] je conclus [...] que toutes ces filles appartenaient à la population qui fréquente les vélodromes, et devaient être les très jeunes maîtresses de coureurs cyclistes. En tous cas, dans aucune de mes suppositions, ne figurait celle qu'elles eussent pu être vertueuses.²¹

We might note several things about this passage. Firstly, Proust's narrator is analysing these strange creatures according to the 'old world' of Odette. He reacts with hostility to the idea of games-playing and loud speech from a woman, the use of slang terms, and most of all the claim to independence ('live my own life'). Secondly, the French text at this point is full of anglicisms: polo, golf, clubs. Incidentally, Albertine's bicycle was probably English-made, since Britain was the world's chief supplier of bicycles in 1895–1900. To make Albertine sufficiently threatening on her first appearance, Proust is using all the stage-props of the 'New Young Woman', including foreign, particularly English influence. A few pages further on, he reinforces this point with a description of the way Albertine speaks. Not only does she use slang terms like 'tram' and 'bike', but she affects an 'Anglo-Saxon' delivery:

En parlant, Albertine gardait la tête immobile, les narines serrées, ne faisait remuer que le bout des lèvres. Il en résultait ainsi un son traînard et nasal dans la composition duquel entraient peut-être des hérédités provinciales, une affectation juvénile de flegme britannique, les leçons d'une institutrice étrangère et une hypertrophie congestive de la muqueuse du nez.²²

Space forbids more examples, but I will hazard from these extracts the view that, whatever the relation between Proust's writing and his environment, and whatever he later does with the poetics of desire, his initial depiction of Albertine and her friends as sporty aliens is significant. We see these female characters through a discursive narrative (Proust's), one which is drawing on the discourses of others, while also challenging them by the way he writes his novel. But he is not challenging all the discourses of his day. In the male Parisian upper-class discourse of his time, women were, as Simone de Beauvoir would later put it, the Other. There was a certain agreement among

men about that. In terms of the conceptualisation of French national identity, I could quote a parallel taken from Sharif Gemie's book on nineteenth-century revolutions:

Nationhood might be constituted around a shared sense of conflict or, less violently, diversity. In other words, while monarchists and republicans might disagree about every element of their respective interpretations of the French past, they might still both agree about which moments constituted the crucial moments of division.²³

French men might disagree about many things during the *Belle Epoque* but arguably they shared a certain patriarchal discourse about women. Perhaps patriarchal is not quite the right word – it seems inappropriate for Proust, who consistently undermines his narrator and puts him in embarrassing situations. A better term is 'fraternal'. We may not think of Proust as being a particularly 'fraternal' writer in the republican sense, but in practice he enjoyed the fraternity of various all-male groups: men about town, ex-soldiers, ex-law-students, homosexuals, would-be young novelists, etc. The fraternal discourse about women encompasses *la Parisienne* and the *cocotte* in the Bois de Boulogne, and at some remove it shades into the political iconography which put up statues of beautiful (arguably maternal) goddesses of the Republic and Liberty all over Paris – but hardly any of real women. It does not extend to comradeship with sporty young women. Albertine's role in *A la recherche* is that of an impossible partner for the narrator: she is eventually killed off in a riding accident.

How could *Belle Epoque* women respond to such a discourse? They could accept it and work entirely within it (like Odette); they could seek to turn it to advantage by modifying it a little (Mme Verdurin); or they could break with it and challenge it. The challenge could be cultural (New Woman) or political (feminist). Proust's generation, whether or not he noticed it, witnessed the growth of second-wave feminism in France. The movement had to contend with fairly entrenched antifeminism in political circles. Governments of the turn of the century celebrated many centenaries related to the 1789 Revolution. They put up the Eiffel Tower in 1889; in 1894, they celebrated the centenary of Condorcet's death (without mentioning his championing of the rights of women). Ten years later, in 1904, the French Civil Code had its centenary and despite the fact that it had been composed by and for Napoleon, rather than by the revolutionaries, the occasion was used as yet another celebration of the Republic (on the eve of Separation from the Church). Contemporary feminists however saw the Code as enshrining principles which deprived women of their rights. In particular, it made a distinction, not applied to men, between married and unmarried women. The married woman had no real civil status in her own right, only through her husband. Feminists did organize protests at the time, though they were

