Fluid Masculinities

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‘Toute recherche oblige’, wrote André Gide in Les Faux-Monnayeurs (1926), regarded by many as his finest novel. But what are the obligations that bind the researcher caught up in what Gide’s English translator Dorothy Bussy glossed, somewhat formally, as ‘the mere fact of inquiry’? These three studies of masculinity – one of them a remarkable reading of Gide – provide an occasion for examining different styles of research, different disciplinary and intellectual commitments, and different national contexts, though their arguments ultimately converge around a single, if hardly simple, moment of historical transition, the difficult passage into the twentieth century. Are there any lessons to be learned from their juxtaposition?

Kim Townsend’s Manhood at Harvard: William James and Others – now available in paperback – has already been widely praised for its detailed treatment of the gendered ‘ideal’ informing the attempt by Charles William Eliot ‘to build … a university in the largest sense’ in the aftermath of the Civil War, a world-class, yet distinctively American, centre of higher education that would not need to aspire to ‘be a copy of foreign institutions’ (p. 85). Townsend begins his study on a suitably retrospective note, with Eliot’s final Commencement Day as President of Harvard on 24 June 1908. Reviewing his achievements, Eliot emphasised the college’s crucial role in preparing ‘men … for the strenuous competitions’ they would face in their lives ahead. The good of ‘scholarship’ lay in its capacity to instil ‘the power to work hard, and to endure fatigue and have a steady nerve under intellectual and moral stress’, a claim whose physiological overtones at once suggest a disposition of body and mind that is far from cerebral or bookish (p. 22). If Eliot’s language sounds suspiciously like that of the sports-field or military training-ground, then this is an indication not only of his struggle to find a moral vocabulary that would appeal to students and patrons alike, but also of the strength of the opposition. As Townsend points out, throughout this period the term ‘manly’ occurs with most frequency in discussions of athletics and games,
pursuits whose growing influence Eliot actively tried to resist, yet was finally compelled to concede. The ‘tough and alert body’ possessed of ‘a large vitality and a sober courage’ that characterised Eliot’s notion of the ‘scholar’ was scarcely distinguishable from the bearer of ‘the manly virtues’ of ‘energy, strength, courage, alertness, persistency, stamina, and endurance’ or ‘coolness’ and ‘presence of mind’ extolled by Harvard’s director of physical education, Dudley A. Sargent (p. 100).

In fact, the overlapping rhetoric employed by these two quintessentially Harvard figures was symptomatic of ‘a marked narrowing of the common definition of manhood’ (p. 17). Prior to the Civil War the word ‘manly’ had been synonymous with nobility and could be generalised, as in Emerson’s essay on ‘Self-Reliance’, to both sexes, referring to those ‘men and women who shall renovate life and our social state’ (p. 16). With the emergence of the much more specific term ‘masculinity’ in the latter part of the nineteenth century, however, manliness literally came to signify a boundary between men and women to be crossed only at one’s peril. This is by now a rather familiar story and it sometimes seems as if the history of masculinity is doomed to repeat endlessly the alternation between such restricted and elaborated codes of manliness over a variety of eras and in a variety of keys. Fortunately, Townsend is far less interested in opening up this contrast than he is in showing the intense personal struggles to which the process of ‘narrowing’ could give rise. Eliot’s own disappointments are one instance of the frustrations of Harvard manhood, of failure amidst success, a credo outdistanced by the more rugged creations of Owen Wister and Teddy Roosevelt. But it is in what Townsend calls the ‘dark spirit’ of the philosopher William James that we see the turmoil of this agonistic individualism in full bloom (p. 26).

James’s Pragmatism is nowadays apt to be associated with an urbane practicality according to which, as he once told a puzzled audience, ‘an idea is “true” so long as to believe it is profitable to our lives’. So it is rather a relief to find this ‘manly and … radiant being’, whom contemporaries praised for helping ‘many a doubting soul to feel a man’s glow of hope and courage’, wrestling not only with abstraction and dogma, but also with self-disgust, the infirmities of the body, and probably masturbation (p. 39). James did not come easily to the vocation of philosopher. Prevented by his father from serving in the Civil War, James drifted through a medical degree dogged by ill-health and depression, admitting himself to an asylum at one point and attempting to cure his back trouble with injections that contained an extract of bull’s testicles. In his 1895 lecture ‘Is Life Worth Living?’ he spoke movingly of suicide as the recognition that ‘you now may step out of life whenever you please, and that to do so is not blasphemous or monstrous’, a first step in the recovery of the will to believe, the conviction that life is worth ‘a tussle’.

James’s marriage to Alice Gibbens in 1878 – once his father had virtually picked her out for him – played a vital part in restoring confidence and direction to what was clearly a miserable and anxious existence. What is striking, though, is the crab-like way in which James negotiated the conventional idealisation of sexual difference, regarding marriage as a crucible in which his own austere disposition could be renewed and strengthened. Paradoxically, one form this took was that of distancing himself from the home, through bouts of solitude, through close friendships with other women conducted chiefly by letter, and through ardent collaborations with male colleagues. James’s uncommon powers of expression often gave away more than he perhaps knew: he once likened joint teaching with
fellow philosopher Josiah Royce to ‘a love affair between Siamese twins’ and he would typically refer to ‘Pragmatism’ as ‘she’ (p. 189). Marriage was discipline or it was nothing, though he also held to the unstated premise that to confine intimacy and eroticism to the home was somehow to impoverish the spirit, to cloister the emotions. And, curiously enough, there was a sense in which James’s ambivalent regard for war and sport was also the reverse side of the marital coin. For despite the fact that athletics or battle could each be taken as an indispensable preparation for the ‘strenuous life’ – a favourite Jamesian phrase, subsequently popularised by Roosevelt – those ‘independent and lonely thinkers’ to whom they held no appeal were to be tolerated, respected and even cherished (p. 165). On the other hand, to engage fully with others intellectually was simultaneously to ‘embrace’ them and to ‘grapple’ with them to the point of death (p. 189). This was, after all, the land, and the century, of Walt Whitman.