neither huge nor spectacular compared to what was happening in Britain. However most historians of French feminism are agreed that during the decade after 1900, feminism was attracting support in many quarters. A number of particular but real amendments were made to the Code Civil: for example, a wife was granted the right to do what she wanted with her earned income (1907). A head of steam for suffrage and other rights was gathering by the spring of 1914, and one of the biggest feminist demonstrations ever was held at the statue of Condorcet in July 1914 – an unfortunate piece of timing.²⁴ What the demonstrators chiefly had to contend with was the dread of ridicule among French women: the very idea of a demonstration for women's rights in the world of *A la recherche* sends a shiver down the spine, when one thinks what Proust might do with it. The Condorcet demonstration, which the organizers tried to keep decorous, was very different in tone from the meeting of American women at Seneca Falls in 1848 – over sixty years earlier – which had robustly declared: 'In entering upon the great work before us, we anticipate no small amount of misconception, misrepresentation and ridicule; but we shall use every instrumentality within our power to effect our object.'²⁵

Conclusion

The cementing of nationhood and republicanism that took place during the first half of the Third French Republic – the creation of an 'imagined community' – was indeed based on a literal fraternity. One of the components that was taken for granted, and therefore virtually unmentioned, in creating French nationhood – at least as constructed in textbooks, books on republicanism, standard histories, histories of nationalism and national identity – was the unchanging nature of French women. They had to continue being what it was thought they had always been, and not change into something weird and modern, 'landed none knew whence'.

My concluding point therefore is that the kind of Frenchness which was voluntarily being constructed during the *Belle Epoque* had among its components a view of desired relations between the sexes which did not disturb fraternity. This went with some fear and distrust of contemporary women, as shown in Proust's portraits of some of the women in his narrator's life. Women were potentially disruptive and needed to be defused in some way. What happened at this time however was that an even more disruptive woman than the French variety – the English suffragette, the American New Woman, the foreign German or Russian art student – was arriving on the scene. Some of Proust's best friends actually did marry American heiresses to industrial fortunes: Boni de Castellane married Anna Gould, and the prince de Polignac married Winnaretta Singer, of the sewing-machine family, whose sister also married a French aristocrat. There is a condescending and rather slighting reference to an American woman who has married into the French

'beau monde' in *Le Temps retrouvé*. But comradesly equality, to which some lip service was paid in New Woman circles in America and Britain, in Shaw's plays for example, was not an option.

In the short term – and perhaps even in the long term – the resistance which French culture was able to put up to this gender-based threat was successful, subtle and determined. One method was to stave off women's suffrage until it could be no more postponed, in 1944. We might even extend the argument of this article to suggest that the Anglo-Saxon Allies, whose support the French provisional government needed in 1944, were a not entirely negligible influence on the decision from the Consultative Assembly in Algiers. Secondly, there was a forceful cultural image of French women as being 'not ridiculous', hating excess, being sensible, pragmatic, having a special view of sexual relations which meant knowing how to deal with men, and avoiding the ideological stances of their Anglo-Saxon sisters. French feminists of the middle years of the century, who included many determined characters, were active in the various international women's associations which held meetings in Paris or at the League of Nations in Geneva; but one often senses their discomfort at the cultural milieu in France which expected 'sophisticated' rather than 'militant' behaviour. This distinction can be traced through a rhetorical tradition, mostly masculine in origin, but nevertheless taken up even today by a number of French women who consider themselves feminists. I am thinking here of Elisabeth Badinter, Mona Ozouf, Françoise Giroud, who have all written in recent years of the gulf between American feminists – characterized as strident, man-hating, positive-discriminating, politically-correct – and the sensible, 'feminine', charmingly different Frenchwoman who can conduct a civilized conversation with men.²⁶ One could argue that 'French identity' for much of the twentieth century, up to and including the 1960s, depended on an internalization of this dichotomy. Equally, it might be suggested that the most recent *fin de siècle* (from the 1970s to the present) has seen previously unthinkable changes in the status and life experience of French women, of which the very recent parity campaign is a rather striking example. The statue of the Parisienne shattered when it was taken down from its pedestal in the autumn of 1900. Might one suggest that a different *Belle Epoque* for French women has come a hundred years later, as the avant-garde Albertines of today ride off on their mountain bikes to become bankers and rocket scientists?

Notes

1 Marcel Proust, *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, in *A la recherche du temps perdu* (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Editions Gallimard, Paris, 1962), vol. I, p. 788. All further references to the French are from this edition. 'I was simply hanging about in front of the Grand Hotel [...] when I saw coming towards me five or six young girls, as different in appearance and manner from all the people whom one was accustomed to see in Balbec as could have been, landed there none knew whence, a flock of seagulls

[...]. One of these strangers was pushing, as she came, with one hand, her bicycle' (tr. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, *Within a Budding Grove* [London, 1922], p. 122).

2 Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France 1870–1914* (London, 1977).

3 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1993).

4 '[A] siren clad in a tight skirt, her hat in the shape of a ship representing the city of Paris, caught in the pose of flinging back an evening cape of artificial ermine.' Quoted in Pascal Ory, *Les Expositions universelles de Paris* (Paris, 1982), pp. 81–82 (my translation).

5 On the Palais de la Femme as it was called, see Alfred Picard, *Rapport, Exposition Universelle de Paris 1900* (Paris, 1906), vol. IV, p. 212. ['(T)he day of a society lady, from her morning cup of tea to dressing for an evening at the theatre or a ball, by way of a ride through the Bois [de Boulogne] in an impeccably turned-out victoria' – my translation.] A victoria was a light, open-topped, four-wheeled carriage.

6 On the 1900 women's and feminist conferences, see Laurence Klejman, Florence Rochefort, *L'Égalité en marche: le féminisme sous la IIIe République* (Paris, 1989), p. 137 ff., also Steven Hause with Anne Kenney, *Women's Suffrage and Social Politics in the French Third Republic* (Princeton, 1984), p. 36 ff. The founding conference of the Conseil National des Femmes Françaises, which affiliated to the International Council of Women, was held in April 1901.

7 Ouida, 'The New Woman', *North American Review*, 158 (1894), 270–76. See Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de siècle* (Manchester, 1997), pp. 2, 8, 35–36 and passim.

8. George Bernard Shaw, *Mrs Warren's Profession*, in *Plays Unpleasant* (London, Penguin edn, 1946), pp. 212, 215.

9 Unpublished papers on the New Woman in France, delivered at the 1999 Berkshire conference on Women's History, Rochester, NY. Cf. James F. McMillan, *France and Women 1789–1914: Gender, Society and Politics* (London, 2000), ch. 10, who also sees 'the New Woman' in the Anglo-American style as a doubtful presence in France.

10 Quoted in Christophe Charle, *Paris fin de siècle: culture et politique* (Paris, 1998).

11 For full details, based on up-to-date research on the social circumstances of women in *fin-de-siècle* France, see McMillan, *France and Women*, chs 10–12.

12 Manuscript letter from Otilie McLaren to William Wallace, National Library of Scotland, Wallace Papers: MSS 21535, 27 November 1897.

13 S. Reynolds, 'Running Away to Paris: Expatriate Women Artists of the 1900 Generation from Scotland and Points South', *Women's History Review*, 9:2 (2000), 327–44.

14 Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris 1900–40* (London, 1987), p. 78.

15 Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris, 1972).