If Townsend has succeeded brilliantly in probing the inner life of the exception that proves the masculine rule, one measure of his achievement is that he makes a writer like André Gide seem far less exotic, far less idiosyncratic – one is tempted to say far less ‘queer’ – than he might otherwise appear to be. Still, Gide has always been, and continues to be, an unusually strange case. To show just how strange, and yet how extraordinarily revealing his writings on the vicissitudes of human desire have been, is the main preoccupation of Naomi Segal’s excellent André Gide: Pederasty and Pedagogy. This is an ambitious book that runs the gamut of the sprawling Maginot line of gender studies, though some matters receive more attention than others. Segal’s determination to ‘think about his case via the contemporary state of theory’ (p. 361) does tend to give her discussion of Gide a noticeably presentist flavour in which chronology inevitably takes second place to those substantive topics that emerge from the work as a whole. Thus there are individual chapters that deal, for example, with Gide’s body, women’s voices, masculine non-couples or ‘male chains’, the spell cast by criminality, androgyny, and family relationships, each of which achieves enough momentum to be read on its own. Nevertheless, what holds this absorbing, densely argued book together is an overarching concern with the role of hydraulic metaphors in the imagining of desire and, as Gide deploys them, in representing a number of sexual practices from masturbation to pederasty, or pedagogy as seduction.

Gide’s imperious eroticism, driven by an insistence upon épuisement or depletion, courses through multiple orgasms to a final stage of solitary masturbation, taking the other as a condition of desire in a special sense. Switching the sign of Freud’s ‘narcissism of minor differences’ from thanatos to eros, Segal generalises Gide’s image of ‘one beside the other but not however one with the other’ to suggest that the autoerotic should be placed on a continuum with the alloerotic rather than being seen as its opposite, and likewise with the autoerotic and the homo-erotic (p. 58). Not that this in any way exhausts the complexity of Gide’s fluidity, for there is also an uncontrollable urge to saturate the other – ‘flooding’ as ‘a sort of negative release, violent and undirected’ (p. 67) – not to mention a revelling in divestment that Segal variously calls ‘self-repressive indulgence’ or ‘an intoxication of constraint’ (p. 49). Though ostensibly aimed at Gide scholars seeking to go beyond influential recent readings by such critics as Leo Bersani, Jonathan Dollimore or Michael Lucey, Segal’s careful exploration of hydraulic language as the primary discursive medium of gender deserves the widest possible readership in the humanities, and her brilliant opening chapter on the relay between
desire, contamination, overflow and parturition could be read with profit even by those least susceptible to Gide’s literary magic and certainly by anyone wishing to find an alternative to the treatment of floods in Klaus Theweleit’s *Männerphantasien*.

From their different perspectives on history and textuality, Segal and Townsend each suggest that one of the most fundamental obligations of research lies in an alertness or sensitivity to the resonances and resources of language, to the ways in which figures of speech model different forms of life. Bernard Profitendieu’s ‘research’ in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, Oedipally rummaging through his mother’s letters to find proof that he is not his father’s son, stands as a wilful emblem of the uncomfortably tight fit between linguistic constraints and self-fashioning. Trev Lynn Broughton’s *Men of Letters, Writing Lives* extends something like the same thesis to the memoir or valediction. Indeed, early on in her study she notes the degree to which the writing of Victorian lives and, conversely, ‘living within’ the ‘dense grid of biography’ were ‘part of the fabric of social obligation’ that profoundly shaped ‘the subjectivity of a man of letters’ throughout the nineteenth century and beyond (p. 11). Broughton takes the commotion caused by the intimations of impotence in J. A. Froude’s controversial biography of Carlyle as a cultural watershed, effectively inverting the Victorian sage’s own attempt to pit a heroic ‘counteraesthetic of masculine chastity’ against the open flood-gates of the ‘spermatic economy’ (pp. 144–5). After Froude – and along lines that Froude himself could not have anticipated – biography and autobiography became inflected with a new sort of special pleading, one eye anxiously trained upon medicalised questions of fitness and degeneration. These fears were not a million miles from the neurasthenia that so haunted William James in the United States and that informed his imperative of constant ‘strenuous’ endeavour. What comes through again and again in these studies is both the lasting influence of these problematisations of personal and public life and the complex adaptations made by these much-discussed men to the moral climate of their times, adaptations that our current theoretical lexicon still struggles to capture. No one illustrates this complexity better than André Gide, who surely deserves a last, contradictory word. Here was a man, argues Segal, who was ‘haunted by genetics and genealogy’ (p. 253), and yet ‘never doubted his right to seem queer’ precisely ‘because he was so solid in his core of masculinity’. Whatever ‘ego-psychologists’ might wish to make of that ‘core gender identity’ it would certainly have been impossible without the potent force of ‘those other masculinities’ that Gide inhabited, masculinities of ‘class, status, fame, [and] the inalienable right to persuade or purchase’ – the inexorable flow of privilege (pp. 363–4).

**Notes**

3. ‘Is Life Worth Living?’, in Gunn (ed.), *Pragmatism*, pp. 228, 239.