16 J.-B. Duroselle, *La France de la 'Belle Époque'*, 2nd edn (Paris, 1992), pp. 65–66.

17 Proust, *A la recherche*, vol. I, p. 419. '[O]n foot, in a "polonaise" of plain cloth, a little toque on her head trimmed with a pheasant's wing, a bunch of violets in her bosom, hastening along the Allée des Acacias'; '[in a] matchless victoria [...] her hair now quite pale with one grey lock, girt with a narrow band of flowers, usually violets from which floated down long veils [...], on her lips an ambiguous smile [...]]' (tr. C. S. Scott Moncrieff, *Swann's Way* [London, 1922], pp. 276–77).

18 Proust, *A la recherche*, vol. I, pp. 425–27. 'How can the people who watch these dreadful creatures hobble by, beneath hats on which have been heaped the

spoils of aviary or garden-bed – how can they imagine the charm that there was in the sight of Mme Swann, crowned with a close-fitting lilac bonnet, or with a tiny hat from which rose stiffly above her head a single iris?’ (tr. *Swann’s Way*, pp. 284–86).

19 On Proust’s circle and the so-called originals of some of the characters in *A la recherche*, see George Painter, *Marcel Proust* (London, 1965). Cécile Brunschvicg (née Kahn, 1877–1946) is referred to in all histories of French feminism in the twentieth century; see for example Hause and Kenny, *Women’s Suffrage*.

20 Proust, *A la recherche*, vol. I, p. 788. ‘One of these strangers was pushing as she came, with one hand, her bicycle; two others carried golf-clubs; and their attire generally was in contrast to that of the other girls at Balbec, some of whom, it is true, went in for games, but without adopting any special outfit’ (tr. *Within a Budding Grove*, p. 122).

21 Proust, *A la recherche*, vol. I, p. 793. ‘[A] girl with brilliant laughing eyes and plump colourless cheeks, a black polo-cap pulled down over her face, who was pushing a bicycle with so exaggerated a movement of her hips, with an air borne out by her language, which was so typically of the gutter and was being shouted so loud when I passed her (although among her expressions I caught that irritating “live my own life”) that [...] I concluded [...] that all these girls belonged to the population which frequents the racing-tracks, and must be the very juvenile mistresses of professional bicyclists. In any event, in none of my suppositions was there any possibility of their being virtuous’ (tr. *Within a Budding Grove*, p. 128).

22 Proust, *A la recherche*, vol. I, p. 877. ‘In speaking, Albertine kept her head motionless, her nostrils closed, allowing only the corners of her lips to move. The result of this was a drawling nasal sound, into the composition of which there entered perhaps a provincial descent, a juvenile affectation of British phlegm, the teaching of a foreign governess and a congestive hypertrophy of the nose’ (tr. *Within a Budding Grove*, p. 246).

23 Sharif Gemie, *French Revolutions 1815–1914: An Introduction* (Edinburgh, 1999), p. 10.

24 On feminist campaigns of this period see Hause and Kenney, *Women’s Suffrage*, passim; McMillan, *France and Women*, ch. 12.

25 Quoted here from a facsimile of the Declaration, kindly sent me by my former student Ingrid Omand.

26 On the unsuspected riches of French feminism between the wars, see Christine Bard, *Les Filles de Marianne: histoire des féminismes 1914–40* (Paris, 1995); on international links, see S. Reynolds, *France Between the Wars: Gender and Politics* (London, 1996), ch. 7. On the debate over French vs American feminism, see ‘Femmes: une singularité française?’, *Le Débat*, 87 (Oct.–Nov. 1995), 117–46. Significantly these writers have on the whole been unsympathetic to the recent parity campaign, on the background to which see Danièle Haase-Dubosc, ‘Sexual Difference and Politics in France Today’, *Feminist Studies*, 25:1 (1999), 183–210; since that article appeared, new legislation has been introduced in France to ensure the equal representation of men and women in all elections where the list system is used (excluding therefore the National Assembly, but covering most other elections).

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